

# GLORIA

by David Sartof

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### I

‘Mercy? You? You’ve got to be kidding me.’ Oliver Beaton-Court, thirty-six, failed lawyer, frustrated musician and now would be murderer, was thinking clearly now – more clearly than he had done so for some time. Unexplainably, he rocked back on his feet – his eyes tight shut. Recovering – ‘OK,’ he said, after a little while.

‘Pardon?’ snapped the man before him, whose name Oliver still did not know. The man was nothing if not defiant.

*Such arrogance – he would have made a good lawyer. One far better than I would have been,* thought Oliver. ‘You heard me,’ said Oliver, speaking more slowly now, with deliberation and not a little menace. His voice sounded low, calm and measured. It was a voice he had used with great effect in the past, when he had occasion to chastise his beloved wife, Becky.

Oliver looked back over his shoulder. She was still there – Becky. He rocked again, suddenly. A blinding flash overpowered his vision. Blackness and pain followed immediately. But the spasm passed with the same speed that it had struck him. They were coming more regularly now.

Oliver recovered his gaze and it set upon his friend. Thomas Green. Tom sat in the single leather chair that fronted the open fire – its dog grate filled with the warm glowing radiance of wood fuelled flames. Tom sat in silence. He smiled expectantly, his head tilted slightly, his face carrying an expression of knowingness.

Oliver looked back to Becky. A pool of blood the size of a tea tray had gathered beneath her supine body. But she looked beautiful. Nobody would be able to take her away from him now. Nobody. And, despite the tears that now welled in his eyes, despite the tears that lay, already dried, upon his cheeks and upon his shirt collar, he could take some comfort in that knowledge. There would be nobody else.

‘You heard me.’ Again Oliver’s voice was calm and measured – despite the tears now flowing freely again. ‘You heard me,’ he repeated a third time, for effect – as if he were reciting the chorus lines of one of his failed loves songs. Only, where there should have been a guitar in his hand, he now cradled an axe. That axe had become the single, unerring focus for what’s-his-name’s gaze. Whatshisname – that would do for now. Whatshisname had scarcely lifted his eyes from that axe for the past hour. He had little opportunity to do so. He sat, bolt upright and alert, his legs and arms bound to the wooden straight-back dining chair. ‘Did you really, for one minute... for one tiny, little minute... actually think you would get away with it? You and Becky?’

‘Is that her name?’

‘You know damn well...’ began Oliver, but something in Whatshisname’s demeanour shouted out to him. ‘No. You didn’t know, did you?’ he corrected himself.

‘No, I didn’t. She introduced herself to me somewhat differently,’ sneered Whatshisname. ‘That’s how it’s done on the internet. You know that, don’t you.’ It wasn’t a question. Whatshisname continued to stare, fixated, at the axe. Not once had he looked towards Becky’s still, lifeless body.

Tom sat, looking on. He smiled encouragement at Oliver.

## II

A mere seven days earlier, his friend had re-entered Oliver’s life after an absence of nearly thirty years.

‘Hi, Oliver,’ shouted a be-hatted stranger from across the street, that cloudy, overcast, ambiguous and most unwelcome of afternoons. The wide brim of the black hat cast a neat shadow over the stranger’s face, rendering any recognition impossible at the distance presented.

Oliver had just left his doctor’s surgery – a smart brass-plaque emblazoned, three storey, double-fronted Victorian terrace, lying in a leafy corner of the small town’s market square. The Friday market was in full throng under billowing canopies of deck-chair striped plastic sheeting. The pavements encircling the market square had become difficult to negotiate as Oliver neared the centre of activity. The air was damp. He sported a blank expression as he vaguely reacted to the salutation uttered by the stranger from across the street.

Oliver stopped and the stranger made his way to where he stood.

‘Oliver, it’s great to see you after all this time.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Oliver, hesitantly. ‘I am sure we’ve never met.’ Oliver’s manner and voice were listless, as if he carried the weight of an unseen but mighty burden upon his shoulders.

