

Hibernation

Another Maisie Kaywood Story

By John Bonthron

(Edited by Kareth Paterson)

Collateral

March 2011.

Maisie Kaywood stood at the lounge window of her penthouse apartment near the centre of Glasgow and stared across to the cranes dominating the site of the Southern General Hospital. In time, after some heated debate, it would eventually be assigned the ungainly name of The Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, Glasgow.

These cranes marked its upgrading and expansion to become Scotland's latest super-hospital. Part of the Southern General campus already housed its world-renowned Neurosurgical Unit, with its strong track record in treating brain damage arising from traffic and other impacts.

Her heart was heavy. Maisie had now accepted she might lose her friend and collaborator David Abernethy, aka Biscuit, aka Ferret. To protect his identity, he had been registered in the NHS system as Flight Lieutenant Peter John MacEwan.

She had just returned from a short visit to Abernethy's home, a remote cottage above Corgarff Castle, near Aberdeen. A few days earlier, Maisie had told his wife Fida she must face the future alone. Initially, she had resisted the news her David was dead and gone, lost without trace, collateral damage suffered while on duty. Maisie had eventually convinced her, holding Fida as she wept, starting the grieving process. Fida would have to find a way to tell her boys who were away at school, boarders at Fettes College in Edinburgh.

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Maisie's lie told was born of kindness and for several practical reasons:

- The prognosis for Biscuit was poor. After a fraught brain operation which had extended to thirty gruelling hours, he had been placed under a regime of hibernation treatment. This was a new approach which had been developed by the brilliant Glasgow neurosurgeon Ken Fletcher and his team.

- Fida had three children to care for. Knowing Biscuit was clinging to life in Glasgow would oblige his family to witness this long and uncertain medical treatment, with many

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months of awkward visiting. Such a vigil, forcing them to visit and revisit the bedside of a silent and unresponsive person who might never return, stealing Fida and her boys from their normal lives, pulling them into a state of limbo. To Maisie, this was an avoidable torture which Fida and her family must be spared. If Fida was forced to witness his present condition, the necessary secrecy of surrounding Abernethy's situation would eat away at her resolve, debilitating her as the weeks turned to months and hope faded.

- Fida was still an attractive and sensual woman. In time, she might meet someone to make a new life with, just as she might have done had David had been killed in a road accident or some other catastrophe for which the details could be understood, mulled over, rationalised or railed against.

- Abernethy's wife had known the risks, having been party to most aspects of planning of the undertaking, fully involved in the detail, as she had been increasingly over recent years in her role as Maisie's nominated understudy. Although Fida was unaware, apart from the brutal head injury to Biscuit, the outcome had been good. Had Kim Lucas not been part of it all, with his helicopter and his steely nerves, Biscuit would surely be dead.

- Despite the loss of Biscuit from her team, Maisie's work of delivering justice and retribution must go on, at least while she herself was still able to do so. Her own prognosis from the interrogation of her genes had proved accurate and her arthritis was taking a stronger grip, making her less mobile. Without remission, she might have five years or less before being forced to make her own exit, unless Professor Derek Dysart at the Strath-Glasgow Centre for Prosthetics and Assisted Living in Later Life could provide her with a solution which would allow her to continue an independent and active life. Or perhaps the research team at Global Bio-Genetics might find a cure or a treatment which would stave off the worst of what was to come.

- Fida was needed - now more than ever. Her work would be her salvation, help her rehabilitation over the months ahead, Maisie reasoned to herself. Apart from her essential work at Excalibur Executive Travel, Fida had shown she had the potential to become Maisie's replacement when it was time for Maisie to retire.

- Maisie would continue to do everything she could; no expense would be spared to give Biscuit the best treatment available, drawing expertise from the world-wide medical community. She had given Ken Fletcher a free rein and he had put his care team in place for the expected long haul.

- Fletcher had insisted he **must** have Amelia Curtis. The pompous, overbearing yet gifted man had proclaimed Amelia was, like him, the best of the best. More importantly,

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Maisie had asked her second-favourite nephew, also a noted neurosurgeon, for his opinion.

- The necessary specialist medical equipment, with its computerised systems and array of digital CCTV cameras, was now up and running, installed by the team which her closest collaborator Tom Farquarson-Wright had chosen and supervised. Like Biscuit, Tom was an ex-SAS soldier who had been seconded to GCHQ, joining Maisie's Carpe Diem group, working with her on many clandestine operations; and on other more intimate, under-the-duvet operations in their personal lives. When her Carpe Diem team had been disbanded, Maisie had established her own group to carry on the work, taking Tom, Biscuit Abernethy and others into her new freelance organisation called Team XCD.

- Tom had embedded the necessary surveillance software in the Hibernation Treatment Suite (HTS) computers. Every channel was covered, even telephones. Everything which occurred in the HTS was recorded in digital archive files stored in mirrored servers, each continuously duplicating the data on the other for extra security. The servers, operated by IBM on a commercial basis, were located anonymously amongst many others, in a vast computer hall located on the outskirts of Motherwell, twenty miles to the south of Glasgow. Maisie had the passwords.

- Enabled by these passwords, the HTS data and images were freely accessible to Maisie, allowing her to monitor the performance of those taking care of Biscuit, to reassure herself the HTS medical and nursing teams were always performing to the highest standards. As Maisie well knew, the human link in any chain of responsibility was usually the weakest.

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Turning away from the window, Maisie fired up her laptop and tuned into the live images and voices streaming from the Hibernation Room itself, watching the small well-drilled care team go through their morning routines. Over the next hour, she monitored both their actions and their words, as they bathed their patient then applied firm but gentle physiotherapy. The aim was to keep David Abernethy's stagnant body as fit as was possible while his brain slowly healed. They spoke gently and encouragingly to their patient, even though it was unlikely he could hear them.

- MOD archives showed there had been a brave man called Flt Lt Peter John MacEwan, who had died several years earlier when his helicopter had been shot down under mysterious circumstances. Biscuit's alias had been acquired from GCHQ records, filched through a back-door loophole, without permission.

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- The copy of the patient's admission records lodged on the servers whirring in Motherwell, were a confection, bringing together the records for both Peter John MacEwan and David Abernethy, prepared in great haste by Maisie.

