

SIDNEY SHELDON'S MISTRESS OF THE GAME

The spellbinding sequel to
MASTER OF THE GAME

TILLY BAGSHAWE

Sidney Sheldon
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Sidney Sheldon's
Mistress of the Game

Аннотация

The spellbinding sequel to Sidney Sheldon's MASTER OF THE GAME, one of the most glamorous and suspenseful tales ever told... It began with Jamie MacGregor, stealing diamonds in Africa. It continued with his daughter, the powerful Kate Blackwell, who grew her father's company into a world wide conglomerate. Now the story passes to the next generation. Spanning the decades and picking up exactly where Sidney Sheldon's bestselling Master of the Game finished, Mistress of the Game follows the Blackwell family as they love, lose, scheme and murder through the 80s up until the present day. Heart-stopping and glamorous, tense and provocative, Mistress of the Game is the sequel that Sheldon fans have been waiting for...

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Sidney Sheldon's
After the Darkness
TILLY BAGSHAWE
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Dedication

For Alexandra Sheldon, with love and thanks.

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PROLOGUE

Lexi Templeton's hands trembled as she read the letter. Sitting on the bed in her wedding dress, in what had once been her great-grandmother's bedroom, her quick mind began to race.

Think. You don't have much time.

What would Kate Blackwell have done?

At forty-one, Lexi Templeton was still a beautiful woman. Her lustrous blonde hair was untouched by gray and her slim, petite figure showed no sign of her recent pregnancy. She'd been determined to get her killer body back before her wedding. She wanted to do justice to her vintage Monique Lhuillier gown, a clinging column of finest ivory-white lace. And she had.

Earlier, the hundred or so wedding guests gathered at Cedar Hill House, the Blackwell family's legendary Maine estate, had gasped when Lexi Templeton appeared on the lawn arm in arm with her father. Talk about beauty and the beast. Peter Templeton, Lexi's father, once an eminent psychiatrist and one of New York's most eligible bachelors in his day, was now an old man. Frail, bent almost double with age and grief, Peter Templeton lead his beautiful daughter towards the rose-covered altar.

I can go now. I can go to join my darling Alexandra. Our little girl is happy at last, he thought to himself.

He was right. Lexi Templeton *was* happy. She knew she

looked radiant. She was marrying the man she loved, surrounded by family and friends. Only one person was missing. That person would never witness another of Lexi's triumphs. He would never delight in another of her failures. His life and Lexi's had been intertwined since birth, like the tangled roots of a great tree. But now he was gone, never to return. Despite everything that had happened, Lexi missed him.

Can you see me, Max darling? Are you watching? Are you sorry now?

For a moment, Lexi Templeton felt a pang of loss. Then she laid eyes on her husband-to-be, and all her regrets evaporated. Today was going to be perfect. The cliché. The fairy tale. The happiest day of her life.

The President of the United States was unable to make the wedding. There was a small matter of a war in the Middle East. But he had sent a congratulatory telegram, which Lexi's brother Robbie read aloud when the newlyweds cut the cake. And everybody else was there. Captains of industry, prime ministers, royalty, movie stars. As chairwoman of the mighty Kruger-Brent, Limited, Lexi Templeton was American royalty. She looked like a queen because she was one. She had it all: great beauty, immense wealth and power that stretched to the four corners of the globe. Now, thanks to her new husband, she had love, too.

But she also had enemies. Powerful enemies. One of whom was determined to destroy her, even from beyond the grave.

Lexi read the letter again.

I know what you've done. I know everything.

The net was closing in. Lexi felt the fear churn in her stomach like curdled milk.

There must be a way out of this. There's always a way. I will not go to prison. I will not lose Kruger-Brent. I will not lose my family. Think!

A few hours earlier the Governor of Maine had made a speech about Lexi at the reception.

‘... a remarkable woman, from a remarkable family. Lexi Templeton’s personal courage and integrity are known to all of us. Her spirit, her determination, her business acumen, her honesty ...’

Honesty? If only they knew!

‘... these make up the public face of Lexi Templeton. But today, we’re here to celebrate something else. A very private joy. A very private love. And a love that those of us who know Lexi know she so richly deserves.’

None of you knows me. Not even my husband. I don't 'deserve' his love. But I fought for it, and I won it, and I'm damned if I'm going to let anyone take it away from me. Least of all you.

Now most of the guests had gone. Lexi’s brother Robbie and his partner were still downstairs. So was Lexi’s baby daughter, Maxine, and the nanny. Any moment now Lexi’s husband would come looking for her. It was time to leave for their honeymoon.

It was time ...

Lexi Templeton walked over to the window. Beyond the

formal lawns of Cedar Hill House she could see the closely huddled white roofs of Dark Harbor, and behind them the dark, brooding sea. This evening the roiling water looked unusually ominous.

It's waiting. One day it will swallow the island whole. A big wave will come and wipe everything out. As if none of this ever existed.

Two men in suits got out of their car and approached the security gate. Even before they pulled out their badges, Lexi Templeton knew who they were. It was just like it said in the letter: *The police are on their way. You have no way out Alexandra. Not this time.*

Tears stung the back of Lexi's eyes. She could hear her Aunt Eve's voice as clearly as if she were still alive, taunting her, laden with spite. Was she right? Was this really it? The end of the game? After all Lexi's struggles? She remembered a Dylan Thomas poem she'd learned at school: 'Do not go gentle into that good night ... Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'

Damn right I'll rage. I'll not let that old witch beat me without a fight.

The cops were through the gate now. They were almost at the door.

Lexi Templeton took a deep breath and went downstairs to meet them.

BOOK ONE

Dark Harbor, Maine
1984

Danny Corretti looked down through the branches at the swirling mass of people below and felt gripped by a wave of vertigo.

‘What the hell are we doing here?’

Closing his eyes, he tightened his grip around the ancient yew tree, making sure both he and his camera remained concealed in the thick green foliage.

‘Making money,’ his companion whispered excitedly. ‘Look, there she is!’

‘Where?’

