

# POISONED VEINS

BY STEVE ALDOUS

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## CHAPTER ONE

Gibbs cursed the icy early morning breeze as it whipped around his face like a razor in the hand of a careless barber. The soft glow of the street lights captured the clouds of breath blowing in short staccato bursts from his wide flaring nostrils as if from an angry bull. He dipped his head to let the insulated woollen hat take the assault and coasted past the shuttered shops, restaurants and coffee houses that flanked Deansgate. The city never slept, it merely slumbered. Soon it would stretch itself awake as the hired domestics arrived, followed by the shop and office workers to service another day in the endless cycle of routine.

The streets had been dark and deserted when he left her apartment at the junction of Cheetham Hill Road and New Bridge Street - an area of redevelopment the City of Manchester's marketing bullshit had

christened “The Green Quarter”. They had merely painted over a rusty radiator.

At eight-thirty the previous evening Gibbs had been in the Hard Rock Café waiting on a client who was already thirty minutes late. Why the client had arranged to meet Gibbs here rather than at his office was a mystery that seemingly would not now be solved. Gibbs contemplated making his way to the bar for one last shot of Jack Daniel’s, having decided the client could go screw himself. He gave up on watching the doorway and started scanning the Sunday evening crowd. His eyes came to rest on a shapely pair of tanned legs draped around a tall bar stool. A black mini-dress clung tightly to the girl’s athletically toned thighs. She was alone and had suddenly become aware of his lingering attention. To Gibbs’ surprise she acknowledged his stare with a smile then casually flicked her fingers through a mane of long and lightly curled blonde hair. Her smouldering grey eyes tracked him as he picked up his drink and weaved his way through the crowd toward her.

‘Joe Gibbs,’ he announced holding out a hand. After a brief hesitation, she shook it. Her hand was warm and soft.

‘Sherry McAdam.’

Gibbs looked at her quizzically having recognised her accent. ‘You’re not local.’

‘No, I’m from New Jersey – in the States. I came over to the UK a couple of years ago... on a scholarship.’

Gibbs smiled and shook his head.

‘What’s so funny?’ she asked.

‘It’s either coincidence or fate, but I was born across the river. In Harlem.’

‘It’s a small world,’ she said returning the smile. ‘You’re an immigrant too.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I was eight or nine when my parents decided there were more opportunities here than at home.’

‘Oh?’

‘An uncle promised work for my dad. Didn’t work out the way they hoped.’

‘That’s a shame. What happened?’

Gibbs considered the Sherry’s open and innocent question leaving an uncomfortable pause that caused her to shift uncomfortably on her stool.

‘Long story,’ Gibbs said then paused hoping the subject would move on. He gestured at her near empty glass. ‘You ready for another?’

‘Thank you. Dry white wine.’

Gibbs pushed his way through to the bar for their refills. When he returned, he eased himself onto the empty stool beside her.

‘You here on your own?’ he asked.

‘I was supposed to be meeting a friend, but she just called to say she’s come down with the flu and can’t make it. I was about to head off home when—’

‘Listen,’ Gibbs interrupted. ‘It seems crazy to waste the evening now you’re all dressed up. I don’t know about you, but I’m famished. How about we go get something to eat? My treat.’

Sherry tilted her head as if considering whether she could trust this big black man who had been so bold as to approach her.

‘Okay,’ she said finally with a smile.

Over a light chicken salad, Sherry had gulped back three or four glasses of white wine and talked enthusiastically about her scholarship and how it had led to her embarking on a dancing career. Her parents had come up with the money for her to chase her dream. She loved her classes and loved the city. It was so different. She had passed her first audition and was working as part of a dance ensemble in one of those shows that had turned some old pop group’s hit songs into a money-spinning musical. It was showing each evening at the Palace Theatre, over on Oxford Street. Her eyes sparkled with the obvious enthusiasm she had for her work and her facial mannerisms, used to emphasise her story, were both charming and alluring.

‘The show’s crap, but the songs are good and the routines are testing,’ she said finally pausing for breath. Gibbs did not fill the silence. ‘What about you?’

The sudden change of subject caught Gibbs off guard. He had been happy to listen to Sherry and keep the subject away from his own life.

‘I’m a private investigator,’ he replied washing down the last mouthful of his steak with a gulp of red wine.

‘No shit,’ she said, her eyes widening with excitement.