- Although Maisie knew these records were not robust, fortunately the data had proved quite acceptable to the hospital authorities. This was due mainly to the large sums of money which Maisie, in her persona of 'Mrs Marsdene' from a charity called Health Thru Research (HTR), had offered to invest in the hospital to support Ken Fletcher's revolutionary and expensive hibernation treatment, believing this approach to be Biscuit Abernethy's only hope for recovery.

Flicker

January 2015.

Following her familiar routine, Charge Nurse Amelia Curtis entered the Hibernation Room to make a close inspection; a human back-up to the array of sensors and equipment monitoring everything which happened to P.J. MacEwan.

The room and its patient were unusual and both were strictly out of bounds to most of the staff in the Neurosurgical Unit. The man himself was not a secret: to everyone inside the Unit, he was a celebrity, a medical miracle in the making.

The patient's head was held in a multi-point brace and his limbs restrained by padded Velcro ties, immobilising him, a necessity dictated by his treatment. Ken Fletcher's *hibernation regime* involved delivering medications through a myriad of over a hundred micro-tubes, some almost as tiny as optical fibres. These tubes penetrated deep into the patient's brain tissues, transferring precisely timed micro-dosages of the many different healing fluids which were slowly restoring his brain function, it was hoped.

Infection was the stealth enemy which might take hold and kill this vulnerable man within hours, if not detected and countered immediately.

Biscuit Abernethy was being protected by 'barrier nursing'. The room temperature, humidity and air cleanliness were maintained by a dedicated air conditioning system, designed to maintain a positive pressure inside the room, preventing ingress of dirt and germs. The room was totally enclosed, without external windows and, for the most part, dimly lit.

Apart from the low hiss of the air conditioning, forcing ultra-clean air into the room, and the soft monotonous bleep of a repeat alarm from the master monitor, the room was quiet, calm and womb-like, again by design. The entry doors were air-locked and security protected. Access was allowed only to named individuals who must be in possession of an authorising swipe card. The use of any card initiated a strict protocol under which exit times for any visit must be matched by a corresponding report on the records system.

Authorised visitors or observing personnel were allowed only to view the hibernation patient through a triple glazed one-way viewing window set in a side wall,

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accessed from a small sound-proofed room which accommodated a maximum of two persons. Normally this side room was kept locked and the viewing window set to 'opaque'.

Under a medical tent, the patient's body was naked, apart from paper underpants. To ward off bedsores, he lay on a sophisticated form of airbed, a surface which supported and massaged him simultaneously. His nutrients were fed to him through conventional drip tubes and his waste products removed via catheters. All inputs and outputs were weighed, measured and analysed daily, tracking his physical well-being closely.

When required for treatments and inspections, his body was supported from above and below by a padded double lattice frame held by a large retractable arm which lifted, inclined and rotated the patient at ultra-slow speed. This frame had been designed and donated by Professor Dysart.

There were no weekends or holidays in this special room and the patient's care status was maintained at 'high alert' on a 24/7 basis.

Professor Ian Spalding, visited weekly to inspect and care for his teeth.

Abernethy's finger and toe nails were manicured by a podiatrist as required.

To Amelia, now nearing her fourth year of caring for this slightly built man, her patient no longer looked odd. His almost ghost-like, washed out, waxy appearance now seemed normal. Every day, she used surgical spectacles incorporating magnifying lens to examine every square centimetre of his skin, checking for blemishes or small lesions which might herald a negative situation developing. Daily sessions of timed applications of simulated solar radiation from medical quality sun lamps. These lamps emitted ultraviolet B radiation (UVB) which the skin surface converted to the crucially important vitamin D required to maintain a healthy body and promote healing. Although this treatment did not seem to be effective, Ken Fletcher had insisted they be continued. Amelia was not convinced but kept her opinion to herself.

The main feature contributing to the hibernation patient's strange appearance and the image which always stuck with the few allowed to see him, was his bald scalp with its many transparent nylon tubes filled with multi-coloured fluids. His entire cranium was deliberately kept bald, maintained thus by a combination of injections and antiseptic hair-growth inhibitor lotions applied three times each day with cotton buds. This activity required meticulous care and high concentration, to avoid disturbing or infecting the many entry points for the treatment tubes. Infections did occur occasionally and were always a cause for great concern. During an 'outbreak', their

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internal code, the patient was 'locked down', with all other treatments suspended until the infection subsided.

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Amelia leaned over her charge and as she did so, saw his eyes flicker.

She pulled back in astonishment. Although the dullness of his required protocol had blunted her edge, in an instant, she was alert, buzzing, adrenalin pumping through her veins. Almost in disbelief, Amelia watched his eyes move as the lids opened fully.

The relay from the supervising master monitor beeped, confirming reassurance his vital functions were within range and he was not in distress. Perhaps he was 'returning' to her, at last. Ken Fletcher had said many times this was how it would begin: when the patient was healed, ready to face the associated mental terrors of the trauma which had damaged him, he would overcome the minimal dosage of the hibernating drug which held him down, and come 'up' of his own free will.

Amelia watched P.J. MacEwan's pupils adjust to the dim light. When he sensed the brace which prevented him from moving his head, his eyes rotated to scan the room. When they arrived at her, saw her face hidden behind its surgical mask and her body shrouded inside her clean-room robe as required by the barrier nursing regime, she saw him react with raw panic.

'Hello Peter. I'm Amelia. You're safe and well in hospital, in Glasgow.'

The man's pupils dilated and his body shook. His limbs fought against the restraints as he tried to 'escape'. The master alarm tone changed, sounding a warning. Amelia reached up and adjusted the third mini-pump from the left in the bank of fifteen. Her patient calmed, his eyes drooped and closed as he went back under.

His 'fear' reaction was not uncommon. Peter McEwan or whoever he was, would be disoriented, unsure where he was and why he was restrained. His anxiety was normal, a good sign, indicating his basic fight or flight instinct was intact.

At last, after almost four years, her mystery patient was coming back. Amelia was confident with further care and rehabilitation, he would make a full recovery, provided he could overcome his mental trauma.

Miracle

The patient's recovery was a medical miracle and one which would not have been possible without the support of his benefactor, an oddly dressed but attractive woman called Margery Marsdene. It was rumoured this secretive woman had put up hundreds of thousands of pounds for his treatment, funding the construction of the specialist Hibernation Treatment Suite, paying for the expensive drugs and equipment including a state of the art computer system, everything renewed, upgraded and tweaked on a regular basis.

