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TAO
DECEPTION



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THE
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DECEPTION

A TORI SWYFT THRILLER

JOHN M. GREEN



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great storytelling



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*In memory of Sylvia Green,
whose magic fingers conjured dresses out of sacks,
whose presence charmed sunshine out of gloom.*

NATIONAL SECURITY NOTICE

The Central Intelligence Agency disputes
a number of Dr Victoria (Tori) Swyft's accounts.

The Agency also asked for certain names to be redacted
claiming disclosure may imperil operations or lives.

The Author has changed those names.

More novels by John M. Green

Nowhere Man

Born to Run

The Trusted

TORI SWYFT NOVELS

The Trusted

ISABEL DIAZ NOVELS

Born to Run

The Trusted

Tao (道): the Universe's natural order, its essence

'To get rich is glorious!'

—**Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader, 1978-92**

'The march of the mujahidin will continue to Rome,
by Allah's permission.'

—**Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Caliph, Islamic State, 2014**

'A nuclear EMP attack would kill two-thirds of America's
population, 200 million dead in one year from starvation, disease and
societal collapse.'

—**Task Force on National and Homeland Security, 2016**

PROLOGUE

Three years earlier – Tehran, Iran

‘D-D-DID WE JUST HAVE SEX?’ THE husband of two sputtered from under his black shoe-brush of a moustache.

Tori Swyft shuddered at the mere notion, yearning to shout *As if!* Instead, she forced out a slow wink, lowered her shoulder strap and sidled back to the bed.

In truth, the man revolted her. His arrogant swagger, his shameless ogling, even his hair; it was like it had dropped off the top of his head and stuck to him everywhere else. Tori had made out *on* a couple of rugs but never *with* one. And not even a crucial catch like Dr Masoud Mahdi Akhtar, head of Iran’s atomic energy organisation, would make her change that.

To reel him in, all it had taken was a slinky black dress, an airy whiff of her gardenia fragrance and a few husky whispers.

After that, the redheaded CIA officer had flown the living Persian carpet to her hotel room where she'd plied him with his first dose of dazzle—the street name for midazolam—quickly laying him to rest so she could get on with her mission.

Carving her mouth into what she hoped was a seductive smile, she leant over the bed and flashed her cold green eyes at him. 'You were magnificent, Masoud ... a lion,' she said in the steamiest Persian she could muster from her recent training.

For the second time, she twisted the tip of the vintage urn on her charm bracelet and tipped four more drops into the tumbler on the night table. She stirred it with one finger then pressed the glass to his lips. 'Drink this to give you energy, then let me feel you roar inside me once more.' She cringed. *As if.*

Then she smiled, genuinely this time. *I christen thee Asif*, she decided. *Well, not so much 'christen', but definitely Asif.*

With the exception of the mullahs themselves, Asif was as powerful an official as they came, palpably close to Iran's political heartbeat and one of a handful with unfettered access to the nation's nuclear secrets.

With his head nestling into his pillow, Tori went back to the desk where she'd piggybacked her tablet onto his smartphone and continued trying to crack into Iran's nuclear control and operating systems. Her mission: to reconfigure and supercharge Stuxnet, a computer worm that had first spun Iran's nuclear centrifuges out of control in 2009.

Every minute increased her risk of being gatecrashed by VEVAK, Iran's infamous secret police and, glancing at the timer on her tablet, she'd already been at this for 125 of them. Asif was snoring but VEVAK wouldn't be.

The drug top-up would give her another two hours but tiptoeing inside Iran's network for that much longer was too great a gamble, with their digital trip-wires everywhere.

Besides, the battery level on her satellite phone, with its aerial poking out the window to secure a signal, only gave her thirty minutes more at best.

