

A JOSH GRAY THRILLER

# THE BEST LAID PLANS

A TERRORIST CELL  
AN UNDERCOVER OPERATIVE  
A RACE AGAINST TIME

**RUSSELL GOVAN**

"A WELL-RESEARCHED, WELL-CRAFTED THRILLER... A NEW  
VOICE AND PROTAGONIST IN THE GENRE." THOMAS WAUGH

## THE BEST LAID PLANS

### Chapter 1

The scream dies almost immediately, barely lasting a couple of heartbeats. But it's enough to pull me up short. The hairs on the back of my neck are at attention, like squaddies on parade.

I'm aware of the adrenaline rush as my brain switches up several gears. Definitely a female scream. The sudden suffocation of the sound – *definitely* the intervention of a second party. **Definitely** someone in danger – my experience and instincts combine to confirm these certainties in a nanosecond. The damping effect of the torrential rain and the surrounding tall buildings suggest it came from a distance maybe just a couple of hundred metres ahead in the same northerly direction as I'm facing, probably from one of the alleyways on the opposite side of the road.

My instructions are clear and absolute. *Keep your head down. Focus on your mission to the exclusion of all else. Do not get involved in anything that you do not have to.* But those instructions contradict most of my basic training and all of my core instincts, and I'm already running at full tilt. My PB for 100M is 11.1 and, despite the conditions and my six-foot three frame being drenched through, I reckon I'm moving at pretty close to that rate. I stay on the balls of my feet and take care to avoid splashing any puddles so that I don't alert anyone to my approach.

After twenty seconds I hear the sounds of a struggle and an indistinct male voice coming from an opening just ten metres ahead to my left. I slow down, then stop and peer around the corner to recce the situation. The alley is no more than two metres wide and unlit, but there's sufficient illumination from the streetlight behind me for me to see all I need.

Just twenty metres into the passageway three figures are clearly identifiable. A young woman is being pressed against a large wheellie bin by a tall, powerfully-built male. He's got his left hand across her mouth, with his right arm across her chest, pushing her backwards. There's a flash of reflected light from where his right hand should be which means he's holding a blade. Another male, shorter – maybe five-eight – is bent forward, hitching the woman's skirt up with one hand and roughly tugging at her knickers with the other. The woman is trying to kick out with both legs, but there's a weariness to her resistance like you see on wildlife documentaries when mortally wounded prey continues to struggle instinctively, but feebly.

I step forward into the alley. My faint shadow is sufficient to alert all three to my presence and each of them turn with squinted eyes to try to pick details from my silhouette. The shorter of the two men, closest to me, rather ridiculously removes his hand from the woman's knickers and smooths her skirt downwards. He addresses me, "On yer way, mate. Nothing to see here." His voice is reedy and nasal, cutting through the splattering sound of the rain battering the tarmacked ground.

I've got surprise on my side and I have control. I look right past him and talk directly to the woman. I affect a broad Glaswegian accent, "Are you okay, hen?"

"Didn't you hear me, mate? I said there's nothing to see here. On yer way!" He's calling me his mate, but there's nothing friendly about his demeanour. He has a quick glance back over his shoulder that confirms that his partner has released the woman and stepped behind him, his right hand gripping the knife. It's either a MAC 695 or 700 military survival knife, with an 18cm blade – a serious bit of kit. Emboldened, the short-arse takes a pace forward.

I look past the pair of them. "I said, are you all right, hen?" She tilts her head so that she is looking in my direction. She mouths something, but no words come – either that, or they are drowned out by the monsoon.

“Are you fucking thick or something, you stupid Jock bastard?” He’s taken another step towards me. “Just fucking walk on by.”

He’s at exactly the right distance. I sprint, then leap feet first at head height. The sole of my right boot makes contact with his jaw with sufficient force to propel him backwards into his accomplice’s midriff, knocking both off of their feet. I’m on top of him instantly and use both hands to crash the back of his skull satisfyingly against the ground. I know that’s him sorted.

His oppo is hauling himself back to his feet, using the wheelie bin for leverage. I launch myself at his back, grabbing a shoulder in each hand and pulling him down. The wheelie bin tips over and spews open and ripped bin bags. Despite the rain, the sulphide and ammonia stench of rot almost makes me retch. I steel myself against the reflex, but my opponent is less resolute. As he gags, I rabbit punch his Adam’s apple and he rolls backwards, clutching at his throat. I rise to my feet and administer a ferocious kick to the side of his head, which jerks violently. He is prone and I check whether he is unconscious or dead. It’s the former, and the same for the other guy too when I check him. The thought occurs that I could do the world a favour by snapping both of their necks. But two killings would draw far too much unwelcome attention to the incident, so I don’t act on the impulse.

I turn towards the woman, who is standing with her back and arms pressed hard against the brick wall on the other side of the alley. Her head is turned sideways, looking right at me, eyes frozen wide. I step towards her and she mouths something that I can’t make out. I lean in closer and she whimpers, “Please, don’t hurt me.”

Although I’m pumped, I’ve got sufficient wits about me to remember the pretence of being Scottish, and to recognise that she is seriously traumatised. “Don’t worry, hen. You’re safe. That pair are unconscious and are not going to hurt you. Are you all right?”