It was common knowledge the Marsdene woman had also funded additional nursing staff and paid for Ken Fletcher to fly to and from LA to chair monthly reviews with the medical and nursing teams. Most unusually, Mrs Marsdene was permitted to attend, always sitting directly opposite Mr Fletcher, often clearly unhappy at his increasingly grandiose language and fantastical anecdotes. She never spoke, never questioned, listening with fierce concentration with what seemed to be a complete understanding of the medical details being discussed. When she heard something which she perhaps did not agree with or fully believe, she would type rapidly on her laptop and stare at it, as if waiting impatiently for a reply. Amelia wondered if she was checking websites or emailing someone for a second opinion. When what she had been waiting for arrived on her screen, she might look up at Mr Fletcher sharply, her steely blue eyes glittering in cold anger. From departmental gossip, Amelia knew Fletcher had always been both a blowhard and a popinjay. Outside the meetings, the other medics joked that since his move to the USA, the hot air balloon of his giant ego had clearly broken free of its moorings.

Mrs Marsdene visited regularly, the patient's only visitor. Although she might not visit for several weeks at a time, she always returned. The patient had been an orphan, originally from South Africa, his visitor had volunteered, saying she was his only living relative. Beyond that she would not be drawn, merely shaking her head at further questions.

To Amelia Curtis, there was something very odd about her patient's admission notes. Peter's older injuries were extensive, with scars and repairs to many parts of his body. The notes suggested sporting injuries but Amelia was unconvinced. Despite entries spanning over twenty years, his data had been provided in digital form, with no photo-scanned images, nothing on microfiche. Every entry for him was in the same font, as if crafted by the same hand in what, to Amelia, seemed to be a jumbled non-

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contemporaneous transcription idiom, poorly edited. To Amelia, who was a stickler for record keeping, the language was certainly not that of a medical professional. His notes claimed his DOB was 13 January 1980, making him thirty-one but she suspected he might be older.

His special treatment had generated a strong rumour among the staff, started by a porter called James Peake. Known to all as Peakie the Porter, James was a keen plane spotter and had told everyone the helicopter was a specially adapted version of Lynx, the type used by Special Forces, asserting it had mountings for missiles although none had been present. Later, he had asserted it had been "unmarked", which he said proved it was Black Ops.

Patient P.J. MacEwan had arrived by helicopter, at the old Southern General. Although this was a common practice for patients suffering head injuries, the fact it not a medivac or rescue helicopter, was unusual. Peakie had worked offshore in the North Sea oilfields and had praised highly the skill of the pilot who had landed expertly in darkness, in foul weather.

During his early months in hibernation, P.J. MacEwan's skin had been a darker hue. Initially Amelia had thought he had been tinged by African blood somewhere in his lineage, as Amelia was herself. Over time, the colourant from his professionally applied fake tan had faded and he became a ruddy pink-white before slowly morphing to his current grey-white-pink colour.

This all added to the mystery, now a mini-legend, which circulated again each time a new person joined the Neurology Unit and asked about the mystery patient in the HTS. The consolidated rumour was his 'delivery' had been 'authorised' by someone high up in Whitehall. The hierarchy of the hospital did not respond, keeping a low profile with Mr Hector McIver, the consultant appointed as Ken Fletcher's replacement, emphasising their patient should be considered as a normal, everyday admission, a brave man who deserved everyone's best endeavours.

While sitting at the HTS Nurses' Station through the small hours of long nights on duty, Amelia had created many fantasies for the mysterious Peter John MacEwan. Perhaps now her patient was returning, Amelia would learn his secrets.

Amelia

When P.J. MacEwan first arrived at Glasgow's Southern General Hospital, Amelia Curtis had been working at the New Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, often referred to as NERI, where she had become a prized member of their 'Recovery Team'. On the medical grapevine, she had heard about the new Hibernation Treatment Suite under construction at the Neurosurgical Unit back in Glasgow. This news had been of passing interest, an echo from her old life.

When Ken Fletcher's calls started, pressing this post on her, they had been completely unexpected. Initially she had resisted, even hanging up on him on the second occasion. However, Fletcher had persisted, laid on the charm, which he was good at, praising her extravagantly, telling her repeatedly she had always been "the complete and dedicated professional" and no one else in the entire world had the skills set needed to implement his pioneering treatment. After a few rounds of negotiation, she had capitulated, despite the personal history between them.

The reason Amelia Curtis had banished herself to NERI was because she had been caught *in flagrante delicto* with Ken Fletcher in the senior houseman's relief bedroom he had used as his boudoir. At the time of her seduction, she had been enjoying a steady relationship with Barclay Dunlop, a brilliant young neurosurgeon on Ken Fletcher's team. Amelia later learned she had not been alone in succumbing to his charms: unfortunately, she was the one who was caught.

The exposé, comprising several close-ups stills and a short video clip of them 'naked and active' had raced around the department's email circuit. A 'well-wisher' had forwarded it to both Fletcher's wife and the Chair of the Board of Management of the Health Board.

At the hospital, Ken had toughed it out but his wife had divorced him, claiming their massive Architect-Designed house in Killearn as part of her financial settlement. The house was an eight-bedroom monster complete with a squash court, covered tennis court and five-a-side pitch enclosed by a glass dome. The initial design had raised a plethora of planning objections but eventually, by careful landscaping and some serious smoozing of local councillors and officials, Ken had won over his deriders to his way of thinking. When finally built, with its stunning views over Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, "The Eyrie" had won dozens of Architectural awards. As if to spite him,

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Tracy Fletcher had immediately sold it to a tattooed footballer before moving to France to live near her only son and his family.

At first, everyone thought it had been Barclay Dunlop who had taken the images to discredit the world-famous Ken Fletcher with whom he had an uneasy relationship. The subsequent witch-hunt revealed Dunlop was out jogging with a group of like-minded keep fit fanatics at the time the images had been captured. A trainee nurse eventually admitted to hiding in a cupboard and taking the images using Barclay's mobile phone. The girl was transferred to another hospital but this had not satisfied Fletcher's desire for revenge. Barclay Dunlop was designated *persona non grata* and banished to Fort William, out of Amelia's life for ever, her dream of a their future together ended for a one night stand with Ken Fletcher. For Amelia, the irony of it all was her boss had not been very good in bed and had needed quite a bit of 'coaxing' to make him 'ready'.

