

Craig Jones

GEM

NO CONSPIRACY

Gem – No Conspiracy
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G·E·M

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By
Craig Jones

New York.

“Ladies, we have a problem.” John Bradley barged past me and into our apartment. Usually such disrespect would have my gums throbbing, my teeth extending, and his blood all over my lips, but there was a look in his eyes I hadn’t seen before.

He looks scared!

He turned to face me, wringing his hands. His top shirt button was undone, and his tie, usually so perfectly positioned, hung askew. Black stubble covered his chiselled chin and defined cheeks, and dark stormy shadows languished just below his eyes.

I closed the door, hoping my neighbours hadn’t seen him storm in. They might call the cops.

Katrina is going to go ballistic that he’s turned up unannounced!

“You’d better have a damn good reason for crashing my lair.”

“Who knows about you?” he snapped, his lips twitchy and aggressive.

My gums ached to be split by my ferocious fangs. “Just us.”

“Except for us, who knows?”

“Very few people,” I replied, trying to remain calm. “Maria and Angel.”

“Who else?” He gasped, and I thought he was actually going to fall to his knees on the floor and have a hissy fit right here.

He better not vomit on my new carpet. At fifty bucks a yard...

I heard footsteps above me and knew within seconds Katrina would be making her way down the stairs.

This is going to get messy!

There had to be something I could say to calm Bradley down. “Our secret is safe.”

“You’re beautiful but so damned naïve, Gem,” he said, his voice cracking. “After what I’ve seen tonight—”

“Gem,” Katrina shouted from the top of the stairs. “What the hell is he doing here?” Her hands were jammed on her hips, and her right knee bent slightly. Damn she looked good in those short blue jean shorts.

Does she have any idea how hot she looks?

I was suddenly aware of how much we’d begun to mimic each other.

She glared at Bradley. “You have a lot of nerve—”

“Katrina!” he shouted. “What have you told your friends about us?”

She strutted down the stairs, blatantly ignoring him, and stood directly in front of me, a damnit-not-again look on her face. “We’ve got plans for tonight. You’re not going out to kill someone. You promised!”

Bradley put his hand on her shoulder.

My vampire rage flared up.

No one touches my woman!

But then I saw the look on his face, the complete and utter desperation in those piercing eyes, and for the first time since he arrived in our lives, Bradley looked more than scared. He looked terrified to death.

I peeled his hand off Katrina’s shoulder and placed my own conciliatory hand in its place. Her bare skin felt smooth and smouldering under my palm. “Nobody’s going to ruin our night, babe.”

Then I turned on Bradley. “I don’t know what has gotten into you, but you have five seconds to tell us what is going on.”

“Let me use your computer. I’ll show you.”

Moments later, Katrina and I flanked Bradley as he sat at my laptop, the one we almost died for, and he tapped a Web site into the browser.

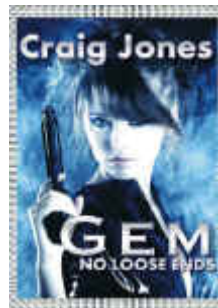
www.twbpress.com

“What the hell is TWB Press?” Katrina asked. “Gem—”

“Just watch,” Bradley implored.

The Web site booted up. It was an e-publishing site: horror, thrillers, science fiction.

“Look!” He scrolled down the page.



I suddenly felt a churning in the pit of my stomach as I recalled Bradley’s earlier questions. Somebody did know about us, maybe the whole damn world.

“What the frick is going on?” I said, trying to keep my vampire blood pressure from blowing a gasket.

Katrina leaned forward and pushed Bradley out of the way to get a closer look at the screen. “Oh my god,” she squeaked. “Gem! That’s you!”

“That’s what I saw in the mirror this morning.” I was checking my gun, posing a little, okay, *I do that sometimes*, but somehow someone took my picture.

“There’s more,” Bradley said, elbowing his way in again. He clicked on my picture, it had my name on it and our motto, ‘No Loose Ends’ emblazoned across the bottom. The picture grew bigger, and a brief description of my life appeared next to it.

The New York underworld is no place for a lady... but no one told Gem.

Katrina's mouth hung agape.

A sick feeling in my belly spread throughout my body like I'd been shot in the heart with a silver bullet. I glanced down at Bradley. He actually looked a little relieved at having unburdened himself of this nightmare and proved he was not insane.

He clicked the mouse again. A new document appeared, pages of a book with the same picture of me looking at myself in the mirror. FREE Excerpt. Names appeared on the first page. Copyright by Craig Jones. Edited by Terry Wright. I wondered who the hell these people were.