To work faster, she needed to think faster so she reached for her most sure-fire accelerant: classic surf rock. Popping in an earbud, she picked out a track on her tablet and began streaming it from her ear into her fingers. The opening tremolo twang and the urgent, dangerous drums crashed over her like waves pounding a sea wall. As she resumed her tapping and typing, she imagined herself standing precariously on the wet, stone blocks, breathing in the briny smell, the spray cooling her skin, the salt prickling her tongue. And as she worked through six repeats—fifteen pounding minutes of The Break's *Groynes*—a sparkling Aladdin's cave of the country's most precious digital treasures started opening up before her.

Lifting every binary rock, poking into every crevice, she unearthed the perfect hidey-hole for the 25,000 lines of code that a CIA tech team had spent eighteen months creating, refining and squashing into ten tiny digital packets.

With the music's work done, she turned it off. Then her fingers froze and her ears cocked. Out in the corridor ... a scuffle? Something ... someone dragging?

VEVAK?

She twiddled her left pearl earring, ready to snap it open and swallow the kill pill inside it if she had to. Her eyes spun around the room, landing on the cold plate of kebabs on the nightstand. Grabbing one, she pushed the meat cubes off the metal spike and crept to the door. Standing to the side to avoid casting a shadow, she held the skewer point up as she put an ear to the wood. Holding her breath, she stretched over to look out the peephole.

A man, his face in darkness, was tottering on a stepladder and fiddling with a dead light bulb, one Tori was sure had been

burning brightly when she'd used her card key to enter the room. Her jaw clenched and she twisted the spike downward.

She pulled back to the side, her breath quickening, sweat beading on her forehead. A ribbon of light wavered across the crack under the door and she leant back to the peephole. The back of the man's head was now bathed in light. He boxed the dead globe and dropped it onto the tool bag on the carpet below him. As he turned his face toward her door, her body tensed and she raised her fist, gripping the skewer. Then she blinked and smiled, her arm falling beside her, muscles at ease.

Jaman from her extraction team, also realising her time was running out, had come to stand watch. She dropped her eyes to his bag, which she knew concealed the respectable black chador he'd brought for her escape and the Heckler & Koch UMP submachine gun intended for anyone who tried to stop her.

Relieved, she darted back to the desk to finish her assignment. Within minutes it was apparent how good Asif and his nuclear minions were. Brilliant in fact. But for the noise it would make, she would've been whistling at their technical wizardry; one expert's awe at another's work.

Then her mouth suddenly dropped, her admiration boiling into loathing. At first tens, then hundreds of lines of code started scrolling up in front of her, lines so recognisable she was mentally reciting the next one before it appeared on the screen. The filthy, thieving bastard lying on the bed had filched *her* model, the protocol she'd earned her nuclear engineering PhD for.

She squinted at one line, then six, then sixty ... new lines of code. Tweaks. Enhancements. *Improvements*. The bastards hadn't just pilfered the intellectual sweat of her brow, they'd made revisions she now knew she should have thought of herself. With reworks like these, she realised, Asif would have

squeezed so much extra juice out of Iran's nuclear cores their program would have been fast-tracked by years, far beyond what the CIA's intel had revealed.

The new virus wasn't just important, it might prove crucial. Her fingers worked even faster than before and she'd just hidden it in place when Asif groaned. She grabbed the skewer and spun around, but judging by the lewd smile drooling from beneath his moustache he was still in the land of nod.

Her mission was complete. This was officially go time. But unknown to her superiors she was going to push her luck, implanting another tiny block of code. This one she'd written herself.

Tori worked for the US government, but that didn't mean she trusted them to control Iran's nuclear ambitions. And now, with her own code hibernating alongside theirs, she didn't have to.

1

Present day – the Vatican

AT FIRST GLANCE, AUGUSTINE APPEARED MORE like an affable grandfather than a pope. In reality, his silky tousle of white hair, feeble pink eyes and soft translucent skin camouflaged a stiffness of backbone and a moral rigidity that only the brave or foolish dared challenge.

Strangely for a cleric, he'd struggled with the notion of miracles until a hundred days ago, the day God gave him one. His fellow cardinals had elected him Bishop of Rome and Vicar of Christ, entrusting him to grip the papal wheel and lurch the Church back onto its true path, to restore the wreckage the populist Latino had left in his dust.