Following his friend’s line of vision, Danny Corretti trained his zoom lens on a figure huddled in the very center of the crowd of mourners. Dressed head-to-toe in black, with a thick, floor-length lace mantilla covering her immaculately cut Dior suit, it was impossible to make out her face. She could have been anyone. But she wasn’t anyone.

‘Are you kidding me?’ Danny Corretti frowned. Below him the churchyard seemed to lurch ominously, the ancient graves rising and falling like horses on a ghoulish carousel. ‘I can’t see shit. Are you sure it’s her? It could be Johnny Carson under all that lace.’

His companion grinned. 'Not with that ass it couldn't. It's her all right.'

From the tree to his left, Danny Corretti heard the low *whirr, whirr, click* of a rival camera. Re-focusing his zoom, he began to shoot.

Come on baby. Give daddy a smile.

A clear shot of Eve Blackwell's face would be worth a cool hundred grand to whichever photographer got there first. Anyone skilled enough to capture her elusive baby bump could expect to earn twice that.

Two hundred grand!

Not a lot of money to the Blackwells perhaps, heirs to the multi-billion-dollar Kruger-Brent, Limited, the diamond empire turned vast, multinational conglomerate that had made them the richest family in America; but a fortune to Danny Corretti. It was the Blackwells who had brought Danny and his fellow paparazzi to St Stephen's churchyard on this chill February morning. They had come to bury their matriarch, Kate Blackwell, dead at last at the grand old age of ninety-two.

Look at them. Like bloated black flies, swarming around the old lady's corpse. Revolting.

Danny Corretti felt his nausea return, but tried not to think about it, nor about the excruciating pain in his back from being stuck up a tree for six straight hours. He longed to stretch out, but didn't dare move a muscle, in case he alerted the Kruger-Brent security guards to his presence. Watching the dour, black-clad

figures pace the perimeter of the churchyard, pistols clutched like security blankets to their ex-marine-corps chests, Danny Corretti felt a stab of fear. He doubted Kate Blackwell had hired any of them for their sense of humor.

You'll be OK. Just get the shot and get out of here. Come on Eve, baby. Say cheese.

Danny Corretti wasn't really cut out for this sort of covert work. A tall, skinny man with preternaturally long legs and an unexpected shock of white-blond hair above his Italian, olive complexion, there weren't too many hiding places in the Maine churchyard that could accommodate his lanky, six-foot-two frame. The yew tree had been his best option, but he'd had to arrive ludicrously early this morning to beat his rival snappers to such a coveted vantage point. Clinging to the upper branches now, every sinew of his body felt as if it were on fire, despite the numbing cold of the day. He gritted his teeth, cursing his long legs to the heavens.

Just think of the money.

Ironically, if it weren't for his long legs, Danny wouldn't have been on this crazy job in the first place.

If it hadn't been for Danny's long legs, his mistress's husband would never have noticed his size twelve feet sticking out from under the marital bed.

Ah, Carla. God, she was beautiful! Those breasts, as soft and succulent as two ripe peaches. No man could resist her. If only that Neanderthal she married hadn't clocked off early ...

It was Danny's long legs that had gotten him beaten to a pulp and landed him (uninsured) in the local hospital. Thanks to his long legs, his wife Loretta had discovered his affair, divorced him and taken the house. Now, thanks to his long legs, Loretta's rat-faced lawyer was demanding Danny pay maintenance to the tune of a thousand bucks a month.

A thousand bucks? Who did they think he was, Donald frikkin' Trump?

Yes, Danny blamed his long legs entirely for his current predicament. Why else would he be spending his Sunday morning bent double and freezing his ass off in a four-hundred-year-old tree above a graveyard, risking his neck for one lousy picture of the woman the tabloids had dubbed 'The Beast of the Blackwells'?

Danny Corretti's long legs had a lot to answer for.

He was going to get that shot of Eve Blackwell if it killed him.

The priest's voice rang out through the February chill, deep and strong and powerful.

'Merciful God, you know the anguish of the sorrowful ...'

Behind her thick veil, Eve Blackwell sneered. *Sorrowful? To see that old witch dead and buried? Please. If I were ten years younger I'd be doing cartwheels.*

Today Eve was burying one of her enemies. But she would not rest until she had buried them all.

One down, three to go.

'You are attentive to the prayers of the humble ...'

Eve Blackwell glanced around at the small group of family and friends who had come to bid her grandmother Kate farewell, and wondered if any of them could be described as humble.

There was her identical twin sister Alexandra. At thirty-four Alexandra was still a great beauty with her high cheekbones, mane of buttermilk hair, and the striking gray eyes she had inherited from her great-grandfather, Kruger-Brent's founder, Jamie McGregor.

Eve's eyes narrowed with hatred. The same hatred she had felt for her twin since the day they emerged from the womb.

How dare she! How dare my sister still look beautiful.

Alexandra was weeping openly, clutching tightly to her son Robert's hand. Blond, delicate and sweet natured, ten-year-old Robert was a carbon copy of his mother. A gifted pianist, he had been Kate Blackwell's favorite, and Kruger-Brent's heir apparent.

Not for much longer, thought Eve. Let's see how long the boy lasts without Kate around to protect him.

Eve Blackwell felt her chest tighten. How she loathed the pair of them, mother and son and their crocodile tears! If only it were Alexandra's body being lowered into the gaping, frozen earth today. Then Eve's happiness would truly be complete.

Beside Alexandra hovered her husband, the renowned psychiatrist Peter Templeton. Tall, dark, handsome and blue-eyed, Peter Templeton looked more like a quarterback than a psychiatrist. He and Alex made a handsome couple. Peter had

once been arrogant enough to think he understood Eve. He believed he'd seen through her, through to the molten core of hatred that bubbled deep within. Alexandra, in her goodness, had never been able to see how much her twin sister hated her. But her husband knew better.

Eve smiled.

Vain fool. He thinks he knows me, but he's barely scratched the surface.

No, the priest would find no humility in Peter Templeton.