Bradley flipped to the next page. A block of text came up. He butted his knuckles on the screen. "Read this."

The Deal

Maloney looked around my room and nodded like he approved of the extravagance surrounding him: the inch-thick carpet with its diamond designs, the half moon flock of the wallpaper, and the antique furniture, polished to a museum quality shine. The two goons he brought with him flanked the door, equally impressed, I could tell by their dropped jaws and roving, wanton eyes. One of them set a briefcase on the floor beside him. Finally Maloney's eyes found me, and his expression turned from amazement to shock.

"I didn't expect you to be—"

"A vampire?" I asked, feeling the touch of a smile form on my lips.

"That's exactly how it began," I whispered. I would have shouted, but the breath had been sucked from my lungs.

Katrina pushed Bradley's hand off the mouse and began scanning ahead.

I shouted, "Katrina, no, please don't!"

But she found it; she read the part where Maloney first asked me to kill her. Of course I'd said no, but then he forced me to change my mind by threatening to kill Angel. A four-year-old little girl, damnit, Maloney had no couth whatsoever.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, Katrina."

Her chest hitched, and then she turned and sprinted from the room. I could hear her vomiting in the toilet.

"So you knew nothing about this biographer?" Bradley asked. "Craig Jones?"

"No, of course not."

"These two guys could take us all down, Gem. They know everything. What I've shown you is just the tip of iceberg. They know about Clayton, the botched job at the park, the dead woman, everything."

Katrina stepped back into the room. "Sorry about that. It's not every day you read about someone plotting your murder."

I stroked her arm gently and glared at Bradley. "Who the hell is this Jones guy, anyway?"

"Jones is from Wales," Bradley said, reading from a bio next to a photo of a scruffy-haired hunk.

"Where's that?" Katrina asked.

"Britain," I said.

"Some kind of tennis pro turned blabbermouth," he added.

"He's going on my hit list," I said, my fangs itching for his jugular.

"Then who is Terry Wright?"

"He's the publisher," Bradley replied. "It's his Web site. He's the ringleader."

"So he's pulling the strings?" I suggested.

"It's more like he's the Yoda to Jones' Luke Skywalker," Katrina offered.

Both Bradley and I looked at her, confused by her reference.

"Jones gets the scoop on us, then Wright hones the skills, trains him. They're working together."

"It's a conspiracy," Bradley said.

"So where's Wright?" I asked Bradley.

He brought up a photo of a well dressed man, hair going silver at the temples, smart-

looking old guy. “Denver, Colorado.”

I turned to Katrina. “Do you want to take a trip to the Rocky Mountains with me?”

“Oh. My. God,” she said. “Are you going to kill Terry Wright?”

“He’s on the top of my hit list, honey.”

“Girls, girls,” Bradley shouted. “He’s probably heavily armed, heavily guarded.”

I smiled “He won’t even hear us coming.”

Colorado

Slinking towards Terry Wright's front door, I felt my body change. Pheromones of murder pulsed through my undead heart. My perfectly manicured nails thickened and grew into talons. I felt the first stirrings of angst in my stomach. My gums split and my fangs extended. Sexual urges came to the fore, and images of Katrina writhing in our bed swamped my mind.

Focus, Gem. This is work.

The house was lit up, and the front door that I had every intention of smashing into matchsticks stood open. My vampire senses indicated that it was safe to enter, that I wasn't walking into a garlic trap.

I stepped inside, looked back at Katrina sitting in our hire car, and winked. I wanted her to feel at ease, to not worry, that we'd be all right after I finished draining this publisher's blood.

I need her to stay just where she is! In case I've underestimated Wright.

I closed the door behind me and stood silently in the hallway.

"Gem," a man's voice said. "Come in."

I almost jumped out of my perfectly smooth skin. How did he know I was here? How could he have been expecting me?

My vampire senses charged to full alert.

I followed the voice and walked into a study. Bookshelves lined the walls, floor to ceiling, 5000 strong, and posters of book signing events, The 13th Power everywhere.

Wright sat at a computer, his back to me.

My pupils dilated and my muscles tightened. I was ready to spring on him, drag him to the floor, and end his puppet master's life with a solid clamp of my jaw on his throat.

Terry Wright turned to face me, one hand still on the computer mouse, the other pressed flat to his chest. It looked like he was having trouble breathing. The old guy might die of a heart attack before I sucked him dry.

“Gads,” he said. “You look just like Craig described you!”