‘Oh, but we have, Oliver,’ said the stranger, oozing a friendly charm. ‘Many years ago...’ The stranger lifted the brim of his hat, revealing a warm smile. ‘We were friends, close friends – peas-in-a-pod friends. But I left your life without warning when we were about six years old. I left you alone. For that I am sorry, truly.’

Oliver’s listless expression morphed into puzzlement. ‘But...’ he started to say.

‘But nothing, Oliver. I am Thomas, Thomas Green. You knew me as Tom. Do you recall?’

Oliver remained puzzled. ‘But...’ he started again.

‘But I’m dead... you were going to say?’

‘Yes,’ said Oliver, again with some hesitation.

‘Am I?’

‘Apparently not – if my eyes are not deceiving me.’

Tom’s smile was full of friendliness for his old school friend. Oliver relaxed, slightly.

‘But I can see something troubles you, Oliver. Let’s go and get a coffee.’

‘No, there is a small park at the end of the square, let us go there and sit a while. He needed a friend right now. Even a friend who had appeared from no place he could have ever imagined. ‘Tom... you lived?’

‘I live.’

‘I am dying.’

‘The building you came from... your doctor?’

‘Yes.’ Oliver turned and walked in silence to the park. There he sat, waiting for his friend to take his place.

### III

Oliver had been in shock that afternoon, as he had rekindled his long-lost friendship. How cruel, fate. The blinding, stabbing headaches – the headaches that passed like miniature atomic explosions: first, the flash, then the bang; the two shock waves following close behind – one outbound, pushing, his brain screaming to be released from his skull. Then the inbound shock: his skull pushing back on his brain – squeezing his life source.

‘I think about three months, Oliver... possibly less. I am so sorry. Should I call Becky?’ asked the kindly Dr Frank Stephens. Dr Stephens had been the family doctor for many years.

‘No, thank you, Frank. I just have to get this clear in my own mind first. Inoperable, you say?’

‘Yes. I have the results of the scan here.’

Oliver had left the surgery in shock. He could not recall what he had been doing up to that point. A state of amnesia beset him. It blotted out his recent memory. All he could think about was the end. An end he had denied even his mother in her last days. She was going to live for ever. He was going to live for ever. Oliver did not do death. And now? Well, now death stared at him in all his nakedness. Death goaded him.

‘You know, Oliver?’ prompted Tom, as he took a seat beside him on the park bench, his smile now displaying a measure of the cruel irony he most surely felt. ‘It has been thirty years. We may only have thirty days, but we should do something. I know a little cabin in the woods, about an hours drive from here. We could go there, spend the weekend. We could catch up. What do you say?’

Oliver could not think. He could not recall getting to this point in his life. ‘I’m scared, Tom.’

‘I know.’ Tom reached his hand out and laid it on the shoulder of his childhood friend.

A peace settled on Oliver’s mind. The past no longer mattered. He stopped struggling to remember what it was that he was trying, so hard, to recall. ‘A cabin in the woods, you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘And a log fire? I always wanted a real open fire.’

‘A log fire. A bottle of whisky and no worries. A real little hideaway.’

‘When can we go?’

‘Next weekend. Friday, if that is OK for you, Oliver?’

‘I think Becky is away next week. She has a spa booked with some friends.’

‘Becky is your wife?’

‘Yes.’

‘No children?’

‘No.’

Tom nodded. ‘Next Friday, then. About ten o’clock? Shall I meet you here?’

‘Yes.’ Oliver looked to his friend, but he had left as quickly as he had entered his afternoon. He watched the be-hatted figure merge with the shade of trees at the far end of the small park. Dusk was falling.

#### IV

For Oliver, the last week had passed painfully. He held his news from Becky. He did not want to worry her. He was selfish, he knew. But he needed to sort things out in his head. Becky just took his mood to be a continuation of his other moods. He had not been happy for some time. He knew that. His work depressed him. But, the rest? Well, the rest he could not recall. Selective amnesia – his state of the last days – had blotted any causality from his mind. He only knew where he was going. Death.

