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Blood Storm

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Prologue

Tweed was dining with a beautiful and very frightened woman. As he cut into his Dover sole he glanced across their table. Her thick blonde hair fell to her bare shoulders. Only her slim arms were exposed by her expensive close-fitting purple dress. Tweed, picking up his glass of wine, held it without drinking.

'You strike me as a lady in need of protection,' he probed. 'Something – somebody – is disturbing you. I gathered from Bob Newman you wanted to meet me to seek advice.'

'As Deputy Director of the SIS – and once a top detective at Old Scotland Yard – your advice is why we are here. I am very worried about the attentions of a very powerful man.'

'His name?'

'I don't feel I can reveal that yet. I could be wrong.'

'Which gets us nowhere.'

Tweed glanced round Mungano's, the most fashionable restaurant in London, checking on the other diners. The place was almost full; it was an octagon-shaped room overlooking the Thames. Tweed had asked for a quiet table, and they were seated in a corner away from the babble of voices, the clinking of glasses.

Mungano's, named after the proprietor, had only been open for five months, and already you had to be known to secure a table, or book one weeks in advance. Waiters were in the majority, but Mungano had recently brought in waitresses, smartly clad in evening dress. No uniforms.

'I have to think it over,' Viola explained. 'I do hope you don't think I'm wasting your time.'

'Hardly, when I have the pleasure of dining with such a very attractive woman.'

Tweed smiled, raised his glass to hers, studied her as they drank. In her early forties, Viola had an almost perfectly shaped bone structure. Below her blonde eyebrows were large blue eyes, a Roman nose, sensuous lips, a chin which expressed character. Her voice was soft and appealing. Tweed recalled how this meeting had come about that morning, in his office at SIS headquarters on the first floor of an old building in Park Crescent.

'Got a favour to ask you,' Bob Newman, a key member of his SIS team, had suggested the moment

Tweed settled behind his desk.

'It had better be worthwhile,' Tweed said abruptly.

'Someone I know slightly may have information about the Cabal. She's a beauty, Viola Vander-Browne. You may have heard of her.'

'No.'

'She's very well educated. Roedean and all that. But not one of your society types who can't talk about anything but fashion and the latest boyfriend.'

The Cabal. The two words summed up the greatest crisis Tweed had ever faced in his career. Three men, all junior ministers, the driving force behind a new plan to merge the SIS, MI5, the police and the coastguards into one security force – to be known as State Security.

The very words sent shivers down Tweed's spine. He had already expressed his unreserved opposition to the idea. It was a giant step towards turning Britain into a police state.

'How does this Viola Vander-Browne come into the picture?' he demanded.

'I gather she knows one of the Cabal. No idea which one. She wants to talk to you. I couldn't get a word out of her – she insists on seeing the top man. You.'

'I'm not sure this is a good idea,' Tweed responded.

'She's an acquaintance of mine . . .' Newman began.

'His new word for a girlfriend,' teased Paula Grey, who was seated in a corner behind her computer. Paula was Tweed's top assistant and a forceful member of the SIS team. An attractive brunette with dark glossy hair which fell to her shoulders, she was the closest of anyone to Tweed, who admired her brilliance.

Newman, almost six feet tall, with a strong face which appealed to women, was in his early forties. Dark haired, he smiled a lot, and he responded to Paula's remark with a gentle punch to her shoulder. She reacted instantly with a clenched fist which hammered hard into his.

'As I was saying,' Newman went on, addressing Tweed, 'Viola has a flat in Fox Street off Covent Garden. She's well off, with a legacy left her when her parents were killed in a car crash. But sometimes she likes to add to her income.' He paused.

'How?' demanded Tweed.

'Don't get the wrong impression, but occasionally she'll have a wealthy man in her flat for the night. She's so good at the feminine arts she charges her visitor twenty thousand pounds. I gather they're happy to pay.'

'I see,' Paula remarked, 'she's a high-class call girl.'

'She isn't!' Newman snapped, turning on Paula. 'You really are very Victorian.'

'You know I'm not,' Paula snapped back. 'I adapt

to the circumstances. I could throw this computer at you.'

'That's enough, both of you,' Tweed barked. 'Any more data on Viola, Bob? You suspect one of her men friends belongs to the Cabal? Is that it?'

'I'm not sure. But she does want to see you to tell you something. I knew you'd think it was a good idea. I've booked a discreet table for the two of you at Mungano's, your new favourite restaurant.'

'Without consulting me. All right, you had to act on the spur of the moment. What time this evening?'

'Seven o'clock. She likes to get to bed early. I only got the table when I mentioned your name to Mungano himself.'

'All right,' Tweed agreed brusquely.

He had no idea he had committed himself to one of the most horrific episodes of his life.

Newman's data passed through Tweed's mind as he studied Viola over dessert. He became aware she was studying him. She saw a man with horn-rimmed glasses resting on the bridge of a strong nose, blue eyes she felt could see inside her, a firm mouth half-smiling and a determined jaw. He exuded shrewdness and physical vitality. She thought he was beginning to like her.

'Do you know many people – people who count and have power?' he asked.

'If you're talking about celebrities, as they're stupidly called these days, no. I avoid them like the plague. They are nobodies puffed up by the media. The people I know and mix with are intelligent.'

'Any people of power I might know?' he persisted.