I glanced past him at the computer screen where he’d been reading an email:

From: Craig Jones

Subject: Gem

The house was lit up, and the front door that I had every intention of smashing into matchsticks stood open.

What the hell?

Their conspiracy lay proven before me. They knew every move I was going to make before I did. The question was how did they do it, how did they know, and how much had they seen happen between Katrina and I...at night...when we’re alone?

There was no way I could kill him before I learned the answers.

The computer pinged, announcing the arrival of an incoming email.

Terry’s index finger twitched.

My muscles relaxed. As my anger faded to curiosity, my fangs withdrew back up into my gums, became teeth again, and my claws receded to beautifully manicured fingernails. I no longer wanted to tear Terry Wright limb from limb.

I read the words that appeared on the screen:

From: Craig Jones

Subject: Gem

Gem’s anger faded and she no longer wanted to tear Terry Wright limb from limb.

“That’s how it works,” Wright said quietly, in a voice only a vampire could hear.

“But how do you do it?”

“I’m a publisher. I find writers and work with them to make their good stories great. Then I put them on the Internet for sale, worldwide. Craig sent me a story about a sexy vampire hit woman. I had no idea you’d turn out to be real.”

The computer binged again.

From: Craig Jones

Subject: Gem

Gem shook her head. “I don’t believe this.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe this.” My mouth fell open. I’d said everything that Craig had written.

How could I have been so wrong?

My brain filled with static. I couldn’t think. Fear overwhelmed me.

Jones has been the real puppet master, all along! My puppet master!

Wright looked me up and down, *like most men do*. “Craig told me you were coming. I never thought you’d show up, but I wanted to meet you. And here you are, come to life.”

Another email arrived.

From: Craig Jones

Subject: Gem

“You risked your life to meet me,” Gem muttered.

I bit my lip, but the words muttered out anyway. “You risked your life to meet me.”

Terry didn’t bother to hide the smile that jumped onto his lips. “Sweetheart, I took out my own insurance.” He tapped the hand that he held on his chest. “I’m wearing a crucifix under here, and if you attacked me, I was going to use it to stop you. I’ve read what happens to you if you see one of those bad boys.”

Wright was right. He knew everything about me. He was in cahoots with the person who possessed the power to control me. My thought processes were like a plate of spaghetti.

“But you shouldn’t want to hurt me. If it wasn’t for me, you’d be history.”

The computer beeped again.

From: Craig Jones

Subject: Gem

“Rubbish,” Gem shouted.

I didn’t fight it this time. “Rubbish,” I shouted.

“When I first read about you, Gem was just one story. I suggested to Jones that he should write a series. It was me who kept you alive. And not just you.” Wright paused and raised his brows, real cocky like. “But Katrina, too.”

I raised my perfectly plucked eyebrows in response. “Katrina?”

“At the end of No Loose Ends, Craig made you kill Katrina. I made him rewrite the ending. I saved her, Gem. You owe me one for that.”

My knees almost buckled.

I was meant to kill Katrina? Does Craig Jones have no heart?

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, what I had read in the emails Jones was sending Wright. The conspiracy had almost gone out of control. Terry Wright was my saviour.

I should ask Katrina to come in and thank him proper.

But my ire for Jones felt like a time-bomb ticking in my chest.

Another email:

From: Craig Jones

Subject: Gem

“So it’s Jones I need to go after!” Gem said.

I shrugged. *Here it comes.* “So it’s Jones I need to go after!” I said in a morose, monotone voice.

“You don’t want to do that, either. If he dies, he stops writing. He stops writing and you will no longer exist.”

No!

“And Katrina will no longer exist.” Terry paused and respectfully lowered his head. “And Angel will no longer exist.”

Jones has got me over a barrel.

The computer pinged again. I was beginning to hate that sound, and this time I didn't even bother to read the screen, I just let the words exit my stunned mouth.

"But my job relies on anonymity. If he's writing it down, then people are going to know what I'm doing. All they have to do is read the short stories."

"They'll think it's fiction," Terry said. "Simple as that. Come on, while Jones is knocking these stories out of the ball park, who's going to believe it's a real vampire bumping off New York's sleaze bags?"

I had no answer. Maybe Jones had a sudden case of writer's block.

But Wright was, once again, right. If I didn't cooperate, everyone I love will cease to exist. I was powerless against these guys.

I can't let anything happen to my girls.

An email arrived.

Jones suddenly had something for me to say. "So I go back home and forget this ever happened?"

"I advise it highly. But before you go, one more thing." He stood up and walked to the door. "Bobette!" he called.