The headaches persisted, perhaps half a dozen times a day – a dozen on a bad day. He struggled, but all he could bring into focus was the end. But he did have brief moments when he saw the roaring open fire and the interior of a log cabin – just as the one he now stood in. It was Friday. The time? Who knew? If he stopped to work it out, his head would hurt – massively. He did not want that. Tom looked across at him from the chair by the fire. Still the same expression of open friendliness, supporting him, encouraging him.

‘Well...’ continued Oliver, returning his attention to Whatshisname. ‘You had not expected this, had you?’

‘No. I will give you that. ...How? ...How did you know?’

‘How?’ Oliver caught himself; he pushed the question to the back of his mind. It didn’t fit with where he was going. ‘...How? How is not important.’

‘It is. You have no idea.’

‘Shut up.’

Whatshisname complied. His eyes unmoving. His gaze transfixed.

‘Ask him, Oliver,’ said Tom, after a brief silence. ‘Go on, ask him.’

‘Ask him what?’ said Oliver.

‘Pardon?’ said Whatshisname, appearing confused.

Was that fear crossing the brow of the arrogant Whatshisname? Oliver could not be so sure.

‘Look, please...’ Whatshisname began to plead.

It *was* fear. ‘Please what? Oliver’s voice now held a cold edge.

‘P... p... pl... ease,’ stammered Whatshisname.

‘You want mercy? Oliver said, with measured incredulity. ‘You? You’ve got to be kidding me.’ Oliver thought a moment. Coldly, he watched the fear spread on Whatshisname’s face. He was, he had to admit, bemused by the events. What was going on? He couldn’t think straight. Another blinding flash. White then black, then the unbelievable pain broke his gaze – still set upon the wretched figure in front of him. He rocked again. Nausea spilled from the centre of his being, rising like an exploding geyser. Then Becky was standing in front of him – her arms reaching out, pleading for his love.

‘Concentrate, Oliver.’

Tom’s voice brought Oliver back from the edge. But what edge? He was about to peer over it – to see something. What was he about to see?

‘Ask him, Oliver.’

Tom’s question made sense to Oliver, now. ‘OK,’ he replied. And to Whatshisname, ‘You knew my wife... Becky. You knew her,’ he said. Oliver again glanced over his shoulder. Her arms would no longer stretch out to hold him. He had killed her. He could not recall... but he stood there... weapon in hand. And, he was about to kill again.

#### V

That last bout of pain. Tom's caution. 'Concentrate, my friend,' he had said. The fog that had plagued him this last week was beginning to lift. 'Why are you here?' Oliver asked Whatshisname. He ought to know. It was there, the knowledge – locked inside his head. He just needed to trigger some answers.

Whatshisname's expression had changed again. He appeared to reach a realisation. 'You don't know, do you?

'Don't know what?'

'You really have no idea, have you?'

'No idea about what?' said Oliver, allowing the puzzlement to show in his face.'

'About the others...'

Others? ...What? His impatience was beginning to tell.

'How did you find us?'

'I came here with my friend for the weekend. This is his place,' said Oliver, looking across to Tom for a nod of confirmation.

'Then you found your wife, Gloria. No, that's not right, is it? Becky, wasn't it? I only knew her as Gloria. That's who she told me she was.'

'Gloria?' A trigger? Again, Oliver pushed the question aside. 'What were you doing here?'

'I brought your wife here. I didn't know anyone used this place anymore. I thought the owner had abandoned it. I've never seen anyone here before. Christ, I've been living here, off and on.' Whatshisname's voice was breaking. His face betrayed a sense of helplessness. 'I brought your wife here – she wanted to come.'

'Ask him why,' contributed Tom.

'Why?'

'I met her on the internet. She wanted an affair.'