‘In fact, I was waiting on a client tonight, but he didn’t show either.’ He smiled. ‘I can’t say that I’m sorry.’

‘It must be a dangerous occupation.’

‘Not really. It’s mostly long cold nights on surveillance. Tailing and watching a cheating wife or husband. Security jobs in shops and industrial units. Occasionally helping solicitors and lawyers gather evidence to support a client’s case. Hand-offs from contacts in the police...’

‘So no gunplay or car chases?’ she smiled teasingly.

‘Sorry to disappoint you.’

‘Oh, you’re anything but disappointing,’ she said through a coy smile.

A couple of flirtatious hours later they were opening the door to her apartment. Sherry’s show of naivety had evaporated with that coy smile as quickly as their hot breath in the cold night air and a mutual desire had taken over. They hurriedly undressed each other as she led him to her bedroom where they danced a synchronised and increasingly energetic rhythm on her king-sized bed. It was a display that led Gibbs to draw on hidden strengths of reserve and restraint. After an encore they fell into a deep and satisfied sleep.

Gibbs eventually woke and checked his watch. It was five-thirty. He eased Sherry’s draping arm from across his chest and slid out the bed. He padded out of the bedroom and across to the bathroom where he grabbed a quick shower. Once done he rescued his clothes from the lounge and bedroom floors then dressed in silence. The soft light from

the lounge framed Gibbs' tall muscular frame in the bedroom doorway and cast a dark shadow over Sherry as she snuggled for warmth beneath the heavy pink duvet. Gibbs shrugged on his jacket and finally Sherry stirred. She brushed back her hair and looked up at him sleepily.

'I gotta split,' he said.

'Come back to bed,' Sherry mumbled sleepily.

She lifted a limp arm beckoning him, but Gibbs placed it back on the duvet. Sherry pouted sulkily at the rejection. She pulled the duvet up to her chin and buried her face in the soft pillow.

Gibbs pulled on his coat and checked the pockets to make sure nothing had fallen out.

'I'll call you,' he said. His words felt hollow. The standard exit line to the one-night stand. He might as well have said *So long, it's been fun*. He scanned the floor one last time to be sure then closed the door quietly behind him.

Gibbs tugged at the collar of his coat as he approached the Beetham Tower that towered incongruously over the city like a giant Lego construction. The building had been completed in 2006, just before the economic crash put paid to many planned similar developments. Gibbs had read somewhere that it had cost £150 million to build and was hailed as the tallest residential building in Europe. The glass structure looked out from the east end of Deansgate and the Hilton Hotel was contained within the lower half of its forty-seven floors, which otherwise housed exclusive luxury apartments and penthouses. These were populated by some of Manchester's rich and famous, including some footballers. Gibbs thought footballers were grossly overpaid prima-donna pricks, more interested in cultivating their image and exercising their cocks than the sport they were paid so handsomely to play. The Tower's lofty surroundings was the most appropriate home for their egos – a metaphor for the wage gap between themselves and those who followed them.

He entered the building through the vast revolving door and made his way to the second floor where he followed the corridor to the entrance

to the Leisure Club. The gym contained a mix of weights and cardiovascular equipment that gave him all the options he needed to work his body and focus his mind. He had come to an arrangement with the club's manager for free use of the facilities as payment for a case he had worked tailing the guy's now ex-wife to uncover her infidelity. He had closed the case very quickly by snapping her in the private Jacuzzi of a rival hotel as she demonstrated her oral skills on that hotel's manager.

As he opened his locker a faint Irish lilt from behind interrupted him. 'Don't you ever sleep?'

'Only when I'm listening to you,' replied Gibbs.

He turned to face Des Riley leaning his rake-thin frame against his mop. When Riley wasn't shopping around for like-minded talent in the joints on Canal Street, he juggled a collection of menial jobs – this being the latest. He also occasionally ran errands for and helped Gibbs on cases requiring an extra pair of eyes or ears.

Gibbs started to strip out of his clothes. His muscular physique and dark brown skin a stark contrast to Riley's skinny build and pallid complexion. He felt slightly uncomfortable changing in Riley's presence.

'Aren't there rules about guys of your persuasion working in places like this?'

'No harm in looking,' said Riley in a mock camp voice. 'Anyway, I'm too tired to even think such thoughts. I had a late one. My head feels like it's been churning in a cement mixer all night and my mouth tastes like a zookeeper's brush.'