Showing only a trace of his trademark fervour, Augustine's frail eyes fluttered open at the first sparks of a new dawn. His bedchamber was aglow as the sun's rays began bouncing off all

the gold: the rococo furniture, the Renaissance picture frames, the glittering gilt thread woven into the brocade tapestry, the urns banded in shiny saffron-yellow ribbons. Even the light switches were plated with the lavish metal.

Augustine saw the light and though it was harsh and bright, it was good. Except unknown to him, the real dawn was three cold, grim hours away.

His bedroom blushed with an eerie holiness, a twinkling in the air like golden sunbursts fading into mist. Whatever this was it prickled against his skin, more numb than cool. He sniffed at the odour, which oddly had none of the astringency of the bare-leaved winter morning outside. It was sweeter ... a little like milk.

His ears pulsed with a crinkly thrumming, as if papery wings were fluttering just out of his reach. A dragonfly or a bee, perhaps.

An angel?

Curiously, he couldn't shift his head even an inch to see what caused the rustling. He blinked as a laser-sharp beam of golden light shot through the open window, slicing through the veil of mist then circling around and around his head like a sculptor's knife carving a target out of clay.

A second spray of the sweetness—this time more luscious—burst out along the beam and puffed its creaminess, cool and fresh, over the bullseye of his delicate face. He tried to lick the flavour off his lips but his tongue stayed stuck in his mouth. He went to rub his eyes but his hand wouldn't budge from his side. He tried his other hand but it wouldn't lift either. He couldn't move his legs, not even his toes. All he could control were his eyes; his insipid, pathetic eyes. His genetic weakness had become his only strength.

The mist encased his head like a plastic bag. He panicked, tried to scream out to his valet who, at 5 am, should have been

outside his door awaiting the call to enter. But Augustine's mouth wouldn't open, not even a crack, and he couldn't raise his voice beyond a rasp.

His eyes engorged with terror and his suffocating breaths became shallower and shorter. As the mist around him dissipated, the bag muffling his head dissolved and relief began to wash over him.

He saw. He understood. He knew.

An angel. It hovered a sceptre's length inside his window, above his water jug. This too was a miracle, and God, on this day and at this moment, was blessing his papacy.

This angel bore no resemblance to the classic depictions in Bible stories, but that didn't perturb Augustine, it thrilled him. With no face, no eyes, no arms, no legs, not even a single wing, his angel was far more miraculous. The dull, unpolished sphere the size of a football was perfection itself, its meshed surface matte gunmetal grey. A revelation.

A bizarre thought struck him. If his valet hadn't insisted on opening the window last night when the central heating got stuck on high, would this angel still have come? His windows were bulletproof. What if they were angel-proof?

The mist finally cleared and the golden light paled and sputtered out.

Augustine's ears no longer heard and his lungs no longer breathed. The light left his pink eyes and they grew peaceful, but they no longer saw.

Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.



THE DRONE FLEW forward, hovering directly above Augustine. When its operator, 5,063 miles away according to the

GPS, was satisfied the job was done, the metallic orb glided out the window as unnoticed as when it had entered.

The video feeding back over SATCOM was so sharp, so real, that the assassin could almost inhale the sweet unction His Holiness liked to dab on his forehead before sleeping.

The pope's killer replayed the video frame by frame, by the end confident the autopsy would bring in a verdict of death by natural causes. Only then, after the toxin had passed its first independent trial, would the clip be released and RUA, Rome Under Allah, would proclaim itself to the world.

Allah is truly in the details, the assassin laughed. This was a great moment. A triumph. Step one in the immaculate deception.