What about her own husband, the eminent plastic surgeon Keith Webster? Many people thought of Keith Webster as humble. Eve could hear his grateful patients now: 'Dear Dr Webster, such a gifted surgeon, but so shy and unassuming about his talents.' Eve felt her flesh creep as Keith wrapped a protective, conjugal arm around her shoulder.

Protective? He's not protective. He's possessive. And psychotic. He blackmailed me into marriage, then deliberately destroyed my face, carving up my beautiful features and turning me into this grotesque, this carnival freak show. All so that I wouldn't leave him.

One day I'll make that bastard pay for what he's done.

Eve Blackwell was many things, but she was not stupid. She knew that the trees and bushes around St Stephen's Church were alive with photographers, and she knew why: they all wanted a picture of her hideously ravaged face.

Well they could go to hell, the lot of them. From behind, you

could still make out Eve's perfect, womanly figure. But her front side was completely concealed. No lens on earth could penetrate the thick, hand-woven lace of her veil. Eve had made sure of it.

Once a great beauty like her sister, in recent years Eve Blackwell had become a virtual recluse in her Manhattan penthouse, terrified of showing her monstrously scarred face to the world. Indeed, she had not been seen in public for two years. The last time was at her grandmother's ninetieth birthday party at Cedar Hill House, the Blackwell family's private Camelot, just yards from where the old woman was now being laid to rest.

Kate Blackwell was the lucky one. She'd gone to join her beloved ghosts: Jamie, Margaret, Banda, David, the spirits of Kruger-Brent's long and violent African past. But there was to be no such rest for Eve. With rumors already flying about her pregnancy – Eve and Alexandra Blackwell were both expecting, but the family had refused to confirm this to the press – Eve was well aware that the price on her head had doubled. There wasn't a tabloid editor in America who wouldn't sell his soul for a half decent picture of The Beast of the Blackwells *with child*.

And to think, they call me a monster ...

'Lord, hear your people, who cry out to you in their need ...'

Eve watched silently as Kate Blackwell's coffin was lowered into the freshly dug grave. Brad Rogers, Kate's number two at Kruger-Brent for three decades, stifled a sob. Now a very old man himself, his hair as white and thin as the dusting of February snow beneath his feet, Brad Rogers had been all but broken by

Kate's death. Secretly he had loved her for years. But it was a love she could never return.

How tiny she is! thought Eve in wonder, as the pathetic wooden box disappeared into the bowels of the earth. Kate Blackwell, who had loomed so large in life, fêted by presidents and kings. How insignificant she was, in the end.

Not much of a feast for the worms of your beloved Dark Harbor, are you Granny?

For years Kate Blackwell had been Eve's nemesis. She'd done everything in her power to prevent her wicked granddaughter from achieving her life's ambition – taking control of the family firm, the mighty Kruger-Brent.

But now Kate Blackwell was gone.

'Eternal rest grant to her, oh Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon her.'

Good riddance, you vengeful old bitch. I hope you rot in hell.

'May she rest in peace.'

Danny Corretti looked miserably at the negatives in front of him. His back was still killing him after this morning, and now he felt a migraine coming on.

'D'you get anything?'

His friend tried to sound hopeful. But he already knew the answer.

None of them had got the two-hundred-thousand-dollar picture.

Eve Blackwell had outsmarted them all.

2

In the maternity unit at New York's Mount Sinai Medical Center, Staff Nurse Gaynor Matthews watched the handsome, middle-aged father take his newborn child in his arms for the first time.

He was gazing at the baby girl, oblivious to everything around him. Nurse Matthews thought: *He's thinking how beautiful she is.*

Nurse Matthews was pleasantly plump, with a round, open face and a ready smile that accentuated the twin fans of lines around her eyes. A midwife for more than a decade, she'd seen this moment played out thousands of times – hundreds of them in this very room – but she never tired of it. Besotted dads, their eyes lighting up with love, the purest love they would ever know. Moments like these made midwifery worthwhile. Worth the grinding hours. Worth the crappy pay. Worth the patronizing male obstetricians who thought of themselves as gods just because they had a medical degree and a penis.

Worth the rare moments of tragedy.

The father gently caressed his baby's cheek. He was a beautiful man, Nurse Matthews decided. Tall, dark, broad shouldered, a classic jock. Just the way she liked them.

She blushed. What on earth was she doing? She had no right to think such things. Not at a time like this.

The father thought: *Jesus Christ. She's so like her mother.*

It was true. The little girl's skin was the same delicate, translucent peach as the girl he'd fallen in love with all those years ago. Her big, inquisitive eyes were the same pale gray, like dawn mist rolling off the ocean. Even her dimpled chin was her mother in miniature. For a split second, the father's heart leaped at the sight of her, an involuntary smile playing around his lips.

His daughter. *Their* daughter. So tiny. So perfect.

Then he looked down at the blood on his hands.

And screamed.

Alex had been so excited that morning, when Peter drove her to the hospital.

'Can you believe that in a few short hours she'll be here?'

She was still in her pajamas, her long blonde hair tangled after a fitful night's sleep, but he didn't think she'd ever looked more luminous. She wore a grin wider than the Lincoln tunnel, and if she was nervous, she didn't show it.

'We're finally going to meet her!'

'Or him.' He reached over to the passenger seat and squeezed his wife's hand.

'Uh uh. No way. It's a girl. I know it.'

She'd woken up around six with fairly mild contractions, and insisted on waiting a further two hours before she would let him drive her to Mount Sinai. Two hours in which Peter Templeton had walked up and down the stairs of their West Village brownstone sixteen times, made four unwanted cups of coffee, burned three slices of toast, and yelled at his son Robert

for not being ready for school on time, before being reminded by the housekeeper that it was in fact mid July, and school had been out for the last five weeks.

Even at the hospital Peter flapped around uselessly like a mother hen.

‘Can I get you anything? A hot towel?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Water?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Crushed ice cubes?’

‘Peter ...’

‘What about that meditation music you’re always playing? That’s calming, right? I could run to the car and get the tape?’

Alex laughed. She was astonishingly calm.