'You are a little lacking in colour.'

'Unlike some,' Riley replied with a sly grin, which he was pleased to see Gibbs return. 'Oh, I meant to tell you. Malahide came by Lamar's last night looking for you. Well, looking for me to be precise. He wanted to see if I knew where you were. I told him you were probably busy screwing some hussy someplace. Anyway, he said it was urgent and for you to give him a call straightaway.'

‘Okay, thanks.’

Gibbs made his way through to the gym, chuckling at the thought of the hawk-faced Detective Inspector Frank Malahide of Greater Manchester Police mingling with the crowd in a bar named after a famous Manchester drag queen. He began pumping the weights, but his mind dwelled on what Malahide might want of him. It would be one of two things – he wanted information or he had a case referral. Well, he didn’t play pigeon and he wasn’t desperate enough for work to take whatever dead-end job Malahide was going to lay on him. Especially one that would likely pay badly, if at all. Malahide’s presumption had stirred the irritation that had simmering in him since he had stepped out of Sherry’s apartment into the Arctic breeze.

‘Fuck you,’ Gibbs said angrily as he heaved at the weights.

‘That an offer?’ asked Riley, raising a suggestive eyebrow.

‘Not you, shithead.’

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Detective Inspector Frank Malahide sat in the passenger seat of the unmarked Vauxhall Vectra 2.8 V6 police car which had pulled up facing the entrance to the Hilton Hotel. He was hunched into a heavy grey overcoat, the colour of which reflected his mood. His forty-five-year-old chiselled granite features were set even harder than usual. His frown, accentuated by a deeply lined forehead, provided an expressive punctuation below a thatch of short brown and slightly greying hair. A long nose protruded from his oval face like a shark fin cutting through the water. Intense eyes stared ahead with a disdain borne from too many years waiting around in cold cars on cold street corners at silly o’clock. He reluctantly removed his hands from his pockets and attempted to get some heat from the car’s air-conditioning device by randomly pressing the buttons on the panel.

‘Does this bloody thing work?’ he growled angrily through a thick Salford accent.

‘They said it had been fixed, sir,’ replied Detective Sergeant Tom Simpson from the driver’s seat.

By contrast, Simpson was blessed with boyish good looks that belied his thirty years. A mop of curly brown hair sat around a deceptively pleasant and open face – a mask that gave him the edge whenever he needed it. But those who knew him well knew of his trigger-happy temper. On one infamous occasion, that few dared mention, Simpson was off-duty enjoying a quiet pint in a seedy spit-and-sawdust pub when two young thugs who had been needling him started yanking his “lady curls.” He responded by smashing his pint glass on the bar and slashing both before leaving the pub without saying a word. The landlord kept his silence as did the thugs who required a dozen or so stitches each.

‘Are you sure he’ll be here this morning, sir?’ Simpson asked chewing on the remnants of a large croissant he had bought from the station canteen.

Malahide watched disapprovingly as the crumbs collected on Simpson’s chin and dropped onto his coat. ‘It’s Monday. He always starts the week here.’

‘This early?’

‘He’s not at home or his office.’

‘Like the gay boy said, he’s probably out getting a shag.’

‘We’ll wait.’

‘Why not go in and check?’

‘You don’t cramp him. It just gets him mad and then he refuses to co-operate. This way’s better.’

Malahide fixed his eyes back on the hotel entrance, wiping condensation from the car window to get a clearer view. It was still dark but the city was now fully awake. The cleaners were finishing their shifts and the workers were arriving to start theirs. Malahide pressed the button on the door panel to open the window and release some steam from the car. A blast of icy air hastened him into immediately rewinding it. As he wiped the window again he spotted the tall black

man who had come out of the hotel and turned to walk down Deansgate and away from their car. Malahide immediately recognised the arrogant swagger beneath the heavy clothing. Gibbs was an over-confident prick at times, but he was also tough enough to back up his macho posturing. Malahide also secretly envied the free spirit he saw in Gibbs, whilst he himself had to play by increasingly constricting rules.

‘That’s him,’ he said opening the car door and getting out. He peered back in at Simpson and said, ‘Wait here.’