A waitress carrying a tray appeared at their table, placed a glass in front of Tweed, another in front of Viola. 'Yours is a margarita,' she told Tweed, 'and Madame's is champagne. Compliments of the management.'

Then she was gone. Tweed had a glimpse of a tall slim woman in a black dress, black hair coiffed close to her head like a dark helmet. He looked at his drink, then at Viola.

'The last time I drank a margarita a thug tried to shove me out of my window in Lübeck on the Baltic. It opened on to an inner courtyard. It ended up with my throwing the thug three storeys down on to solid stone.'

He sipped at the drink slowly, absorbing no more than a fifth of it. Something odd about the taste. Viola reached over with a finger, the nail well trimmed and varnished with a delicate pink. She removed a small amount of the salt round the rim, tasted it.

'Salt!' she remarked with surprise.

'It's part of a proper margarita. Ever tasted one? It's very strong unless you're used to drinking.'

'I would have asked for a sip but I'm driving back

to my flat.' She glanced at her watch. 'If you don't mind I'd better get moving. I do hope you're not annoyed that I haven't said much but I feel I'd better think it over. I could be wrong.'

'Wrong about what is frightening you?'

'I'm OK. I'm always nervous when I'm having dinner with someone new for the first time . . .'

No, you're not, Tweed thought. You have the poise of the devil. Don't push her any more, he warned himself.

By now Tweed was feeling dizzy and unwell. He had to concentrate on signing the bill. He had intended to escort Viola home to her flat but he was wondering whether he was capable of driving his car safely. He made a great effort to stand upright as he followed Viola to the exit.

Arriving at the outside world she pointed to a Rolls-Royce Phantom with a uniformed attendant from Mungano's standing guard beside it. She turned, threw her arms round Tweed's neck and kissed him.

'That was the most delicious evening. The company was even better. Already I feel I've known you ages. When I've had time to think things over can we meet again, please?'

She had a gold-bordered card in her hand which she tucked into the top pocket of his overcoat. 'My private number. But I'll probably call you. Bob gave me the number. I like you . . .'

Her velvet coat swinging, she strode across to her car, tipped the attendant. Another attendant had brought Tweed's Ford to the kerb by the entrance. Unhappily, Tweed watched Viola wave, drive off. He concentrated on climbing behind the wheel. What the hell am I going to do now? I'm not fit to drive back to my flat. Then he remembered an obscure cul-de-sac lined with warehouses only a few yards away. Park there, he thought, until I recover.

With a supreme effort of will he fitted the key into the ignition, started the engine. He looked everywhere before moving. No traffic in sight, no sound of it. He had lowered his window and cold March air swept inside. He took deep breaths, felt a little better. He began moving. Slowly.

Arriving at the entrance to the narrow cul-de-sac, he cautiously reversed into it. Once he had the car concealed inside he switched off the engine. It was absolutely silent inside the alcove-like street.

He began to shiver, closed the window, locked all the doors. He was feeling worse now, on the verge of falling asleep. He checked his watch. The illuminated hands showed 10.30 p.m. His last thought was to think about Viola. Was she safely home in Fox Street? Why was he so worried about her? Then he lost consciousness, falling into a deep sleep.

1

Thud . . .

Brief pause.

Thud . . .

Pause.

Thud . . .

Inside the bedroom of her flat in Fox Street, Viola lay naked on the floor, a gag tied round her mouth. She had been attacked the moment she entered the bedroom and switched on the light. A handkerchief lightly soaked in chloroform had been pressed over her face from behind. Her unseen assailant had carried her half-limp figure to the far side of the bed. She was dumped on the floor, began to regain consciousness. A latex-covered hand had lifted her head, slammed it down – not too hard. The towel gag had been applied to her mouth. She was vaguely aware of something awful happening to her, then the weight lifted off her. She opened her eyes.

A weird figure stood over her. Clad in a surgeon's white gown, white cap, white mask over the face, huge goggles clamped over the eyes. She couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman. Terror gripped her as she saw the gloved hand lift a meat cleaver.

Lifted high, the cleaver descended. Thud . . . It severed her left arm just below the elbow. She almost fainted, but the pain was so excruciating she stayed conscious. The lower arm slid a few inches free of the elbow.

Thud . . .

The cleaver descended again, swiftly and with immense force. It sliced off the right arm below the elbow. So great was the force the blade cut straight through bone and muscle, embedded itself into the floorboard. The wielder of the blade had to wrench it strongly to release it from the wood.

Thud . . .

The left leg was severed cleanly below the knee. Viola's upper body was now shuddering. Her sharp teeth were tearing at the gag, now only a reflex action.

Thud . . .

The right leg below the knee was parted from the rest of the body. A lake of blood slithered over the floor. The figure clad in white also wore outsize thick white canvas covers over its normal shoes.

Viola's teeth ripped open the gag. Her mouth opened wide on the verge of a terrible yell.

Time to complete the exercise.

Thud . . .

The cleaver descended through her neck, separating head from body, just before Viola let out a yell of hell. The blow had severed the carotid arteries. An enormous spurt of blood jetted across the room, splashed all over the frosted-glass window overlooking the street.

The white-clad figure sighed aloud, pulled up a sleeve, checked the time. 11.15 p.m. Time to make the arrangement, then leave quickly.