A woman joined us in the study. She was wearing a gym kit like she'd just come back from instructing a Zumba class. She smiled at me like I was a celebrity.

"It's such a pleasure to meet you, Gem," she said. "I'm a big fan. I hope Katrina is well, and I'm so glad you didn't kill her."

"Your husband saved her life," I said with a slight bow of undying appreciation.

"I know," Bobette said. "That's all he ever talks about anymore, Gem, No Loose Ends. Gem, No Secrets. Gem. Gem. Gem. Now if you'll please excuse me, I'm missing American Idol, and I'm sure you have more bad guys to kill. It's been fun talking with you."

An email arrived.

"The pleasure is all mine. But now I have to go." I shook her hand, waved goodbye to Terry Wright, and left the way I came in.

"She's beautiful," I heard Bobette say behind me.

"Gotta hand it to Craig Jones," Terry replied. "He sure knows how to pick 'em."

I enjoyed their conversation as I walked back towards the hire car and Katrina.

How the hell do I explain this to her?

I pulled the door closed with a clunk and tried to ignore Katrina's questioning glare.

"Well?" she asked. "Is he dead?"

"This is bigger than both of us, girl."

"You didn't kill him?"

"No. He's too valuable."

"So we're going after Craig Jones instead?"

"No. We're going home."

"But the conspiracy? How is Jones writing about us?"

"It's no conspiracy, Katrina. It's magic."

"So what do we do when we get back to New York?"

I sighed. "We wait to see what new adventures Craig has in store for us."

About the Author



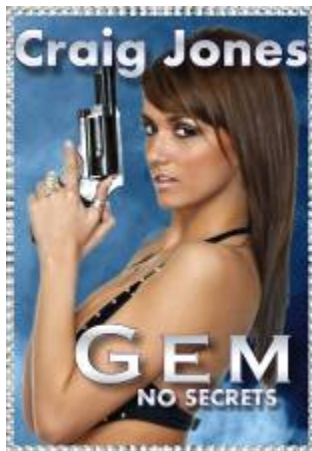
Originally from South Wales, I have held a wide range of jobs from tennis player to gym manager to health service worker. I turned 40 in October, am married to Claire, and we have an insane ginger cat called Wookie. I went to school with Catherine Zeta-Jones, have played tennis with Jamie Redknapp, and coached Great Britain's first ever World Number One tennis player.

I have always loved horror stories, having grown up with Jason Voorhees and his slasher friends, and I love writing them even more. The thought of taking normal people and putting them in terrifying situations gives me a fantastic buzz. I hope to convey that buzz to my readers in every story I write.



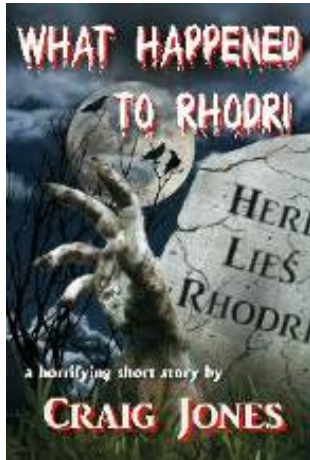
Gem – No Loose Ends (TWB Press, 2011) www.twbpress.com/gemnooosends.html
A short story vampire series by Craig Jones

Gem is everything she seems, beautiful, rich, and successful at what she does, a vampire hit woman for the Mob. She makes problems go away. But when one crime boss decides she's too big for her britches and double-crosses her, he'd better get out the crucifixes and the holy water, because crime hurts bad, real bad, and Gem leaves no loose ends.



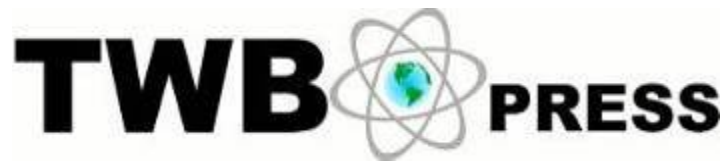
Gem- No Secrets (TWB Press, 2011) www.twbpress.com/gemnosecrets.html
A short story vampire series by Craig Jones

Gem is everything she seems, beautiful, rich, and successful at what she does, a vampire hit woman for the Mob. She makes problems go away. But when one crime boss puts a five million dollar price on her head, dead not undead, he and his goons are in for one hell of a bloody bad ride.



What Happened to Rhodri (TWB Press, 2011) www.twbpress.com/whathappenedtorhodri.html
A short story by Craig Jones

There comes a time in a man's life when he must fight for what he wants, revenge for one, and love for another, even if the odds are stacked miserably against him.



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