She nods. I think she trusts me. She surprises me by speaking again. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Jamie Mackie,” I lie easily. “Do you have a phone?”

She casts around, looking for something and points at a handbag on the far side of the toppled wheelie bin. I vault over and retrieve the bag. The torrential rain has damped the stink from the spilled contents of the bin and I tiptoe through the debris and past the prostrate knife-man, before handing her the bag. She takes it in two tight fists and clutches it firmly against her chest, head bowed. Several seconds take a decade to pass while she remains stock still and silent.

“Is your phone in your bag?”

She looks up at me. She’s got huge eyes and I think that she might be on something. Her cheeks are streaked with mascara. She doesn’t speak.

“What’s your name, hen?”

More years pass and I’m about to repeat the question when she saves me the trouble, “Amelia.”

“Amelia, is your phone in the bag?”

She doesn’t answer, but opens the bag, dips her right hand inside and brings out the very latest top-of-the-range Samsung model. She offers it to me and I see that she’s wearing a ring on her middle finger that matches her expensive-looking earrings.

“No, Amelia. I don’t want your phone. I need you to make a phone call to the police.”

She extends her hand towards me, still proffering the phone. I take a step backwards. Amelia tries to close the gap by taking a pace forwards, but the heel of her left shoe has broken off and she stumbles. I prevent her fall by catching her and immediately feel her go rigid. Her mouth is clamped tight and she is breathing hard through her nose, but she doesn’t drop the bag or phone. I manoeuvre her as gently as I can so that her back is against the wall again, and then I take a step away. Her eyes are locked on mine and, despite her vulnerability, there’s a ferocity there that I didn’t expect.

“Amelia, I need you to telephone the police. Do you understand?”

A nod.

“Good. You have to dial 999 and ask for the police.” I’m speaking slowly and pause now. It’s important to allow her time to process. “Then you need to tell them that you have been attacked and that the attackers are still present. You need to tell them that you are ...” I look backwards and up, to read the sign. “Tell them that you are in Baker’s Passage, off the Tansey Road. Can you do that?”

Another nod. She’s still looking at me. “Jamie?”

“Aye, what is it?”

“Will you stay? Stay until the police come?”

“I cannae do that. I’m sorry, but I have to go now. Will you phone the police?”

“Okay.”

I go over to the two unconscious bodies and give each a powerful kick to the ribs. The complete lack of response confirms that they are both totally sparko, and no threat to Amelia. She’s still looking right at me and I nod pointedly towards her phone, then I head back out on to Tansey Road. I pause just around the corner to hear Amelia say the word “Police”, so that I know she’s making the call, and then I’m running back in the direction I originally came from.

I take the next narrow alleyway on the right, parallel to Baker’s Passage, and sprint-weave between the bins and puddles. This route is going to take me more than a mile out of my way, but I know that it avoids the CCTV cameras at Dixon’s Cross and the traffic cams along Hoxley Drive. I can hear the sirens that confirm Amelia’s call is being answered already. I’m trying to think if I’ve left any traces. I never touched her phone, so no fingerprints. Same for the wheelie bins. Unlikely that Forensics would find anything linking me to the scene, especially with all this rain. Except the handbag – shit! I’m trying to remember how I held it – I don’t think I’ll have left any prints. What about before that? The junction of Howard Street and Tansey Road, there’s a camera there. Shit! It’s less than half a kilometre from the scene, so it’ll get checked. If Moll sees it, she’ll clock that it’s me straight off. Shit, shit, shit! I’ll either have to brazen it out or just completely deny it. I can decide nearer the time.

I cross Brook Street and turn right on to Holmesmeath Avenue, a half-mile stretch of Victorian terraces and semis. The rain has eased to a drizzle that gives each streetlamp an other-worldly orange aurora, and I break into a gentle jog which I keep up as I marshal my thoughts. Moll couldn’t have been clearer - *do not get involved in anything that you do not have to*. Just my bastard luck that less than an hour later I’m flattening two fucking creatures. My best hope is that Moll never hears about Amelia’s case – but my luck’s not *that* good. I play it all over in my mind again – I’ll deny everything officially, and take my chances with Moll. The jog means that I cover the distance home in double quick time, before slowing to walking pace as I round the final corner. The lights in the flat are still on – the only one in the street. Vi must be waiting up for me. Double shit.

The communal front door is propped open by a bin bag that a cat or a fox has already made short work of. The mess is nearly as bad as the smell. I hold my breath and tiptoe through chicken bones, rotted fruit, soiled nappies and greasy paper towards the staircase. By the time I reach the third floor I judge it safe to breathe again and turn my mind to what I’m going to say to Vi. As I turn the key in the door, she surprises me by pulling it open. She’s a mess – hair all over the place and eyes swollen. I see mascara tracks on cheeks for the second time tonight. “Vi, what is it? What’s wrong?”

She’s struggling to breath, and I’m not sure she’s going to answer me. “It’s Mummy.” No more words are necessary. I wrap my arms around her and hold her tight.