In the end, the main reason she had accepted Fletcher's increased offer was because the grapevine said he would soon be moving to Los Angeles which meant she would not be required to work with him on a daily basis.

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Amelia Curtis's move to NERI a decade earlier had been originally intended as temporary, to escape the gossip which had surrounded the incident. Living in Edinburgh had brought an initial frisson of newness and novelty which had quickly evaporated and since her break-up with Barclay Dunlop, she had been wallowing in self-pity and medicating on chocolate, white wine spritzers and using her subscription to "Netflix", with its archive of soppy love stories. Inevitably, her weight had soared.

For a singleton aged thirty-six with no active emotional ties and struggling to afford her expensive rental flat in Edinburgh's New Town, the post a Head of Nursing at the new HTS was a very good offer. She saw it as an opportunity to reform, re-energise, re-start her career and return to family, friends and roots in Glasgow.

The appointment had brought with it a superb package of additional non-NHS benefits, including a freshly-decorated, fully-furnished serviced apartment in the world-renowned Art Deco Kelvin Court, a Fiat Panda 4x4 to overcome icy roads in winter, lease hired for her personal use, renewed every two years and a prized 24-hour car parking space at the Southern General. There was also an all-inclusive gym and spa membership and a generous 'disrupted living' allowance. At the time it had seemed unbelievable, too good to be true, as if a fairy godmother had waved her wand over her.

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As the rumour mill had predicted, two weeks after Amelia's move to the new HTS to take responsibility for patient MacEwan, Ken Fletcher had moved to Los Angeles. Effectively, Amelia Curtis was in day-to-day charge. At first, she had felt the weight of this burden, wary of the continuous monitoring of everything she and her team did. Gradually, she became used to it and found the ability to review the CCTV recordings and detailed medical data meant she could easily check up on her team. This in turn gave her confidence they were also doing their best, despite the inevitable monotony of the treatment regime.

When Ken Fletcher flew back from LA for meetings, Amelia's interactions with him were always on a strictly professional level only. The focus of these meetings was to review of her monthly report and its associated supporting data, information always probed and scrutinised by the review panel. Initially, she had been nervous but after a few months had settled, welcoming this constant pressure, believing it helped keep her edge fresh and focussed.

Fletcher's move to La seemed to have been good for him physically: "I'm into outdoor squash, tennis and jogging" he opined at every opportunity, clearly pleased with his tanned, fit appearance. While in Ken's company, however briefly, the old attraction returned, especially when he flashed his winning smile at her. Although two decades older than Amelia, Fletcher he could still turn on the charm, when he chose to dispense it.

Since her own self-banishment to Edinburgh, Amelia had been almost celibate. With her move back to Glasgow, she had half-expected Fletcher would contact her 'after hours' on her mobile, or press her entry buzzer at Kelvin Court, to re-start their affair but this had not happened, so far.

Treadmill

After 'the flicker', Amelia continued with her protocol tasks by treating the skin around each tube entry point then applying moisturiser to his body before moving back to her desk at the Nurses' Station. First, she checked his current readings which were all normal. Next, she looked at those for the preceding ninety minutes, to include the period covering his brief return. She then went through the digital CCTV images to watch 'the flicker' and its aftermath, to be certain she had not imagined it.

Amelia compiled a clip of this data, aware Ken would want to know *immediately*, as he had stressed, many, many times. Satisfied with her data compilation and confident she had acted professionally, she signed it off to the system then attached a copy to the email and pressed 'send'.

As soon as it had 'flown', Amelia hit the speed-dial on the desktop telephone to make direct contact with the great man.

Five thousand miles away in Los Angeles, Ken Fletcher moved his eyes into near focus and read the origin of the inconvenient prioritised call on the data screen located inside the upper edge of his surgical helmet. He was fifteen hours into a tricky neurological procedure on a child's brain, another 'miracle' in the making and did not need this interruption.

'Take time-out, guys. Five minutes, OK Sergio?'

His co-surgeon nodded.

Ken laid down his instruments and stood to the side, turning to his support nurse whose job it was to maintain his sterile integrity. 'Sonia, please switch on my Bluetooth earpiece.' The woman tipped the switch on the side of his helmet, accepting the call from Glasgow's new Queen Elizabeth University Hospital.

'Mr Fletcher?'

'Amelia, this'd better be good.'

'Mr Fletcher, patient MacEwan has returned from hibernation. If you switch to Skype, I'll stream the live images.'

'Hold a minute, please, Amelia. Sonia, I need Skype for this, patch it through, please. Thanks, Sonia. Right, Amelia, I have it now. Bingo! We have McEwan back at last.'

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Incredible. My God, Amelia, to tell you the truth, I had almost given up on him. Well done, lassie, this has been down to you as much as me and my surgical team. Look, keep it under wraps for, say, two days, will you? I'm in the middle of another marathon here and I'll want to look fresh for the media bandwagon. OK?'

'Of course, Mr Fletcher. I've made up a file with the data and a clip of his images. I emailed it to you a few minutes ago. Did you remember the day after tomorrow will be exactly four years to the day from his admission to your care?'

'Excellent. Excellent. I can see the headlines. So, keep the lid on this, lassie, just you, me and MacEwan, agreed? Nobody else must get in on this, OK? Especially not McIver! For God's sake keep that twat out of it. Got to manage the media for best effect, right? Name of the game, right? Are we agreed, Amelia? Stay on duty 24/7 and don't let anyone else near him. Claim a minor infection, I'll mail you a 'script for the antibiotics, keep the system happy, OK? And whatever you do, don't let the Marsdene woman know or she'll try to steal my thunder.'

'But Mr Fletcher, the standing instructions say Mrs Marsdene must be notified at once. Perhaps I should . . .'

'NO! No, please, Amelia, please. Just two days. No one must know. The Marsdene woman is very unusual, as you may have noticed. So, no, no, please be very careful not to let her in on this, OK? I want to be the one to tell her when I get back. I need to manage her. There's a great opportunity here to do more of this hibernation treatment, tap her for the money, OK? It'll be terrific for both of us, Amelia, you'll see, OK? We'll make a great team again, eh? Just like the old days.'

'Oh, yes, yes. I understand Mr Fletcher. No visitors, strictly for medical reasons. I understand. Is there anything else?'