2

White House, Washington, DC

ISABEL DIAZ FLUFFED UP HER PRESIDENTIAL pillow, slid it back and wriggled her shoulder blades into it. For her, waking at 5 am was ingrained, a habit she'd developed working the breakfast and every other shift in the family restaurant she'd built into a nationwide chain and then sold before entering politics. But today the twinge in her stomach woke her early, her bedside clock clicking over at only 4.07 am. Was it the meat patties she'd rustled up for herself in the kitchen last night? She hoped not. She'd hate to think the old Burger Queen—her first nickname when she'd entered politics—had lost her magic touch.

The glow from the clock lit up her fountain pen as it too lay awake, stretched across the top of her draft State of the Union address. The speech was weeks off but she'd started work on it

early. She was struggling more with the tone than the words, so crucial when her utterly unpredicted and unprecedented rise to office was still raw in the nation's throat. Yes, she was the most popular president in recent history, but flung into office by a constitutional earthquake, not swept in on a voters' landslide, meant her every nuance would be scrutinised far more than usual.

She ran her fingers through her hair, which these days she kept in a manageable, shoulder-length black bob. She'd been in office eleven months. Eleven months since her predecessor's first and only State of the Union, the chill February evening only weeks after his own Inauguration when he left Isabel, America and the world gasping by resigning on the floor of Congress and handing her the keys to the Oval Office.

Her thinking for her own State of the Union address was to stand in the same spot, explicitly acknowledge the crisis that pitched her into office and seek closure for it. Her advisers disagreed, arguing her approach could rip open the nation's wounds after a year of healing, and offer her opponents a fresh chance to scratch at her naivety, to point anew to the red flags she'd missed, the bloodiest being the man who used to sleep in her bed. And the beds of others as it turned out.

His son, Davey, squirmed and rolled toward Isabel under the pastel blue sheet, his golden hair softly curling across the pillow. His free hand poked out from the bed covers and patted around until it found his fluffy penguin, Pip. He dragged the soft toy back under the sheet and nestled it to his chest, nuzzling it with his chin, the musty smell reminding Isabel that Pip hadn't seen water for far too long.

Every day, she negotiated with people speaking at her in Russian, Chinese, Hebrew, French, German, Arabic and, in the case of her Australian chief of staff, what passed as English.

But all those exchanges were picnics compared to a ten-year-old's tantrum over Isabel wanting to 'drown' his penguin, all conducted in American Sign Language.

God, how she loved her stepson. In these early morning moments she often felt like cradling him in her arms and gobbling him up, his pale complexion stark against her natural olive skin. She'd fret over whether it had truly sunk in for him that he'd been the one to expose his father's treachery, terrified he might be blaming himself for her husband's—his dad's—suicide.

But today there'd be no time for cuddling with the red night-light above her door starting to flash. The circus had begun. She placed a hand on the phone waiting for it to ring, not to stop it waking Davey since he wouldn't hear it, but because she didn't like to keep her people waiting.

'Madam President, I'm sorry to wake you.'

'I had to answer the phone anyway,' she laughed, even though it was a quip Narthex Carter, her national security adviser, had heard her make at least twenty times. 'Aren't you supposed to be surfing in Hawaii?' She glanced at Davey, thinking she might add a beach vacation to their own list.

'Flying out later this morning, ma'am, but I've had the Vatican on the line. Augustine died in his sleep. Natural causes.'

'Good,' she said, spite pinching her mouth before she could stop it.

'But with you as—'

She sighed. 'As the world's highest ranked Catholic *political* leader, they want me to kick off the news cycle with some uplifting words—'

'Exactly.'

'—about a man who on his tenth day as Bishop of Rome let it be known that he saw me as an apostate?'

‘You’re not going to say anything, are you?’

Silence.

‘Ma’am?’

‘Did you hear my lips moving?’

‘Surely you could say—’

‘What? That Augustine’s death proves that God really does exist?’

‘Er, I guess not.’

‘Then it’s *aloha* from me.’

‘Pardon, ma’am?’

‘Go pack your wetsuit.’