‘I think you need it more than I do. Honestly darling, you must try to relax. I’m having a baby. Women do this every day. I’ll be fine.’

I’ll be fine.

The first problems began about an hour later. The midwife frowned at one of the monitors. Its green line had begun rising in sudden, jagged leaps.

‘Stand back please, Dr Templeton.’

Peter searched the woman’s face for clues, like a nervous airline passenger watching the stewardess during turbulence ... if she was still smiling and handing out gin and tonics, no one was gonna die, right? But Nurse Matthews would have made a

first-class poker player. Moving surely and confidently around the room, a professional smile of reassurance for Alex, a brusque nod of command to an orderly – *fetch Dr Farrar immediately* – her dough-like features gave nothing away.

‘What is it? What’s the problem?’

Peter struggled to keep the panic out of his voice, for Alex’s sake. Her own mother had died giving birth to her and Eve, a snippet of Blackwell family history that had always terrified Peter. He loved Alexandra so much. If anything should happen to her ...

‘Your wife’s blood pressure is somewhat elevated, Dr Templeton. There’s no need for alarm at this stage. I’ve asked Dr Farrar to come and assess the situation.’

For the first time, Alexandra’s face clouded with anxiety.

‘What about the baby? Is she all right? Is she in distress?’

It was typical Alex. Never a thought for herself, only for the child. She’d been exactly the same with Robert. Since the day their son was born, ten years ago now, he’d been the center of his mother’s universe. Had Peter Templeton been a different sort of man, a lesser man, he might have felt jealous. As it was the bond between mother and son filled him with joy, a delight so intense that at times he could barely contain it.

It was impossible to imagine a more devoted, selfless, adoring mother than Alexandra. Peter would never forget the time Robert came down with chicken pox, a particularly nasty attack. He was five years old, and Alex had sat by his bedside for forty-

eight hours straight, so engrossed in her son's needs that she had forgotten to take so much as a sip of water for herself. When Peter came home from work he'd found her passed out cold on the floor. She was so dehydrated she'd had to be hospitalized and placed on a drip.

The midwife's voice brought him back to the present with a jolt.

'The baby's fine, Mrs Templeton. Worst case scenario, we'll speed things up and do a caesarian.'

Alex went white.

'A caesarian?'

'Try not to worry. It probably won't come to that. Right now the heartbeat looks terrific. Your baby's as strong as an ox.'

Nurse Matthews had even risked a smile.

Peter would remember that smile as long as he lived. It was to be the last image of his old, happy life.

After the smile, reality and nightmare began to blur. Time lost all meaning. The obstetrician was there, Dr Farrar, a tall, forbidding man in his sixties with a pinched face and glasses that seemed in permanent, imminent danger of toppling off the end of his long, shrew-like nose. The green line on the monitor took on a life of its own, some unseen hand pulling it higher, higher until it looked like a fluorescent etching of the north face of the Eiger. Peter had never seen anything quite so ugly. Then came the beeping. First one machine, then two, then three, louder, louder, screeching and screaming at him, and the screams turned into

Alex's voice, *Peter! Peter!* and he reached out his hand for hers, and it was their wedding day, and his hands were trembling.

Do you take this woman?

I do.

I do! I'm here Alex! I'm here my darling.

The doctor's voice: *'For Christ's sake someone get him out of here.'*

Peter was being pushed, and he pushed back, and something fell to the floor with a crash. Then suddenly the sounds were gone, and everything was color. First white: white coats, white lights, so strong Peter was almost blinded. Then red, the red of Alex's blood, blood everywhere, rivers and rivers of blood so livid and ketchup-bright it looked fake, like a prop from a movie set. And finally black, as the movie-screen faded, and Peter was falling into a well, down, down, deep into the darkness, pictures of his darling Alex flickering briefly in front of him like ghosts as he fell.

Flash!

The day they first met, in Peter's office, back when Alexandra was still married to that psychopath George Mellis.

Flash!

Her smile, lit from within as she walked up the aisle to marry him, an angel in white.

Flash!

Robert's first birthday. Alex beaming, with chocolate cake smeared all over her face.

Flash!

This morning in the car.

We're finally going to meet her!

Dr Templeton? Dr Templeton, can you hear me?

We're losing him. He's blacking out.

Quick! Someone catch him!

No more flashes. Only silence and darkness.

The ghosts had gone.

Reality did not return until he heard his baby cry.

He'd been awake for almost half an hour, listening to the doctor and the hospital staff, even signing forms. But none of that was real.

'You must understand, that degree of hemorrhage, Dr Templeton ...'

'The speed of the blood loss ...'

'Highly unusual ... perhaps her family history?'

'After a certain point, heart failure cannot be prevented.'

'Deeply sorry for your loss.'

And Peter had nodded, yes, yes, he understood, of course, they'd done all they could. He'd watched them wheel Alex away, her ashen face covered with a bloodstained hospital sheet. He stood there, breathing in and out. But of course, it wasn't real. How could it be? His Alex wasn't dead. The whole thing was preposterous. Women didn't die in childbirth for God's sake, not in this day and age. This was 1984. This was New York City.

The shrill, plaintive cry seemed to come out of nowhere. Even

in his profound state of shock, some primal instinct would not allow Peter to ignore it. Suddenly someone was handing him a tiny swaddled bundle, and the next thing Peter knew he was gazing into his daughter's eyes. In an instant, every last brick of the protective wall he'd been building around his heart crumbled to dust. For one, blissful moment, his heart swelled with pure love.

Then it shattered.

Wrenching the baby out of his arms, Nurse Matthews thrust her at an orderly.

'Take her to the nursery. And get a psych up here, right now. He's losing it.'

Nurse Matthews was good in a crisis. But inside she was riddled with guilt. She should never have let him hold the child. What was she thinking? After what that poor man had just been through? He might have killed her.

In her defense, though, Peter had seemed so *stable*. Fifteen minutes ago he was signing forms and talking to Dr Farrar and ...