'Amelia my darling girl, do stop calling me "Mr Fletcher"; it makes me feel like you're talking to my father. It's Ken when we're alone or on the phone, OK? And how's the fancy flat of yours doing? Perhaps I should pay you a visit, carry on from where we were so rudely interrupted by the prat, Barclay Dunlop. Well, I managed to sink him, through the old boy network. Do you know he's still working in Fort William? Bloody Fort William! The medical arsehole of the UK! Serves him bloody right, too! Look, I'll leave it with you, Amelia, my team is ready to re-start here, must go, OK!'

'Yes, Mr . . ., eh, Ken, of course; our secret, as you wish.'

Amelia spoke to the ether; Ken Fletcher was already gone, back to the operating table.

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Perhaps it was the excitement of this news, perhaps it was written in the stars. Two hours later the child suffered a massive seizure and, after a further, dramatic intervention by Fletcher, they lost her.

'Sorry guys, we can't win them all. Ah, Sergio old boy, will you do the needful with the family, please? There's a good chap. After all it was you who recruited them, talked them into it. Right?'

This was Fletcher's fourth 'medical miracle' failure in a row. He had heard the whispers. Avoiding eye contact he scurried out, showered, changed and headed for home, leaving his associates to complete the first draft of the write-up. He would edit it carefully tomorrow, when he was fresh, alert, he promised himself. First, he needed to relax, reward himself for the supreme effort and the unfair disappointment it had brought. He should never have allowed Sergio to talk him into it. It was the Mexican's fault; the child should have been left to die in peace.

You Only Live Once

Back in his ocean-view apartment, Ken Fletcher stepped out of his 'King's clothes', reverting to the introvert he had always successfully hidden inside his public façade of charm and bluster. Living alone after his failed marriage, all Ken had left to fill his life was his work, his habits and his addictions. He always took failure badly. His brilliance of the old days in Glasgow was dulling, becoming tarnished but he had kept polishing the orb, just in case.

Now, as he did increasingly when faced with any failure or success, large or small, Ken Fletcher sought comfort and reward in a line of coke.

As the powder hit the sweet spot, the dull throbbing at the base of his cortex receded. He fished in the bedside drawer behind his underclothes, found the bottle and popped a 'bluey', slurping it down with a crystal glass of 17-year-old Glengoyne single malt, his all-time favourite. This whisky was crafted less than two miles from Killearn, on the outskirts of Glasgow, where he had built his dream home.

Fletcher was buzzing. Talking aloud to encourage or scold himself as he had always done when securely alone, his words began to come in his original Glasgow patios:

"Oh Kenny, Kenny, son, why, oh, why did ye promise to do the saintly Amelia again, she of the huge breasts and heavy thighs? OK. OK, Ah suppose she'll be all right for a dark Thursday January night in Glasgow but only if there's nothing better on offer. I bet that Linda's a goer, eh? Ah but tonight, Kenny ma old son, tonight ye'll have someone small, slim and energetic. Get yourself a deep massage to start, take it slow and easy. So, the big decision is upon us! Thai or Filipino? Eh? Yes, definitely Thai if the young Bernardo's available. Yes Kenny, that's what ye need son, good firm hands to get the wee man up and make him stiff and willing. Yes, Kenny boy, Thai it shall be!"

Ken Fletcher pressed the speed-dial button on his mobile phone, made his request, authorised the payment to his account and refilled the crystal glass, this time to the brim. As he waited for Bernardo to arrive, his mind raced on and his words streamed at high speed, as if running along the edge of a precipice fully in his mother tongue:

"So, Kenny, yer miracle man MacEwan came through for ye, at last. Yes surree-Bob! This'll show thum Mack the Knife's still King of the Cut. Good nickname, eh Kenny? Mack the Knife. Aye and here in LA being Scottish is a plus, no a minus like back there, among McIver and his pals with their fancy accents. Ower here in the Land of the Free, this is

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whur ye shoudah been a' along, Kenny Fletcher. Yes, "my dear boy", just time for another line, Aaaah, that's it! Yeh-Essss! Aaah, lovely, lovely dubbley. 'N huv yerself another wee 'bluey', eh, Kenny? Mustn't disappoint the boay. That's it Kenny, eh? Get the wee man rock hard, just like'n the old days. Ye only live once, eh? Aye, so be good tae yerself, Kenny, why don't ye!"

At sixty-nine, Ken Fletcher should have retired years earlier but, like many surgeons, he could not relinquish the thrill of playing God. In compliance with his often-repeated mantra, he had lived his whole life on the edge, day by day, every day.

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After an extended pleasure excursion with the amenable fourteen-year-old Bernardo, Ken had used the British Airways Platinum Card provided by Health Thru Research to get a priority passenger seat on the next flight. Sobered up, freshly showered and back to his elegant self in a \$5,000-dollar cashmere suit, he sauntered into the first-class section of the recently introduced Airbus A380 for his flight to London, sipping a flute of Buck's Fizz, his fourth since checking in at the Executive Desk in the VIP lounge.

Throughout his life, Fletcher had concealed a deep-seated fear of flying. His LA analyst had told him this anxiety was irrational, quoting statistics which proved air travel was safer than any other form, including walking busy streets of downtown LA or London, emphasising to Ken his jitters were due to "*loss of personal control in a potentially hazardous situation*". This useless but expensive advice had only made Ken more fearful, not less, causing him to abandon the prescribed deep-breathing exercises and Neuro-Linguistic Programming mantras in favour of his former tactic of disguising his anxiety with bravado and several large brandies.

At Heathrow, by arrangement, Fletcher would be collected by the usual HTR chauffeur, the tall, thin man with the occasionally frightening eyes. To avoid the extra trauma of a short-haul flight to Glasgow, Ken would travel in the privacy of the anonymous limo-van's window-less, sound-proofed and air-conditioned rear section. This was a simple, almost spartan box but he would have excellent mobile Wi-Fi, the choice of a hammock or a luxury reclining chair, a small fridge with snacks and non-alcoholic drinks and a porta-potty.

After a light meal, Fletcher discretely self-medicated, taking two small but powerful sleeping pills and settled to endure the remaining nine hours of his long-haul flight.

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Ken Fletcher, born dirt poor in Barmulloch, one of Glasgow's most deprived housing schemes and now spinning the treadmill of celebrity in the top echelon of the USA's medical fraternity, would not awaken from his slumbers. Three hours from Heathrow, he suffered a massive cerebral haemorrhage. His death was not detected until the breakfast service commenced an hour later.