Gibbs quickened his pace as he saw Malahide hurriedly dodging through the traffic across Deansgate to cut him off. He was in no mood for whatever shit Malahide was about to lay on him. But on the other hand, he didn’t want to spend the rest of the day dodging policemen, so he reluctantly decided to stop.

‘A little early in the morning for kerb crawling isn’t it, Frank?’

‘Well, we catch all kinds of low-life returning from their dubious nocturnal activities with their ill-begotten gains.’ All their conversations started this way – attempts at one-upmanship with the score likely even over the years.

They started walking slowly side by side. Malahide pulled a packet of chewing gum from his pocket and tore the wrapping off a stick then popped it into his mouth. As an afterthought, he offered the pack to Gibbs.

‘No thanks. I’m trying to kick the habit.’

‘I’ve been trying to get hold of you, Joe. Don’t you ever return your calls?’

‘Well, I’ve been getting too many dirty phone calls lately, Frank. So, I let them ring out then use caller ID to get the number so I can report it to my friendly neighbourhood police station.’

Malahide let it ride. ‘I’ve got a job for you.’

Gibbs had been annoyed by Malahide cornering him on the street. He wasn’t going to make it easy. ‘You know where my office is. You can book an appointment.’

Malahide sighed, already tiring of the game. ‘Okay, let’s cut the wisecracks. I have a client for you. Now do you want to hear this or not?’

Gibbs hesitated before finally answering. ‘Go on.’

‘She works for the CPS. Her name’s Lorna Nicholson.’ Gibbs had heard or seen the name before and associated it with one of the senior prosecutors with the Crime Prosecution Services. Gibbs was sure of one thing – she would prove to be one big pain in the ass.

‘Look, Frank—’

‘Here me out first. Okay?’

Gibbs stopped walking. ‘Okay, what’s her problem?’

‘It’s her daughter, Karen. She’s a student. Must be nineteen or twenty-years old now. Lorna’s not heard from her for three or four weeks. She thinks Karen’s got mixed in with the wrong crowd. You know the kind of thing. She wants to find out where she is and who she’s with. She just wants to make sure her daughter’s safe.’

‘At twenty and all grown-up she’s free to do as she pleases. Most kids that age look for some independence and pick friends their parents don’t approve of. They want to experience the wider world. So, what’s so unusual about this one?’

‘The lack of contact is out of character. She’s a model student with a promising future.’

Gibbs considered deliberately for a few moments. ‘Okay, I’ll talk to her.’

Malahide handed Gibbs a folded piece of paper. ‘This is Lorna’s number.’

‘Who’s paying?’

‘She is.’

‘She good for it?’

‘Of course she’s bloody good for it!’

Gibbs laughed. He knew the question would rile Malahide.

‘She’s a classy lady, Joe. I don’t want you upsetting her with that attitude of yours. Just do the job and take the money, okay?’

Gibbs studied Malahide's stern face with a frown of his own. 'Look, I get the message, Frank. I'm taking night classes in the art of etiquette. Anyhow, how come with all the resources at your disposal *you* can't help her?'

Malahide's brow was set hard. 'She wants to keep this low-profile. Just in case. She doesn't want anything official. Tongues wag and the next thing you know it's in the local rag. I told her you'd be discreet.' He almost laughed himself. 'You will be discreet, won't you, Joe?'

'You know me.' Gibbs placed the palm of his right hand over his chest and laughed. 'I'm the soul of discretion.'

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Gibbs' office was situated in a white stone-built, four-storey building in a small paved back alley running off Cross Street in an area between Exchange Square and Albert Square.

As he walked through the alley he picked up faint residues of aromatic spices – remnants of the previous evening's produce from the flanking eating houses. He took the three steps into the spacious lobby in two big strides and nodded at the security guard sat behind a large desk then climbed the central staircase to the fourth floor. He followed the bare corridor past the stuffy insurance broker's office to a frosted glass-fronted door upon which was stencilled JOSEPH J. GIBBS, INVESTIGATIONS. He unlocked the door and stepped over a pile of mail that fanned out over the linoleum floor of the compact outer office then hung his coat on a wooden stand. Being a one-man agency he saw no need for a reception area and instead furnished his outer office as a waiting room with a couple of chairs and a small table, upon which lay a loosely arranged selection of outdated magazines he'd been given by the modelling agency that occupied the first floor – shrines to the Z-list celebrity industry.