Peter's screams grew louder. Outside in the corridor, visitors exchanged worried glances and craned their necks to get a better view through the glass window of the delivery suite.

Hands were on him again. Peter felt the sharp prick of a needle in his arm. As he lost consciousness, he knew that the peaceful blackness of the well would never return to him.

This wasn't a nightmare. It was real.

His beloved Alex was gone.

The press had a field day.

ALEXANDRA BLACKWELL DIES IN CHILDBIRTH!

To the public she would always be Alexandra Blackwell, just as Eve was for ever known by her maiden name. ‘Templeton’ and ‘Webster’ simply didn’t have the same caché.

KRUGER-BRENT HEIRESS DEAD AT THIRTY-FOUR AMERICA’S FIRST FAMILY STRUGGLE TO COPE WITH LOSS

The national fascination with the Blackwells was well into its fifth decade, but not since Eve Blackwell’s surgical ‘mishap’ had the papers been thrown such a juicy bone. Rumors were rife.

There was no baby: Alexandra had died of Aids.

Her handsome husband, Peter Templeton, was having an affair and had somehow contrived to end his wife’s life.

It was a government plot, designed to bring down Kruger-Brent’s share price and limit the company’s enormous power on the world stage.

Like Peter Templeton, no one could quite believe that a healthy, wealthy young woman could be admitted into New York’s finest maternity hospital in the summer of 1984 and wind up twenty-four hours later on a slab in the morgue.

The rumors were fuelled by a stony silence from both the family and the Kruger-Brent press office. Brad Rogers, acting chairman since Kate Blackwell’s death, had appeared just once in front of the cameras. Looking even older than his eighty-eight years, a white-haired apparition, his papery hands trembled as

he read a terse statement:

‘Alexandra Templeton’s tragic and untimely death is entirely a private matter. Mrs Templeton held no official role within Kruger-Brent, Ltd and her passing is not pertinent to the management or future of this great company in any way. We ask that her family’s request for privacy be respected at this difficult time. Thank you.’

Refusing to take questions, he scurried back into the maze of the Kruger-Brent headquarters like a distressed beetle searching for the safety of its nest. Nothing had been heard from him since.

Undeterred by the lack of official information, perhaps even encouraged by it, the tabloids felt free to start making the story up themselves. Soon the rumor mill had taken on a life of its own, and by then it was too late for the family or anyone else to stop it.

‘We must do something about these press reports.’

Peter Templeton was in his study at home. With its tatty Persian rugs, antique Victorian upright piano, walnut paneling and bookcases crammed to bursting with first editions, it had been one of Alex’s favorite rooms, a place to retreat to after the stresses of the day. Now Peter paced it furiously like a caged tiger, shaking the newspaper in his hands.

‘I mean this is *The New York Times* for God’s sake, not some supermarket rag.’ The disdain in his voice was palpable as he read aloud: “*Alexandra Blackwell is believed to have been suffering from complications of the immune system for some time.*” Believed by whom? Where do they get this nonsense?

Dr Barnabus Hunt, a fat, Santa Claus of a man with a tonsure of white hair around his bald spot and permanently ruddy cheeks, took a contemplative draw on his pipe. A fellow psychiatrist, and Peter Templeton's life-long friend, he had been a frequent visitor to the house since Alex's death.

'Does it matter where they get it? You know my advice Peter. Don't read this rubbish. Rise above it.'

'That's all very well, Barney. But what about Robbie? He's hearing this kind of poison day and night, poor kid.'

It was the first time in weeks that Peter had expressed concern for his son's feelings. Barney Hunt thought: *'that's a good sign.'*

'As if his mother were some kind of prostitute,' Peter raged on, 'or a homosexual or a ... a drug addict! I mean, anyone less likely to have Aids than Alexandra ...'

Under other circumstances, Barney Hunt would have gently challenged his friend's assumptions. As a medical man, Peter should know better than to give any credence to the pernicious idea that Aids was some sort of righteous punishment for sinners. That was another thing the press should be blamed for: whipping the entire country into such a frenzy of HIV terror that gay men were being attacked in the streets, refused employment and even housing. As if the dreaded disease could be spread by association. 1984 was a bad year to be gay in New York City – something Barney Hunt knew a lot more about than his friend Peter Templeton would ever have suspected.

But now was not the time to raise these things. Six weeks

after Alex's death and Peter's grief was still as raw as an open wound. His office at the Kruger-Brent headquarters remained empty. Not that he'd ever done much there anyway. When Peter first married Alexandra, he'd insisted to Kate Blackwell that he would never go into the family business.

'I'll stick with my psychiatry practice, Mrs Blackwell, if that's OK with you. I'm a doctor, not a businessman.'

But in the years that followed, the old woman had ground him down. Kate Blackwell expected the men in her family to contribute to 'the firm', as she called it. And what Kate Blackwell wanted, Kate Blackwell always got in the end.

But now Kate, like Alexandra, was gone. There was no one to stop Peter from spending entire days holed up in his study with the phone unplugged, staring mindlessly out of the window.

The true tragedy of Alexandra's death, however, was not Peter's retreat from life. It was the wedge that it had driven between Peter and his son, Robert.

Robbie Templeton was Barney Hunt's godson. Having known him since birth, Barney had seen first hand the unusually close bond between Robbie and Alexandra. As a psychiatrist, Barney knew better than most how devastating it could be for a boy of ten to lose his mother. If not handled correctly, it was the sort of event that could fatally alter someone's personality. Dead mothers and estranged fathers: two of the key ingredients for psychopathic behavior. This was the stuff from which serial killers, rapists and suicide bombers were made. The danger for

Robbie was very real. But Peter point blank refused to see it. 'He's fine, Barney. Leave it alone.'

Barney's theory was that because the child internalized his grief (Robbie hadn't cried once since Alex's death, an immensely worrying sign) Peter had convinced himself that his son was OK. Of course, the psychiatrist in him knew better. But Peter Templeton-the-Psychiatrist seemed to have shut down for the moment, overwhelmed with the pain of Peter Templeton-the-Man.