Immediately on landing, Fletcher's body and luggage were quarantined while the authorities began to pick over the entrails of the great man's life and death. As a priority and part of the normal routine for in-flight deaths, his baggage was searched by the Heathrow authorities - even dead people had been known to be carrying and many drug mules as well as their clients travelled in first class.

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At the Hibernation Treatment Suite, Amelia Curtis kept her side of the bargain and waited for Ken to arrive. As ordered by her superior, she had declared a 'scalp infection' to the medical records system, used Ken's emailed prescription to requisition the unneeded, unused antibiotic. She had also banned everyone from the room, effectively placing her patient and herself in quarantine.

On her own initiative she had used a pair of dark, medical safety spectacles to shield his eyes from the all-seeing CCTV lens monitoring his face, claiming in her report the infection had spread to the eyelids, causing inflammation. Ken would make things right with the records system when he arrived, she was sure.

As the clock ticked forward she paced herself, taking only mini-naps in the relief bedroom, then showering, running on the spot and stretching before returning to duty.

She drank enormous amounts of strong black coffee.

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In the Heathrow Airport executive parking area, Tom Farquarson-Wright waited a decent time after the landing had shown up on the Arrivals website and then telephoned an old mucker from his days as a Royal Marine, now Deputy Head of Security at Heathrow. Sandy Whyte provided details of Fletcher's demise and details of the cocaine and high-strength sleeping tablets found concealed in his hand-luggage.

Tom telephoned Maisie in Glasgow, brought her up to date then drove the limo-van to its secure lock-up before driving his dark blue Audi TT back to his Cotswold home and his normal life as the owner of a successful stud farm. Without Fletcher's expertise, Maisie began hatching several alternative back-up plans.

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First, however, there were serious matters to be settled, to prevent the patient in the HTS becoming a media sensation, thus generating the risk of undesirable attention which might lead to Mrs Marsdene, HTR and possibly eventually to Maisie Kaywood and her XCD Team.

Recruitment

Amelia, fully gowned as usual, was standing at Peter's bedside in the Hibernation Room, looking down at him from behind her mask. Behind his dark spectacles his eyes were open and he seemed more relaxed, no longer fearful. From watching the CCTV monitor earlier, she knew her patient had been flexing his muscles and moving his limbs, in a controlled way. On her own volition, Amelia had taken a big decision and loosened the Velcro straps slightly.

Importantly, thrillingly, her hibernation patient had managed a wry smile.

As she performed his personal care routines, leaning close to him, hoping the microphone would not catch what she was saying, she had been whispering, telling him snippets about his treatment. She was being cautious, careful not to say anything which would alarm him and never straying over the Nurse/Doctor demarcation line. So far, Peter had not tried to reply, which was common. After such a long period of disuse, anything he said would probably only be a croak, until his tongue and face muscles regained strength and flexibility and the dormant muscles which controlled his larynx became accustomed to responding to messages from his brain.

The monitoring sensors showed his brain activity was almost back to normal. In Amelia's view, her patient's prognosis was good - Ken Fletcher would be ecstatic.

The only cloud on her horizon was the worry for her future. Assuming Peter became fully well again and left the HTS, she might lose the flat, car and her many perks unless Ken could come up with a new, similar hibernation patient for her. Alternatively, he might take his success state-side and she might be required travel to join him in Los Angeles. Against the rules, she had smuggled her mobile phone into the Hibernation Room checking every few minutes for messages, hoping to learn of his imminent arrival.

The hours stretched out slowly and still Fletcher did not arrive or telephone. Amelia was isolated. By breaking protocol, by telling lies to the medical records system, she was out on a limb, becoming increasingly worried.

Unknown to Amelia, Maisie Kaywood, dressed as Mrs. Marsdene, had arrived at the Hibernation Treatment Suite, carrying a large travel bag containing a change of clothes. Eight hours earlier, Maisie Kaywood's call from Tom Farquarson-Wright at

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Heathrow had set her scheming. Without Fletcher, she had to look to a different solution and now her chess pieces were in place, it was time to play her opening move.

In the Hibernation Room, the intercom buzzed.

'Charge Nurse Curtis, please come to the Nurses' Station as soon as convenient. Mrs. Marsdene *must* to speak to you. It's urgent, Amelia.'

'Yes, thanks Linda, I'll be right out.'

In the airlock ante-room, Amelia changed out of her disposable gown, hood and booties before exiting to the Nurses' Station.

'She's in there, in the Viewing Room,' whispered Linda. 'But don't worry, the viewing window is still switched off, as per your instructions. Watch out, she's grumpy! What have you done?'

'Has Ken Fletcher called in yet?'

'Oh, is he coming? It's in the diary for, eh, let me see . . .'

'No, forget it Linda. I'll see what she wants.'

Amelia Curtis took a deep breath, opened the Viewing Room door and slipped inside, unprepared for the surprise which awaited her. 'Mrs Marsdene. Ah, sorry, oh, oh.' The woman she saw was not Mrs. Marsdene. Maisie had changed from her earlier guise of Marsdene to another much more familiar figure. 'Oh, you're Joanna, Joanna Ingles, from the Tuesday Spinning Class at the gym! Aren't you? What are you doing here?'

'Well Amelia, I'm sorry to have to spring this on you but here, take the weight off your feet girl, you must be exhausted. What is it now, fifty-four hours straight, without a break? What dedication. How is our patient?'

'I'm sorry, I cannot possibly reveal details of any patient to just anyone. You must be authorised by Mr Fletcher.'

'Commendable, Amelia, very commendable. Would you look at my iPad, please? Please watch this video clip. Do you recognise this person?'

'Yes, it's Mrs Marsdene.'

'Is *she* authorised?'

'Yes, but at the moment. . . *Oh my God! This is you! You're Mrs Marsdene!*

'Amelia, please accept my apologies in advance.'

'*What? My God! My God! Mrs Marsdene, I mean, Joanna, what's going on?*

'Yes. Sorry about the subterfuge. *Very necessary*, as I will explain. Now, I have more shocking news for you. Bad news. Ken Fletcher is dead. He died in-flight.'

'Oh, God! Not Ken, no, not Ken, surely. Are you *sure* it was Ken? No, no. Perhaps there's been a mix-up.'