3

Oahu, Hawaii

COMING TO THE BANZAI PIPELINE ON Oahu's North Shore was a pilgrimage for Tori. While this time the break was courtesy of her eccentric boss, Axel Schönberg III, her original visit here fifteen years ago was with her first inspiration: her dad, her mentor, her coach. And her best friend. Swyfty had brought his twelve-year-old wunderkind here for surf training, to terrify her with the fury of the seething, thundering walls of water that jacked up, hurtling and crashing over the coral reefs, to get her to conquer her fears. Only later did she realise it had also been life training.

That day, with her quaking on the beach, deafened by the roar, eyes screaming and mouth agape, Swyfty had grabbed his board, scratched some wax on top and dashed into the water where the current was flowing parallel to the beach at six or

seven knots. It dragged him and the sand it was ripping off the beach to the little gap between Gums and Ehukai where it turned, pushing out at an angle. He paddled until he reached the shoulder to sit with maybe twenty other board riders, the surges welling beneath them, all of them keyed up waiting for the perfect wave.

She couldn't have been more focused, mechanically chewing on gum that had lost its flavour, wired as she watched him reading the direction, sensing which way a lip might curl, waiting for his tell—the face flicker—that fleeting moment of commitment when a surfer forced back fear to tip over a lip and take a line.

This was it.

Tori had leant forward as her father dropped down the liquid curtain, a sheer twenty-foot drop, hundreds of tonnes of water surging behind and above him. Halfway down the face as the Pipe started rolling and crashing beside him, he turned to the side, crouching, grabbing onto his rail with his left hand and pressing his heels down to drive the right edge of his board into the wave. The tube kept coming at him, overtaking and finally enveloping him—Tori fearing the worst—until seconds later it spat him out with a whoosh of spindrift and spray, his arms punching the sky. Hot tears welled in her eyes.

When Swyfty got back to shore, the smile on his face was almost as wide as the beach. But, he'd reminded her, that trip wasn't for him, it was to prepare his daughter for the upcoming world title where she'd be competing against girls five, six years older. Taking no time to bathe in his glory or gather his strength, he took her straight out for step two of the most intimidating, exhilarating lesson of her young life.

Yes, she'd flipped the surfing world on its head and won the junior women's crown, but it was a hollow, short-lived triumph

when not long after, on her thirteenth birthday, her dad fell forward into a wipe out and didn't come back up ... the instant she decided to quit competitive surfing.

She hadn't returned here, to Sunset Beach, for ten years after that. But since then, she'd been back three times, trying but never conquering Swyfty's mastery. Not in her eyes.

That said, the fifteen-foot colossus she'd just caught was possibly her best ride anywhere, not that anyone else would care. Heading back in to shore exhausted but euphoric from her conquest, she passed a blond guy heading out. He gave her the briefest nod as if he'd been watching her ride. Was it, she wondered, a mark of respect?

Back on the sand, her legs crossed, she watched him go out, her eyes straining until his board licked the lip of his wave and she saw it ... his moment of commitment. Without thinking, she scrambled to her own feet as if his were controlling them.

Her mouth fell open as she watched him plunge from the lip, down inside the raw, unbridled power of the churning, barrelling whorl. Apart from him being a goofy-footer, it was like seeing Swyfty again but somehow better, breezier, more languid, his moves almost belying the muscle of the water, drifting like the clouds that shadowed him from above.

He was breathtaking, the guy and his board at one with the Pipe, on it yet in it, the monster wave driving him yet, at the same time, he was driving it. Tori was possessed by it, bewitched by it ... by him.

Sunset Beach was sinuously long, two miles point to point, but when Tori's wave wizard, his board under one arm, rocked out of the water at a spot directly below her, it was hardly surprising since she'd repositioned her towel on the sand in line with where she'd seen him heading. Given her lousy history with men, the move was risky. This one could surf, but could

he think? Could he talk? If he could, he was one magician she wouldn't let escape like smoke through her fingers.