Barney Hunt, on the other hand, was still very much a psychiatrist and he could see the truth all too clearly. Robbie was screaming out for his father. Screaming for help, for love, for comfort.

Unfortunately his screams were silent.

While Peter and Robbie drifted past one another like two ruined ghosts, one member of the Templeton household provided a tiny, flickering light of hope. Named Alexandra, after her mother, but referred to from the start as Lexi, the baby that Alex had lost her life delivering was already an utter delight.

No one had told Lexi she was supposed to be in mourning for her mother. As a result she yelled, gurgled, smiled and shook her little fists with happy abandon, blissfully ignorant of the tragic events surrounding her arrival into the world. Barney Hunt had never been big on babies – a confirmed bachelor, and closet homosexual, psychiatry was his life – but he made an exception for Lexi. She was quite the sunniest creature he

had ever encountered. Blonde-haired and fine featured even at six weeks, with her mother's searching gray eyes, she 'smiled whene'er you passed her,' like Robert Browning's Last Duchess, as content to be held by strangers as by her doting nurse.

She reserved her broadest grins for her brother, however. Robbie was entranced by his baby sister from the moment she arrived home from hospital, rushing to greet her as soon as he got back from school, irritating the maternity nurse by dashing straight to her crib whenever she cried, even in the middle of the night.

'You mustn't panic so, Master Robert.'

The nurse tried to be patient. The boy had just lost his mother, after all.

'Babies cry. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with her.'

Robbie scowled at the woman, full of contempt.

'Oh really? How do *you* know?'

Peeling back the soft cashmere blankets, he lifted his sister to his chest, rocking her softly until her cries subsided. It was two in the morning, and outside the nursery window a full moon illuminated the Manhattan sky.

Are you out there, Mom? Can you see me? Can you see how good I'm taking care of her?

Everyone, including Barney, had been worried that Robbie might have very conflicted feelings towards the baby. He might even become violent towards her, 'blaming' Lexi in some simple, childish way for their mother's death. But Robbie had

confounded them all with an outpouring of brotherly love that was as unexpected as it was clearly genuine.

Lexi was Robbie's therapy – Lexi and his beloved piano. Whenever he felt the smooth, cool ivory beneath his fingers, Robbie was transported to another time and place. Every other sense shut down and he became one with the instrument, body and soul. At those times he knew his mother was with him. He just knew it.

'Robert darling, don't lurk. Come in.'

The forced cheeriness in Peter's voice made Barney Hunt wince. He turned and saw his young godson hovering in the doorway.

'Uncle Barney's here. Come and say hello.'

Robbie smiled nervously.

'Hi, Uncle Barney.'

He never used to be nervous, thought Barney. Who's he afraid of? His dad?

Standing up, he clapped Robbie on the back.

'Hey, Sport. How you doing?'

'Good.'

Liar.

'Me and your dad were just talking about you. We were wondering how things were going at school.'

Robbie looked surprised. 'School?'

'Yeah, you know. Have the other kids been giving you a hard time? About the stuff in the newspapers?'

‘No, not at all. School’s great. I love it there.’

He likes school because it’s an escape from this place. An escape from grief.

‘Did you want to ask me something, Robert?’

Peter’s tone was tense, his speech clipped. He’d remained seated behind the desk since his son came in, rigid backed, his whole body clenched, like a prisoner on his way to the firing squad. He wished Robbie would go away.

Peter Templeton loved his son. He was aware that he was failing him. But every time he looked at the boy, he felt overcome by a wave of anger so violent he could hardly breathe. Suddenly the bond that Robbie and Alexandra had shared in life, the love between mother and son that had once been Peter’s greatest delight, now left him consumed with jealous rage. It was as if Robbie had stolen those hours from him, those countless, loving moments with Alex. Now she was gone, for ever. And Peter wanted those moments back.

He knew it was crazy. None of this was Robbie’s fault. But still the fury corroded his chest like battery acid. The irony was that Peter felt nothing but love for Lexi, the baby who had ‘caused’ Alex’s death. In his grief-addled mind, Lexi was a victim, like himself. She had never even known her mother, poor darling. But Robert? Robert was a thief. He had stolen Alexandra from Peter. Peter couldn’t forgive him for that.

Even now, Peter sometimes overheard the boy talking to her. *Mommy, are you there? Mommy, it’s me.*

Robbie would sit at the piano, a beatific smile on his face, and Peter knew that Alex was with him, comforting him, loving him, holding him. But when Peter woke in the night, screaming Alex's name, there was nothing. Nothing but the blackness and silence of the grave.

'No dad.' Robert's voice was barely a whisper. 'I didn't want to ask anything. I ... I was going to play the piano. But I can come back another time.'

At the mention of the word 'piano', a nerve on Peter's jaw began to twitch. He'd been idly tapping a pencil on the desk. Now he gripped it so hard it snapped in his hand.

Barney Hunt frowned. 'You OK?'

'I'm fine.'

But Peter wasn't fine. His hand was bleeding. One by one, slow, heavy drips of blood splashed onto the polished wood of the desk.

Barney smiled reassuringly at his godson. 'We won't be long. Five minutes and then I'll come and find you. We can play some catch, how's that sound?'

'Good.'

Another shy smile and Robbie was gone, slipping out of the room as silently as he had arrived.

Barney took a deep breath.

'You know, Peter, the kid needs you. He's grieving too. He ...'

Peter raised his hand. 'We've been through this Barney. Robert's all right. If you want to worry about something,

worry about these damn newspaper reporters. They're the damn problem, OK?'

Barney Hunt shook his head.

He felt for Robert, he really did. But there was nothing more he could do.

Eve Blackwell closed her eyes and tried to fantasize about something that would bring her to orgasm.

'Is that good, baby? Do you like that?'

Keith Webster, her husband, was drenched in sweat, pounding away at her from behind like an over-excited terrier. He'd insisted on regularly 'making love', as he put it, throughout Eve's pregnancy. Now that her time was fast approaching, her belly was so vastly swollen that doggy-style sex was the only option. A small mercy for Eve, who was no longer forced to look at Keith's weak, weaselly face twisted into a mask of sexual ecstasy every time he made love to her.