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'I'm sorry, Amelia, Ken Fletcher is dead. We're going to have to get by without him.'

'What was it? How did he die? He was as fit as a fiddle, jogging and working out at the gym every day, he said, and still playing squash. Are you *sure* he's dead?'

'Yes, quite certain. Their first take on it at Heathrow is he suffered a massive stroke. Ironic, or what?'

'Oh, God! Poor Ken. But what will we do about Peter? I can't do it alone. I'm only his nurse, not his Doctor. Ken kept a lot to himself, you know.'

'Well, Amelia. Over these last four years, I've come to know you pretty well. Indeed, it may surprise you to know I could tell you to the penny how much you have in your three bank accounts and what your credit card spending is every month.'

'What? You've been spying on me? How dare you! Who the hell are you, Mrs Marsdene? I could report you to the . . .'

'Amelia, *please*. Stop your nonsense. Look, I have a proposition for you. As Ken Fletcher said, many times, you, Amelia Curtis are a very special person. Everyone agrees. And the man in there, the one you've brought back to me through your exemplary care, is also very special. I want you to trust me as I am about to trust you.'

'Look, Mrs Marsdene or Joanna, or whoever you are, I need to get back to my patient, right now.'

'No, you don't. Linda Archibald out there is well able to do what is required for him. As you well know, our patient is in excellent shape. I've been monitoring his data live over the past hour, sent straight to my iPad. Despite his 'infection', he has no fever. In fact, to the contrary, his every vital indicator is improving rapidly. Look . . .'

'What? How can you . . . Hey, are you linked to our system? Have you hacked into our computers? This is illegal. I must tell . . .'

'Amelia, calm down. I assure you I have not 'hacked' your system. My people linked me in before you even arrived here at the HTS. They built this suite, wired it, everything.'

'So, it's true? You're with the Government, Black Ops and all that stuff? Just like Peakie said.'

'Peakie?'

'Peakie the Porter. He saw the helicopter landing. It was unmarked he said, so it must have been Black Ops. Peakie knows everything there is to know about planes and helicopters. He travels all over the globe collecting plane registrations, you know, like trainspotting but with aircraft.'

'Right. Now I'm with you. Yes, I know about those rumours. OK, back to business, Amelia. Are we agreed, our first priority must be our patient?'

'OK. Yes, yes. Of course. Although I want to know what all this is about, before I get sucked into any more lies, any more deceptions. I want the truth, or I'll go

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downstairs and tell Mr McIver everything, confess what I've done and take my chances.'

'Well, Hector McIver will not be able to help you much as he is taking early retirement, escaping to his holiday cottage on Speyside, hoping to catch the spring salmon unawares as they run his beat, he tells me. Did you know Hector is ex-military? Although he can be a bit stuffy, old school, he's a very nice amenable man, when properly incentivised.'

'McIver's retiring? Just out of the blue?'

'Yes, it was a shock for Hector too but necessary to clear the decks for the new man.'

'What new man?'

'Well Amelia, now we come to the nub of the matter. First, may I ask; are you entirely happy with your life and work here. Your living allowances, the flat, the car, your package in general?'

'Ye-es. But what has my reward package to do with it?'

'I just thought you might want to take this chance to re-negotiate, since I'm the person funding your extras and it must be clear to you now I want you to stay, to bring our patient completely back to me. Do you follow?'

'So, you've paid for everything? I thought it was the government, because he's military, someone special, maybe a spy or something. What happens afterwards? Assuming Peter makes a full recovery?'

'We can discuss that later but first, let me answer your earlier question. The bumptious and brilliant Fletcher is no more. Hector McIver has driven off into the golden sunset of early retirement on an enhanced package. Big question, Amelia, if you could choose, who would you nominate to head up this Hibernation Treatment Suite?'

'Me? No, no, I'm a nurse, not a medic. Anyway, the best man would never come, not if I'm here.'

'Ah, you speak of my relative, one of my favourite nephews?'

'Who is that?'

'Barclay Thomson Dunlop, he who is blessed with three surnames!'

'Eh? Barclay's your nephew?'

'Well, do you think he's up to the job? Will he do?'

'Yes, but he won't want me here. If you know everything about me, you must know about us - do you?'

'Yes. I've talked it over with him. Like you, Barclay wants to bury the old bones of what happened a long time ago and make a fresh start, provided you will too. What do you say?'

'Barclay actually said that? Did he?'

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'Yes. Oh, and just to even the playing field, if you can keep a secret between us girls, that trainee nurse, the one who posted the video, well Barclay was giving her quite a bit of extra-curricular coaching, if you follow. Sadly, the young lady involved miscalculated. She thought with you out of the way, well, I'm sure you get the picture. Anyway, back to the here and now, Amelia. Let me see, yes . . . I have it as two-thirty-three. Barclay should get here about nine this evening for a review. It'll be just the three of us. His team at Fort William will carry on as before and he'll split his time between both units until we can find a replacement for Fort William. OK? We'll set up a video-conferencing link for him, help him to smooth the transition. The powers that be have agreed Barclay will be based here, in charge, replacing McIver.'

'You seem to have everything worked out. How did you get everyone to agree to this? Normally it would take months to replace a departmental head, especially such and for such a prestigious post.'

'My little secret. Oh, another thing Amelia, I've been viewing and storing all Ken Fletcher's personal research write-ups which he stored on his fancy all singing and dancing laptop, the one I gave him as his going away present when he went to LA. Conveniently and without his knowledge, it was configured to back-up everything to a cloud server to which I have access. This means we have his notes and details of the all medications, dosages, everything. Over the years I've shared these files with Barclay, getting my second opinion, if you like. Barclay also has all your reports to the monthly review panel too, which means he's fully clued up on what Ken Fletcher and your team have done. OK?'

'Who exactly are you, Mrs Marsdene or whatever you call yourself, and who is Peter MacEwan?'

'Before I tell you that, if you want out, this is your last chance. Walk away now and your package will continue for a year from today. Call it a run-off period on your present rolling contract, allowing you to re-orientate, to give you time find a suitable position, accommodation and so forth. However, this exit option is available to you only if you agree to sign an affidavit affirming you will say nothing of our conversation today, not to anyone, not even your Mum. If you ever talk of this conversation or the work you have done here, there will be consequences.'

'What? Are you threatening me, Mrs Marsdene? Just remember what you said, if you get rid of me, Peter will be the loser. Correct?'