Light; dark; pain.... The spasm shot through him. He remembered something. Oliver had been sorting out Becky's computer. He had been cleaning the disks of files and the operating system register of unwanted entries. He was remembering.

'Other women...' Whatshisname was saying. '...this place... You know where you are, don't you? ...Christ, you don't, do you? You really have no idea – have you?' he said, and he burst into hysterical laughter.

Oliver's heart chilled.

The effect was surreal. Tom sat, his smile broadened. It seemed to Oliver as if he smiled just for him. Oliver's tears streamed – he looked back towards Becky. The pool of blood was significantly larger. Fractured images of the fire's flames fanned by the up draught in the fireplace, reflected by mirrors and glass-fronted picture frames, danced across the glossy surface of her blood, begging her corpse to come to life. Oliver let out a cry.

'It's not going to change things. It won't bring her back. You can't bring her back...'  
Whatshisname was saying.

Cruel fate. The moment he had climbed out the car – what was it? ...an hour ago? He had sensed something was wrong. He had motioned to Tom to stay where he was, in the passenger seat. There had been someone else at the cabin – at the rear, chopping wood. He could hear the axe fall with a paced, rhythmic regularity. The unknown, unexpected stranger had not heard his approach. A heavy length of timber had appeared in Oliver's hand as he crept up behind the wood-cutter. The wood-cutter had not sensed the blow falling, nor felt his knees buckle, nor experienced the weight of his thickset body strike the sodden, mossy, wood-chipped ground. And now the wood-cutter, Whatshisname, sat – awake – where Oliver had secured him. All the while Oliver had struggled with the past. This week was to be his future. Where was his past? He looked across to Tom, seeking to clear the confusion. 'I don't know what I am doing here,' he said.

'You don't?' laughed Whatshisname.

'QUIET!' shouted Oliver. I wasn't speaking to you. The axe rose in Oliver's hand and Whatshisname observed the instruction, his gaze rising with the movement of the axe.

## VI

Something Whatshisname had said. 'Wanted an affair.' A trigger. A memory.

'Ask him about the others, Oliver.'

Oliver recalled. He had been working on the computer and found references to an internet site. A few sites really, but one in particular. *A discreet extra-marital dating service for men and women...* it had said. It had not taken him long. 'Gloria,' Whatshisname had said. Yes. He had found her. It was not rocket science. A profile, despite the name: Gloria. Becky could have written it. Becky had written it. He had found a copy in a deleted file. And now he had killed her for her transgression. But how... 'Strange, isn't this...' he began.

'Strange?' Whatshisname laughed, '...you're telling me,' he said. 'Are you going to kill me?' His gaze lifted from the axe to look directly into Oliver's eyes. 'Strange?' he repeated. 'Are you going to kill me?'

'I suppose so,' said Oliver, shrugging his shoulders – the axe in his hand responding to the movement, drawing Whatshisname's attention again.

'Ask him about the others, Oliver.'

Oliver looked across at Tom, noticed the sly smile, the edges of his mouth curled. Tom was enjoying this, Oliver thought. The flames dancing in the fireplace drew his attention. They danced freely, yet constrained by the opening in which they were located. Shadows and reflections mirrored the dance – interweaving colours: reds, oranges, blacks, greys. The permutations endless, fascinating in their intricacy.

'There have been others?'

'Of course there have been others,' Whatshisname replied in disbelief. 'Where have you been?'

'You make a habit of fixing affairs with married women?'

Whatshisname laughed again. The laugh chilled Oliver's being.

Why? asked Oliver.

'People like you just don't value what you have. You neglect your relationships, your wives, your partners. I prey on people like you.'

'I should kill you now,' said Oliver, matter-of-factly. He was getting bored. 'There are probably a few husbands who would thank me to.'

The laugh again. 'You don't know the half of it.'

Something. There was something about the website. Oliver had known about it. Why?

'Come on, Oliver,' Tom was saying, teasing. 'You're the expert. Are you getting there?'