Gibbs gathered up his mail and opened the wooden framed glass door that led into the main office. A modest wooden desk sat in front of the

window. A grey filing cabinet stood against the side wall – its main purpose to hide the cracked plaster work. The cabinet was mostly empty as his records were now paperless and stored on two plug-in hard drives – one kept in a safe built into the wall next to the cabinet and the other in the possession of his accountant. A well-used day couch, which often doubled as a makeshift bed, rested against the opposite wall. Another door led to a small closet containing a toilet and washbasin.

Gibbs breathed in the cold musty air and dropped the stack of mail onto his desk. He checked the chunky radiator, that sat under the window, for heat and increased the setting on its dial. He sat in his fake leather chair and unlocked the large drawer on the right-hand side of his desk from which he pulled out a laptop. He gave it a few minutes to boot up, using the time to prioritise and file his mail by the simple process of examining the envelopes. Junk mail tossed into a grey plastic bin and the rest dropped into the top drawer of his desk. Then he remembered the number Malahide had given him for Lorna Nicholson.

He went to retrieve the slip of paper from his coat pocket. As he opened the door to his outer office he found himself looking down at a small, squat and slightly perspiring Asian man he knew as Jamil “Jimmy” Khan. Jimmy owned a compact newsagent unit on the corner of Deansgate and John Dalton Street. His face betrayed the long hard hours he had put in throughout his life. The thinning head of grey hair hadn’t been combed and a once-proud clipped black-grey moustache sat tentatively on his sweating upper lip. His gloomy eyes suggested he’d just lost the winning lottery ticket.

‘Joe, thank goodness,’ he said casting an agitated glance behind him. ‘He come back.’

‘Sit down, Jimmy, you’re making me nervous,’ said Gibbs.

Jimmy hesitated before sitting in one of the waiting chairs in the outer office. Gibbs sat in the other.

‘Who are you talking about?’ asked Gibbs.

‘That man. The one I told you about last week. The one who wants money from me. Remember?’

Gibbs recalled the conversation. Jimmy had been as jumpy as a rat in a ferret hole. Apparently, a big piece of gristle with a pony-tail, the type of which had gone out of fashion nearly twenty years ago, had been trying to sell him an insurance policy. Naively, Jimmy had told the “broker” he was already adequately insured, but the muscle insisted that this particular policy would provide cover for damage to both property and proprietor.

‘What did he say?’ asked Gibbs.

‘He say he come back tonight, when I close, to collect first payment,’ replied Jimmy. ‘He doesn’t look like insurance man to me, Joe.’

‘What time do you close, Jimmy?’

‘Six-o’clock.’

‘Okay, I’ll be there at five-thirty. But if he comes back before then, tell him you will have his payment by six, okay?’

‘You think I should pay him?’ asked Jimmy dejectedly.

‘No, Jimmy, I don’t think you should pay him. When I’ve finished with him he won’t bother you again.’

‘Thanks, Joe.’

Jimmy shuffled his way out of Gibbs’ office and down the hallway.

Gibbs retrieved Lorna Nicholson’s number from his coat pocket and went back into his office. He sat at his desk to make the call. She answered almost immediately.

‘Hello?’ Her voice was hesitant, questioning.

‘Mrs. Nicholson?’

‘Yes.’

‘This is Joe Gibbs. Frank Malahide gave me your number.’

‘Oh yes, Mr. Giggs.’ There was a sexy huskiness to her voice.

‘No, Gibbs. Two *b*’s, not *g*’s.’

‘Sorry, erm... yes, Mr. Gibbs,’ she corrected herself a little tentatively.

‘I believe you’re looking to employ me to locate your daughter.’

‘Erm... yes,’ she replied. ‘But I can’t talk now. Can I come over to your office later this morning?’

‘Sure. Do you know where it is?’

‘I think so. Just off Cross Street?’

‘Uh-huh. If you look for the Image Modelling Agency, my office is on the fourth floor of the same building. What time?’

‘Sorry?’ She seemed distracted.

‘What time will be convenient?’

‘Oh, yes... sorry. Erm... how about eleven?’

‘Eleven’s fine.’

‘Right... erm... very good. I’ll see you then Mr. Giggs.’ He let it ride as she hung up. The whole world was a bag of nerves today.

He gathered up his unpaid bills and a stack of receipts then set off to visit his accountant.

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