'Amelia, please understand, I am not trying to put you off. Can't you see, I'm very keen you join my group. This is not just about your current patient, it's about your future, working for me, with Barclay. It's not just Barclay who works with me. There are other medics involved, some who will soon to be working over here in the new hospital. However, please listen very carefully. What I do, what my team does, is a serious business, a very serious business. As I said earlier, I am *not* HM Government,

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although I used to be. I'm freelance now. From time to time, my team and I bend and just as HMG does, I break or bend the Law. In your role however, I doubt such dramatic activities will be required. The sort of thing which you will be involved in will be similar to your past four years, but without the same level of mystery, since you would be fully briefed.'

'So, you're are Black Ops then?'

'Amelia, forget Black Ops, right? If you say "no" to my proposal, Barclay and I will have a discussion with Linda out there, to see if she is interested. However, my proposal to Linda would be made on a completely different basis and certainly not involve the full disclosure I propose for you, despite the difficulties which might arise in persuading her to cooperate.'

'Oh, but Linda is planning to . . .'

'Amelia, please just listen and don't keep interrupting. It annoys me. *Please!* Now, *if*, on the other hand, you say *yes*, *if* you join my team, I promise you will be well looked after. You can see what I've done for our patient, investing in him against the odds. At this stage, while you are still in the dark, trying to decide, I offer my personal guarantee. Anything I involve you in will be for the very best of reasons. You will have to trust me on this. Do you?'

'Yes, I think I do. I don't know why, but you strike me as honest, sincere, if a bit scary. Did you really build this HTS for Peter? Is he someone special to you?'

'Good. We'll come to our patient later. Now, Amelia, everyone who works for me does so whole-heartedly, but always on my terms. It will involve complete trust and obedience. What you learn must never be shared outside our group or even within it, unless I have authorised it in advance. *I call all the shots.* Keep this idea uppermost in your mind. I do *not* run a democracy or an old boys' club where people can earn favours. Call it working in compartments. You will be in in your own 'box', a concept which I assure you works and is entirely necessary. If you are careless and expose us, the consequences will be serious, possibly fatal for you and maybe for others. Secrecy is crucial, always, in everything we do. No revelations to the media, to anyone, always working under the radar. Do you understand?'

'Yes, yes. I get it. But well, I must ask, did you, eh, "eliminate", Ken Fletcher?'

'No, I did not. Let's just say the man's death was fortuitous. He was becoming a menace, a liability. Although Ken Fletcher was brilliant at one time, he was always weak, very weak. Not at all like you, Amelia. I repeat, the work we do it vital, intended to benefit the good and to thwart and punish the bad. Are you in. Amelia? Last chance?'

'Is Barclay 'in', a part of what you do?'

'Yes, he has been 'in' for some years. Barclay suggested I should try to recruit you. In fact, he has put up your name several times over the years, even before we needed you for our patient in there. So, Amelia Curtis, are you in?'

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'Yes, Mrs Marsdene, if Barclay's 'in' then I'm in. Definitely.'

'Welcome aboard! Now, first off, my name is neither Marsdene nor Ingles. I am Maisie Kaywood. Ms Maisie Kaywood. Born and bred in Glasgow, like you. You're from Mossspark, right? I'm from Shawlands. Shall we shake hands on our future as "collaborators", as I call my team members?'

'My God, your voice has changed again. Are you really Maisie Kaywood? Are you really from Shawlands? You sound very posh now. You sounded South African when you were Mrs Marsdene. I really believed you were. At the gym, as Joanna, you sounded as if you were from Edinburgh or maybe Fife, East Coast somewhere.'

'Good. Now Amelia Curtis from Mossspark, let me explain about our patient. I'll give you only the short version as I expect you might want to scoot over to your flat and freshen up before our confab with Barclay? You've had a hard few days.'

'Eh, yes. I'll need to check on 'our patient' first but, yes. Good idea.'

'Right here goes, synoptic only, listen up hard, as our American cousins say. . .

- Our patient is David Abernethy. He is ex-SAS and many other things. He has several specialities, all lethal.

- His codename is "Ferret" but he's often called "Biscuit".

- You already know from his body, from his past injuries, how tough he is. Over many years he has proved almost indestructible.

- In his normal life, he works as a gamekeeper/ghillie.

- He is married to Fida and they have three children, all boys, all born downstream of Fida's recruitment to my team. From this, you will gather children are welcomed as part of our family, in or out of marriage, your choice and your *personal* responsibility.

- Apart from the justice side of things, the money we garner and recycle comes mainly from people who deserve to lose it, have it confiscated, if you like.

- Quite often, these bad people die. Mostly they disappear, usually only after they have been punished appropriately for their crimes. Sometimes they "seem" to continue living while we use their reputation and monies to best effect.

- I do not believe in trusting to Hell or Purgatory, as my mother did in the past. You may be required to participate in such punishments but only *in extremis*. This side of our work will normally be done by me or my front-line collaborators.

- As and when you need to know, I will explain in fuller detail on how we operate, when you have earned the right, earned your spurs, shall we say.

- We have a high success rate but do lose some people and occasionally suffer collateral damage, as with David Abernethy.

- As required, you may meet other members of the team but seldom the front-line people. Yours will normally be a benign role, providing nursing support to heal damaged bodies.

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- You are now part of Barclay's sub-group, his "Medical Recovery Team" or MRT as we shorthand it. The injuries will vary, not just brain trauma. You will be given additional training.

- This means you and Barclay will be in the same operational box but, I must be up-front about this, sometimes you may be required to serve independently and keep such other work secret from him. This service may involve travel, sometimes to nasty places. If so, I promise you will always be fully supported, fully protected.

- Personally, I find the constant danger keeps us sharp. I think you might come to enjoy it, as I do.'

Maisie stood up.

'So as not to shock Linda, I'll change back to Mrs Marsdene. Well, Amelia, enough information for now? Right?'

'Right!'

'Now first check on Biscuit, please.'

'Yes.'

'When you use his real name and his nickname, he'll know he can trust you. Whisper to him. Tell him Maisie is here as Mrs Marsdene and all is well with Fida and the boys. Tell him we'll have him home soon. Don't mention his four-year hibernation outage, not yet.'

'Oh?'

'Remember Amelia, to Biscuit this must seem just like the morning after.'