If you could call it making love. Keith's dick was so small, it registered only as a mild irritant. Rather like having a badly behaved child sitting behind you in a movie theatre who won't stop kicking the back of your seat.

Eve faked a moan.

'That's wonderful darling! I'm almost there!'

And suddenly she was, her mind lost in a delicious, slow-moving slide-show of images from the past:

Herself as a thirteen-year-old, seducing her married English teacher, Mr Parkinson. When she'd cried rape, she'd destroyed

the pathetic little man's life. But he'd deserved it. They all did.

Fucking her way through the military academy that adjoined her and Alexandra's finishing school in Switzerland. How intoxicating sex had been back then, back when men used to throw themselves at her feet!

Stabbing George Mellis in the heart and dumping his body in the sea at Dark Harbor. Just thinking about the look of surprise on George's face as the blade tore through his flesh could sometimes bring Eve to climax.

The world knew George Mellis as Alexandra Blackwell's first husband – a footnote in the great Blackwell Family History. In reality he was a sadistic playboy and pathological liar who had once raped and sodomized Eve, a crime for which he ultimately paid with his life.

Of course, Alex never knew the truth about George Mellis. She never knew he was in league with her evil twin sister; never knew that Eve and George had remained lovers throughout Alex's brief marriage to him; never knew that the pair of them had intended to murder her and steal her inheritance; nor that Eve had been forced to murder George instead when their plans went awry.

Alex never knew the truth. But Eve knew. Eve knew everything.

Not that Eve had minded killing George. In fact it had been a pleasure.

Keith Webster increased the pace of his thrusts, shaking with

excitement as his delicate surgeon's hands reached around for his wife's enormous, pregnancy-swollen breasts.

'Oh, Christ Eve, I love you! I'm coming baby, I'm coming!'

He let out a sound that was half groan, half whimper. Eve pictured George Mellis in the moment of his death, then mentally substituted Keith's face for George's. She orgasmed instantly.

Keith slid off her back like a toad slipping down a wet rock. He lay back against the pillow, his eyes closed in post-coital contentment. 'That was incredible. Are you OK honey? Is the baby OK?'

Eve stroked her belly lovingly. 'The baby's fine, darling. You mustn't worry.'

Keith Webster had been neurotic about his wife's pregnancy from the start, but Alexandra's death a few weeks ago had heightened his anxiety tenfold. It was common knowledge that Eve and Alexandra's own mother, Marianne, had died giving birth to them. Now the same fate had befallen Alex. It was easy to imagine that Eve might be next. That some unseen genetic fault lurked in the shadows, waiting to snatch his beloved from him.

Keith Webster had loved Eve Blackwell from the moment he set eyes on her. It was true that, shortly after their marriage, he had deliberately mutilated her face. Playing on Eve's innate vanity, he had persuaded her to let him perform a minor operation to erase the laughter lines around her eyes. Then, once he had her under anesthetic and utterly at his mercy, he had proceeded to destroy her beautiful features one by one.

At first Eve had been angry, of course. He'd expected that. But now she saw things clearly. He *had* to do it. He had no choice. As long as Eve remained so mesmerizingly, intoxicatingly beautiful, he was at risk of losing her. Losing her to other, less worthy men, men who could never love her the way that he did. Men like George Mellis, who had once beaten Eve so badly she had almost died. Keith Webster had restored her looks after that attack. It was the day they met. Eve had been so deliciously grateful afterwards, he'd fallen in love with her on the spot.

But what Keith Webster giveth, Keith Webster could also taketh away.

It was a lesson Eve needed to learn.

Others might find his wife's grotesquely scarred features repellant, but not Keith Webster. In his eyes, Eve would always be beautiful. The most beautiful creature on earth.

Keith Webster had no illusions about his own appearance. When he looked in the mirror he saw a slight, short-sighted man with only a few wisps of sandy hair left clinging to his otherwise bald head, like seaweed on a bare rock. Women had never been interested in him, period, never mind women as insanely attractive as Eve Blackwell. He'd felt no compunction at the time about blackmailing Eve into marriage (Keith knew she had murdered George Mellis, and threatened to go to the police if she didn't marry him) and he felt no guilt about it now. After all, how else was he supposed to possess her? To fulfill her destiny, and his own?

Once again, Eve had given him no choice.

Resting a loving hand on her baby bump, Keith felt replete with happiness. Terrified of being photographed and ridiculed like a carnival sideshow, Eve had become a virtual prisoner in their penthouse apartment since he 'recreated' her, as he liked to think of it. With nothing to do with the long, lonely hours of her existence but cater to his every whim, she had finally capitulated and given Keith the one thing he desired above all others: a baby, their baby, a living, breathing affirmation of their love.

What more could any man ask for?

She'd had a rotten pregnancy, poor thing, with violent bouts of morning sickness throughout. Although Keith knew there had never been much love lost between his wife and her twin sister, he was sure that Alexandra's sudden death must have frightened Eve.

Still, only a few weeks to go now.

Bending his head reverently, he kissed his wife's belly, murmuring endearments to his unborn child.

Soon the baby would be born. Then all their troubles would be over, the pain of the past forgotten.

Eve's labor was long and agonizing. While the press huddled like baying bloodhounds beneath her hospital window, Eve spent sixteen grueling hours feeling her body being ripped apart from within.

'Are you sure you won't consider pain relief, Mrs Webster? A shot of pethidine would really take the edge off your

contractions.’

‘My name is Blackwell,’ Eve hissed between clenched teeth, ‘and no.’

Eve was adamant. No drugs. No relief. She had conceived this child to wreak her vengeance, to bring righteous suffering to her enemies, and to reclaim her stolen inheritance: Kruger-Brent. It was right that he should be born from suffering. That the first sound he heard should be his mother’s screams.