She feigned interest in her novel as he approached, her eyes sneaking a peak at the dripping Adonis through her fringe, the sun searing it redder than normal, almost scarlet. With his turned-up nose and optimistic blue eyes that managed both warmth and scrutiny, he was even more strangely magnetic.

And yes, he could talk, but much more than that, he could think. The more time they spent together that day, surfing, running back onto the sand, shaking the water out of their hair, flopping down onto their towels, chatting, laughing and touching, initially to spread sunscreen over each other, the more she knew he was special. Maybe not the *one*, but closer to it than she'd ever got before.

His one negative was his name, Tex, the same as that redneck she'd been forced to share a desk with on a six-month assignment in China. Though Surfer Tex was nothing like Beijing Tex, the fleeting twist of her mouth or the stiffening of her shoulders must have revealed that his name bugged her. Almost immediately, leaning over to offer her his sunscreen, he casually threw out how he hailed from Arizona, that 'Tex' came courtesy of his archaeologist parents.

'It's from the myth where Prometheus stole fire from the gods,' he said, pointing the tube of cream to the sky, 'so he could bestow it on mankind. He carried the fire to Earth inside a giant fennel stalk, a narthex. That's my actual name, Narthex. Actually, it's worse than that.' He leapt to his feet and bowed, and Tori had to stop herself staring. 'Let me formally introduce myself, ma'am, Narthex Prometheus Carter.' He flopped back onto his towel. 'Can you imagine a kid going through school with that mouthful?' He sighed and leant back on his elbows, the sun glimmering on his chest. 'To my parents, I'm always

Narthex. But with the constant explaining and spelling, I cut it back to Tex. Except at work. My boss,' he added, 'sticks with the formality, like my folks.'

'Why?'

He shrugged. 'I guess she wants to give my relative youth more gravitas around the place.'

The place. As he sprawled next to her, long and lean and tanned, like a dribble of honey on the golden sand, his deliberate vagueness had Tori's neck hairs twitching on alert. 'And what *place* might that be?' she said, deliberately focusing on rubbing sunscreen onto her legs.

'It's ... I'm in, you know ... in government.' He said it hazily, scooping up a handful of grains and letting them spill back between his fingers.

Tori's alarm bells were clanging like crazy. If this Tex, or Narthex, was CIA then this thing she was feeling, if it was a thing, it was over, done, *fnis*.

She bit her lip. Would she ask him or not? Damn it, she had to. She capped the tube of sunscreen and handed it to him. 'If you told me *where* you worked in government, would you have to kill me?' She did her best to make it sound light, almost nonchalant. But to Tori, it was deadly serious.

4

TEX'S EYES DARTED AROUND, LIKE HE was checking no one was close enough to hear. Then his face flushed and he shrugged, a thin cake of sand falling from his shoulder, the foreshock ahead of the quake. 'It's nothing clandestine, not the CIA or the NSA, nothing like that. I, ah, where I work ... Tori, it's the White House.'

A shadow floated over them and Tori looked up to see a red-tailed tropicbird, silky white, unhurried, its coral red streamers trailing behind it. An omen, she hoped, if it didn't spray them with crap. 'The White House?' she asked, relieved, imagining him as a backroom guy, a speechwriter maybe. 'Do you ever get to meet with the president?'

His wince, though brief, was unmistakable. 'Sure, but I kinda avoid talking about work in, you know, social situations.'

‘Because people ooze all over you and want you to fix them up with a ride in Air Force One or a visit to the Oval Office?’

‘Mostly they cringe like I’ve got Ebola.’

‘Hmm, you are a little infectious,’ she laughed, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. ‘But relax, I’m not the oozy type and I don’t need you to pimp me an audience with the president. I got to shake hands with her a few weeks ago, not that I’m boasting, but since you work there and all.’

‘What?’ he said, startled. He perched on one elbow and pushed his sunglasses up to his forehead, his eyes searching hers.

Hoping the reflections of the sun and the green of the sea were glistening in her irises, Tori went on, ‘She was presenting me with—’

‘A Presidential Medal. You’re *that* Swyft?’