'Where?' queried Oliver.

'Where?' asked Whatshisname.

'Where am I getting to?'

'Christ, I wish I knew what the hell you're talking about. Are you going to kill me, or what? I deserve to know,' Whatshisname demanded. He no longer seemed afraid; it was as if he had resigned himself to his fate.

*You... you're a different category,* Oliver thought. He was thinking easier now. That word: deserve! Whatshisname did deserve something. He deserved what he was going to do to him. Oliver was dying. Whatshisname would die too. But why Becky? It had been an affair. He wasn't a jealous man. She had had an affair before. Early in their marriage. He had forgiven her. He remembered the moment she fell into him – her arms outstretched, reaching out around him, enclosing him in warmth. Like his mother had enclosed him in warmth – all those many times during the disappointments of childhood. And it had only taken a few words. 'It's OK,'

he had said. And she had come back to him. But now he stood there. Weapon in hand, Becky dead behind him, and he was about to strike at Whatshisname. Why? It didn't figure.

'You know,' said Tom, 'I think you need some help here.'

## VII

White. Black. Sharp, stabbing, crushing pain. A wave of nausea. The room seemed to move around him. A fleeting glimpse. Images. Women's faces. How many? One... two... three... seven in total. Triggers. More pain. But the pain this time was not crushing. His memory. His memory pained him. Oliver's eyes regained the steady image of the room. He looked straight across to where Tom sat. Tom simply nodded.

'It coming to you, Oliver... Detective Inspector Oliver Beaton-Court, failed lawyer, frustrated musician. Isn't it? It's coming back to you,' said Tom.

The pain of his memory was becoming unbearable. 'Why?'

'Ask him about the other women'

'I have.'

'I have what?' asked Whatshisname. The look on his face showed that the resigned bravado was slipping. Fear was returning.

'No, Detective Inspector,' said Tom, impatience now replacing some of the earlier friendliness. 'Where are *they*? Ask him where *they* are.'

Oliver's head was throbbing. 'You bastard!' He spat the word at Whatshisname. 'You've ruined the marriages of a lot of people, haven't you?' But something about the images troubled him. *Seven women*. 'How many times have you done this?'

'Your wife was number eight.'

'There were seven before?'

'Yes,' Whatshisname replied, matter-of-factly. 'Seven. All blondes – just like your lady there.'

'Why... how?'

'You still don't get it do you? Why all blondes? ...because my mother was blonde. I hated her.'

The images. They were photographs on a board. The memory flooded back. He was investigating. Two years. Seven blondes, all dead. The strain of the investigation depressed him. His wife? Dead. Another spasm hit at him. He swayed, nearly dropping the axe. He hung on.

'You have it yet, Detective Inspector?' Tom was asking.

'You got it yet?' asked Whatshisname, his eyes now diverted again to hold Oliver's gaze; there was redness in them as tears welled – almost relief.

'Christ! I didn't kill her.' Oliver's vision clouded as tears flooded his own eyes. 'I didn't kill her.'

'Bloody hell!' exclaimed Whatshisname, '...you didn't know I killed your wife? How the hell...'

'You killed her,' exclaimed Oliver, almost screaming, his disbelief palpable.

'At last. The penny drops. My god, you really had no idea!'

'You'd been leading the investigation, Oliver,' explained Tom. 'You needed help. Your illness? You had to take time off on sick leave. You remember?'

Oliver remembered. Seven women killed, no leads, no apparent connection. They had been from different areas of the country, but had all ended up in his county. But not here, not here in this wood. He had no recollection of this location. It had never figured. The only connection he had found, after searching the home computers of all the dead women, had been the website. *Discreet and confidential*. It came back to him now.

‘You were shocked when you saw Becky had been using the site,’ said Tom, reading Oliver’s mind.