If she didn’t despise him so intensely, Eve might almost have felt sorry for Keith Webster. The pathetic, inadequate, milquetoast she’d been trapped into marrying actually believed she was *happy* to be having his child! Hovering over her like an old maid, full of pity for her morning sickness ... except it wasn’t morning sickness at all. Eve’s violent bouts of vomiting were triggered by pure revulsion. The very idea of Keith’s seed growing inside her was enough to make her retch.

True, she had allowed him to impregnate her. This baby was no mistake.

He thinks I conceived out of love.

Eve laughed aloud. The arrogance of Keith’s madness knew no limits.

The truth was that Eve Blackwell hated her husband. Hated him with a murderous passion so strong, she was surprised the nurses couldn’t smell it on her skin.

When Keith had first removed Eve’s bandages and shown her her ruined face, five long years ago, she’d screamed until she

passed out. In the weeks that followed she had sobbed and raged, her emotions swinging wildly from shock to disbelief to terror. At first she'd been so desperate she had actually clung to Keith. Yes, he'd done this terrible thing, but he was all she had. Without his protection she feared being flung to the wolves, torn to shreds like a hunted animal. As the years passed, however, Eve stopped worrying about Keith abandoning her. She realized, with amused horror, that the man was so deranged he actually still found her attractive. Keith Webster had turned Eve Blackwell into a monster: *The Beast of the Blackwells*. But she was *his* monster. To Keith, that was all that mattered.

'The baby's crowning Mrs Web—Ms Blackwell. I can see the head!'

Eve wished the nurses would stop smiling. Didn't they realize the agony she was in? It was like being attended by a troupe of giddy schoolgirls.

Thank God Keith had agreed to stay in the fathers' waiting room.

Eve had begged him: 'I want you to still find me sexy my darling. You know what they say about men who watch their wives give birth. It ruins, you know, *that*, for ever.'

Keith insisted that nothing could dim his passion for her. But to Eve's astonishment, he'd agreed to stay away.

'One more push! You're almost there!'

The pain was so strong, Eve was surprised she hadn't lost consciousness. Like a rip tide it pulled at her until she was

no longer aware of anything but the sensations deep inside her womb.

She thought about Alex, realizing for the first time how physically painful and terrifying her sister's death must have been.

Good.

It was ironic. Eve thought about all the time and effort she'd put into trying to kill her twin over the years: setting her nightgown alight at their fifth birthday party; arranging riding accidents, sailing accidents, and finally the whole complicated murder plot with George Mellis. Knowing George was both penniless and psychotic, and that his rich playboy routine was all an act, Eve had encouraged him to woo and marry her sister. The plan was for George to win Alex's trust, persuade her to make a new will that left him everything, including her controlling stake in Kruger-Brent, then get rid of her, splitting the inheritance with Eve.

But somehow Alexandra had survived every one of Eve's elaborate schemes. The bitch was like one of those novelty birthday candles you couldn't blow out. And then *Bam!* Out of nowhere, a simple act of God had come along and erased her, like the unwanted stain she was.

Alexandra Blackwell, Kruger-Brent heiress and famous beauty. Dead in childbirth at the age of thirty-four.

It was so perfect, it was almost biblical.

Eve heard a loud, feral noise. It took a moment to register

that it was her own voice, screaming as the final contraction wracked her body with agony. Seconds later she felt a warm wetness between her legs and the frenzied kicking of tiny limbs. A slimy, bloody creature, covered in waxy white vernix slithered into the waiting arms of the midwife.

‘It’s a boy!’

‘Congratulations, Ms Blackwell!’

One of the nurses cut the cord. Another cleaned up the afterbirth.

Weak with exhaustion and blood loss, Eve slumped back against the sodden sheets. She watched as the nurses cleaned and examined the baby, ticking things off on a chart. Suddenly she felt choked with panic.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ She sat bolt upright. ‘Why isn’t he crying? Is he dead?’

The midwife, smiled. *Well that was a turn-up for the books.* Eve Blackwell had been so detached and hostile during the birth – quite frankly, she’d been an out and out bitch to the nursing team – they’d begun to suspect she didn’t *want* her baby. But obviously they’d misjudged her. The concern in Eve’s voice now was unmistakably genuine. *She’s going to make a great mommy after all.*

‘He’s right as rain Ms Blackwell. Here, you can see for yourself.’

Eve took the white bundle. Someone had cleaned the child up. The blood and the wax were gone. When she looked down

Eve saw a small, olive-skinned face, topped with a crown of glossy, blue-black hair. The nose and mouth were baby-like and nondescript. But the enormous, dark brown eyes with their fringe of black lashes and steady, focused gaze; those were extraordinary. The boy looked up at her, silently scanning her face. To the rest of the world, Eve was a freak. To her baby, she was the universe.

Eve thought: *He's intelligent. Cunning, like a little gypsy.*

She smiled, and though she knew it wasn't meant to be possible, she could have sworn he smiled back.

'Have you thought of a name for him yet?'

Eve didn't even look up.

'Max. His name is Max.'

It was a simple name, short, but to Eve it suggested strength. The boy would need strength if he was going to fulfill his purpose and avenge his mother.

Eve had conceived Keith Webster's child for one reason and one reason only. Because she needed an accomplice. Someone who she could mould in her own image, feed with her own hatred and send out into the world to do all the things that she, a prisoner in her own home, could no longer do for herself.

Max would make Keith Webster pay for what he'd done to her.

Max would bring Kruger-Brent back to her.

Max would worship and adore and obey her, the way that men had always worshiped, adored and obeyed her, before Keith had robbed her of her looks.

‘Knock knock.’

Keith appeared at the door, bearing a huge bouquet of roses. Handing them to a nurse, he kissed Eve perfunctorily on the top of the head before taking his son in his arms.

‘He’s ... he’s beautiful.’ His voice was choked. When he looked up, Eve saw that there were tears of joy streaming down his face. ‘Thank you, Eve. Thank you my darling. You’ve no idea what this ... what *he* means to me.’

Eve smiled knowingly.

‘You’re welcome, Keith.’

And she sank into a contented, dreamless sleep.

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