‘Guilty as charged.’ She laughed again, then worried it came out like a giggle. But even so, she threw her head back, exposing her long throat and hoping her red hair might also catch some of the sun’s fire.

‘So you’re not just Tori Swyft, amazing Australian surfer, obsessive sunscreener—’

‘Hey, beneath this perfect tan I’m as pure as the driven snow,’ she said, before quickly adding, ‘you know, red hair, green eyes, fair skin.’

‘Sure,’ he said, either not hearing the double entendre or ignoring it, ‘but you’re also *Victoria* Swyft ... *Dr* Victoria Swyft ... ex-CIA ... who stopped the cyber-terrorists single-hande—’

‘Not by myself, but yes, that’s me. And about your Ebola, I’m not that kind of doctor. Just so you know.’

‘Hence the paranoia when you thought I was with one of the security services! After how those bastards treated you, I don’t blame you.’

How they'd treated her. What an understatement when her former CIA bosses had effectively accused her of treason. If it hadn't been for the backup from her new boss, Axel Schönberg, and her work colleague Frank Chaudry, right now she'd be decked out in an orange jumpsuit, shackled and shoved down a hole in some off-the-books black site. Instead, here she was lazing under the sun in a skimpy turquoise bikini next to Mr Dreamy.

Tex—she could cheerfully think of him as that now—let out a long breath full of ... what? Reverence? Too much. Deference? Maybe, but Tori didn't want either. Not from him.

He shook his head, pulled his sunglasses down over his eyes and lay back against the sand. 'Dr Victoria Swyft. Well, blow me.'

She'd known him less than a day, but frankly the notion kind of appealed to her, even if he hadn't meant it that way. She kept her eyes on him for several silent seconds, possibly in a swoon, though having never experienced one before she wasn't sure. Just this once, maybe she could park her despondency over men and try being spontaneous, perhaps enjoy the strange electric sensations that were suddenly tingling all through her.

Tex pulled a tablet out of his duffel bag. Almost unconsciously, he started scrawling his fingertip over the screen as he questioned her about her life in the most charmingly inoffensive way, like a pleasant ramble through a maze getting closer and closer to the prize. More than asking, he listened.

She had no clue what he was doodling until later, when with a slight flush of pink in his cheeks, he passed over his tablet and showed her a screen full of brushstrokes, a woman crouching on her board halfway up to standing, her hair flying behind her, redder and more fiery than she ever saw it herself. Disarmingly, he'd added more fabric to her postage stamps of

a bikini, seeing a modesty in her almost ingenuous brashness that she found, well, charming. He'd made her nose less ski-jumpy, more Scarlett Johansson than the one that bugged her every day in the mirror. How did he pick up on that? Her eyes. He'd noticed them too. A lustrous, flecked jade leapt out of the screen, shimmering like gold dust sprinkled over a sea of liquid emeralds.

And, almost like an afterthought, jags of lightning shot out of her pinkie ring as if it were enchanted. The vibe of a woman who could conquer the world. Or perhaps him.

Not knowing what to say, she smiled and turned over onto her chest, unsure if she was trying to muffle her thumping heart or mask the sudden, awkward zing in her nipples.

Tori hadn't met a man like Tex for a long time, maybe never, apart from Frank Chaudry, but as Frank's boss that relationship was doomed to stay professional.

Good men were out there but until Frank, and now Tex, she'd kept missing them, landing the guys who saw questions as ruses, her answers as opportunities to interrupt. Those who weren't grandiose narcissists play-acted as sponges, pretending to thoughtfully soak up whatever she said, all the while waiting for a pause, a chance to jump her, simply viewing her and every other woman in their compass as little more than life support systems for their vaginas.

Tex ... Narthex ... he wasn't like that even though all she knew about him so far was that his folks were a Mr and Mrs Indiana Jones who had taken him on some very exotic digs, that he was an academic China expert now working in the White House, and that he was a fine artist, a dazzling surfer ... and an eyeful.