## VIII

*I’m going to die. I’m going to die,* he kept thinking to himself. Oliver looked back to where Becky lay, lifeless. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Rivulets poured down onto his shirt collar once more. ‘Becky,’ he cried out. Then, ‘I’m going to kill you,’ he shouted, spinning back to face Whatshisname. ‘You killed my wife. Why?’

‘I hate blondes. I said that.’

‘As simple as that?’

‘As simple as that,’ replied Whatshisname. ‘My mother had no time for me. I hated her for it.’

‘And you used the internet to keep your anonymity? Knowing the women would never mention you.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you know who I am?’

‘Yes. I’ve known all along. How did you find me?’

‘You’re asking me how I found you? How is not important. You are going to die.’

‘But,’ pleaded Whatshisname, ‘...you’re a Detective Inspector. The law. You have to take me in...’

‘What you don’t know... I loved my wife. You killed her. And I’m dying. I have nothing to lose. Not now.’

A look of terror shot into Whatshisname’s expression. It settled there.

‘You’re dying?’

‘Inoperable brain tumour. I’m dying. Becky is dead. You work it out.’

‘How did you find me?’

‘My friend here, he brought me. I had no idea where. He must have known about you.’ Oliver raised the axe above his head.

A patch of wetness spread about Whatshisname’s groin. He tried to recoil into the chair. But he could not move. He began to whimper. His head moved to the side, away from the line of the axe’s probable path. ‘But there’s no one else here,’ he cried.

White. Black. Sudden, unbelievable pain. Pushing, crushing pain. Oliver’s grip on the axe failed, it dropped behind him, clattering to the floor as Oliver himself swayed and toppled, falling backward. The pain in his head denied any other feeling.

The sound of laughter brought Oliver round. A hideous, chilling, ironic laughter. He opened his eyes. He was lying on his back. His gaze fell on the wooden beams of the ceiling. Colourful, reflected, dancing patterns of oranges, reds and shades of black filled his vision. Something was wrong. He couldn’t move. No, he could move his head, but nothing else. The fall...

‘Not so clever, now. Mr Detective Inspector, are we?’ sneered Whatshisname.

Oliver couldn’t speak. He turned his head slowly, to his right. Becky’s face lay within inches of his own. Her serenity calmed him.

‘I think you have a problem, Mr Detective Inspector.’

Oliver turned his head to look, first at Whatshisname, then over at the now empty chair. He turned it slowly back to look at Whatshisname, still bound tightly to the chair. Whatshisname was laughing.

‘You fell on the axe, idiot,’ said Whatshisname, as he looked towards the ceiling. He burst into another fit of laughter.

Where was Tom now? Oliver turned his head once more to look at the empty chair by the fire. He felt lightheaded, but there were no feelings elsewhere. He could feel nothing other than his head and its movement.

A sound by the fireplace caught Oliver's attention. He looked back. Tom was still there. He had pulled a burning log from the fireplace. It now lay on the wooden floor, spreading its fire – the dance of flames no longer constrained. A warm feeling of contentment spread through Oliver's mind as he looked back to Whatshisname. Whatshisname had caught the sound of the falling log, too. A look of terror – real, deep terror – filled his face. His eyes widened. He let out a scream. Then, whimpering, Whatshisname started to squirm and rock and pull, vigorously, at his bonds. But the bonds were tight and the heavy wooden chair unyielding.

Oliver looked back to Becky. She had turned her head to face him. Her arms were reaching out to him, offering him her warmth. 'You have done nothing wrong, my darling; you have done nothing wrong;' she was saying to him.

A noise – heard above the roaring of the spreading flames and the panicky movements of the heavy wooden chair and its screaming occupant. Footsteps. Tom walked over, through the flames, to stand by the side of Oliver. He crouched down beside his still form. Oliver wanted to reach out and touch his friend. The whole of the inside of the cabin now glowed with dancing red and orange images. No longer were there any shades of black or grey. Tom was humming a song. Becky started to sing. She was smiling. The chorus sounded like one of his failed love songs.

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