At the beach, although Tori dressed loosely, she kept her history and her thoughts wrapped up tighter than a cocoon, so

opening up to Tex was an unfamiliar sensation. And despite her initial reservations, it felt natural, cosy, like pulling an old baggy sweater down over her head, its familiar musty smells of last year's winter, sleeves stretched too long by the years, warm on her fingers.

'As an Australian,' he asked, 'how'd you get into the CIA? Isn't there a—'

'I've got dual citizenship, so they gave me special consideration. My mother was American and—'

'Was?'

Tori sat up. The sun was high and its rays strong but she folded her arms as if suddenly freezing. She turned her head away.

What mother deserts a two-year-old? she asked herself, the old shame stinging her, that it was her fault her mother abandoned her and her dad. The chronic, paralysing pall of black hung over her, the blame for breaking up the family, for forcing her father's one true love to run away, ruining Swyfty's life. Tori was still plagued with guilt that his death too had been her fault, that once he'd helped her win the world title, he felt free to go. It was nuts, she knew that, but she'd lived her life to prove him wrong, that a surfing crown wasn't going to be the pinnacle of her, or Swyfty's, achievements.

Tex didn't press his question and he knew not to reach a comforting hand out to her. 'That brick in there,' he said, tapping a finger on her beach bag, 'kind of big to be lugging to the beach?'

Relieved he'd changed the subject, she broke through her cloud and slid out her copy of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* so he could see its battered cover and curled, yellowed pages. 'Proust only comes supersized,' she said. 'The plan's to devour the whole thing. Eventually.'

‘And in French! I hit a wall struggling through it in English.’ His expression turned serious and he pointed at her shoulder and stomach. ‘Looks like you hit a few walls, too. CIA mementos?’

He leant over and hovered his finger close to the tiny scar on her stomach, so dangerously close she wanted him to touch it ... to touch her. He must have felt it was too soon, that he was intruding on her personal space, and pulled his hand back. She closed her eyes. He put her on edge. Not an edge like teetering on the brink of an abyss, but more like the anxious schoolgirl she never was, praying this boy would ask her to the dance.



EIGHT DAYS LATER, on the roof terrace of Tex’s rented condo, the roar of the waves below had calmed to a gentle rumble. The rustling whispers of the surrounding coconut palms afforded the sleeping, naked couple a handy seclusion.

Tori blinked her eyes open, running them down the scratch on Tex’s shoulder from their last bout of lovemaking, his chest rising and falling rhythmically, his stomach flat like a drum she suddenly wanted to tap on.

For anyone else this would’ve been idyllic, but with Tex flying back to work the next morning, Tori was torn. He’d asked her to come stay with him for the last two weeks of her own vacation. If he’d been the nerdy researcher or lowly policy wonk she’d imagined at first, it might have been easier to say yes. But it turned out he didn’t just ‘work in the White House’, he was a heavy hitter, the president’s go-to on foreign policy, so she was less sure. Besides, would it be too much too soon? She was terrified she’d risk destroying what they had started by rushing it.

Was he asleep? A waft of wind blew over them, a palm frond lightly brushing over the balcony safety rail near their feet. She

raised herself onto her side and synchronised her breathing with his. Then she reached over to him. Instead of drumming on his stomach, she let her fingertips float over his chest until she could feel the wisps of hair, before lightly running her nails downward, lingering at his navel. She began making circles, tiny at first then bigger and bigger, meticulous in her teasing.

Her nipples hardened as he groaned and his mouth curved into a smile, his eyes still closed. As she circled lower, she discovered he wasn't the only one now awake. She noisily licked her lips. He beamed.

And then she slapped it.

'Hey!' he squealed, springing up and staring at her in outrage. She burst out laughing and he grabbed her, pulling her back down to the bed where they lay, her head resting on his shoulder. He held her close. 'So tell me. Are you coming?'

'Let's find out,' she said, one hand caressing between his legs and the other moving between her own.