

A is for Artemis

One day in May

The athletic, dark-haired man exited Prestwick International Airport with a scrap of paper clutched in his hand. At thirty-two, his supplementary career as a professional footballer was nearing its end due to recurring knee problems.

In May, midweek flights being cheaper, were always busier. The holidaymakers of early summer swirled around him.

As per his instructions from his aunt, he joined the taxi queue, his kit bag hefted easily on his shoulder. When he reached the front of the queue, an attractive older woman got out of her cab and opened the boot for his bag.

Rita eyed him 'surreptitiously', currently one of her favourite words. As almost always happened with interesting fares, she began to spin a story in her head.

Mmm, not bad at all. But he's worried about something. What's his secret? Running away from something or someone? Or heading to meet a new lady, from an online dating App?

As she considered the address on the slip of paper, Dr Marco Bolinchetti read her badge, "Rita Minto". He appraised her smile professionally: he had treated many attractive women like her and saw at once she had benefitted from expensive cosmetic dentistry. She was almost as tall as him and in excellent trim, sculpted into a dark-blue tee-shirt which neatly overlapped her white three-quarter-length trousers. Her shining golden hair (enhanced) was short, her skin tanned and her make-up precise.

There was a swagger about her which reminded him of his ex-girlfriend Giovanna, now married to his ex-best friend Philippe. After the split, Philippe had made it big, moving to play for PSG, taking Giovanna to Paris where they had married, produced twin daughters, becoming a perfect media couple, often by-lined as "The PSG Beckhams".

Marco Bolinchetti had never been good at holding onto girlfriends, perhaps due to his dreamy, self-absorbed nature and lack of willingness to commit. In any case there was always a ready supply of girls available and, since he had been snipped voluntarily, he could enjoy them, without being snared. Since Giovanna, he had learned mature, experienced women were best, especially those playing away from home and looking for romance without ties. The seemingly unlikely possibility beckoned.

She eased the boot lid down and pressed firmly until it clicked, smiled at him and felt the tug as he smiled back, his eyes lighting up momentarily while holding her gaze, making her pulse rate soar.

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Oh, yes, he likes what he sees. Thank you, kind sir!

Holding the door until he was settled and buckled, she closed it gently, then firmly pressed it until it clicked. She hated people who slammed doors shut. 'Uncouth', her mother would have said, another word listed among Rita's current favourites.

Is he running away from some tragedy? Or towards sadness of some kind? Is he strong or weak? Is he selfish, despite his kind eyes?

Settling in the driver's seat, Rita's mind was already framing another story, written using her tried and tested formula, a weave of dark intrigue, improbable relationships, with quirky, bittersweet, poignant and memorable endings, her trademark.

Glancing at him in the rear view and dashtop mirrors, Rita liked his shy smile. Appreciating his eyes on her, she sat more upright, subconsciously pulling in her already flat tummy while flashing him her £3,500 smile. The recent upgrade to her already near perfect teeth was a self-indulgent luxury paid for by stories published in *The Peoples Friend* and similar publications keen on her pacy and devious narratives, penned in an easily readable style. By trial and error, she had learned to keep dialect to a necessary minimum while striving always for perfection in grammar and punctuation as publishers no longer had the resources to expend correcting such imperfections.

"Right sunshine, this postcode o' yours is Paisley. Gleniffer Grange, eh? This could cost ye a pretty penny. Should ye not get the bus or a train?"

Unlike her carefully crafted writing, her lazy workaday drawl was a fusion of her original Glasgow dialect forged in Drumchapel, augmented with East Ayrshire idioms. These new words and mannerisms had been imbued and embedded over decades of married life in Darvel, her 'escape to the country' as she often told her curious passengers, or even uncurious ones. Like all taxi drivers, Rita Minto had her own ready-made chat routines, adapted to suit her fares.

The man leaned forward. She could taste his strong, spicy aftershave.

Don't tell me he's gay, is he?

She checked his eyes in the mirror and was reassured.

No, not gay, just fragrant. Quite nice, really.

Since it was a while since Marco had used his spoken English, he talked slowly, carefully, to be sure he was understood. Before her death to cancer, his mother Anna-Maria Macdonald had taught English and German at Turin University. Under her intense tuition, Marco's English was fluent and near to perfect, just rusty from underuse.

"How much will it cost, please?"

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"Right, son, let me check on *Google*. Mmm. Bridge o' Weir. Right, brace yersel. Noo, if it's tae be cash, I'll do ye for fifty-five quid including yer tip. Or, if it suits ye better, I'll run the meter and you can settle me wi a credit card."

Despite her rapid delivery and odd accent, Marco understood Rita perfectly. His maternal grandmother was from Glasgow.

"It seems rather high. May I hope for a cash discount? I don't use credit cards."

Recognising the young man was speaking 'posh' English, Rita adjusted her local patois, improved her lazy grammar and tried to match his careful diction. This was a morphing technique she had learned to adopt when speaking to her eldest daughter, Mari Minto, a driven career woman who had defied her Ayrshire roots by rising through the ranks of Police Scotland to Chief Superintendent level, the grade just below Assistant Chief Constable, a remarkable achievement for a thirty-two-year-old.

"Hey, son, dinnae try negotiating with me, OK? I'm no' a charity, ken. Flash the cash or get a bus."

"Okay, I accept. My aunt says she will pay the fare when we arrive. Perhaps you have heard of her? Maria Bolinchetti? Many years ago she was a world-famous opera singer. She lives in a *grande edifice, molto grande*. It is called *Bellavista*, which means 'beautiful outlook or panorama'.

Rita considered herself to be a good judge of character and this polite young man passed the test. He would make a good match for Mari she thought, running the frequent worry in her head, a worry which had once spilled over into words:

"Our Mari, you are in real danger of missing the marriage bus. If you don't watch the clock, you'll end up as a crotchety old maid. Is that what you really want?"

This was a thought she dare not repeat to her snappy daughter for fear of causing another snarling argument followed by a few months of silence.

"Okaydokalay son, yer on. Fifty-five it is, cash in hand, so don't say I didnae warn ye, eh?"

Rita Minto fastened her seatbelt, checked her passenger was still buckled in, checked her mirrors all around, eased the stick into first and drew out slowly and cautiously into the passing traffic. Then, as she always did at the start of every hire, she whooped:

"Hi-Ho, Silver. Away!"

Clear of the parking areas, the taxi raced out from the airport, heading towards Glasgow on the M77. Rita drove confidently as she had been trained to do as an ambulance driver before the heart-breaking accident which had led to her retirement on grounds of PTSD.

"So, sunshine, where ur ye frae?"

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"Rivoli, near Turin."

"Aye, so, ur ye a Juve supporter?"

"No, they're rubbish. My team is Toro, you call it Torino, the best team in Italy. Denis Law played for us, back in the sixties."

"Aye, right, if you say so. Have you heard o' Kilmarnock? My youngest, Alfie, plays fur their youth team. Goalie, he is. Whit position dae ye play yersel?"

"Attacking wing-back. But I am out of *la squadra* at present, waiting for another knee operation."

He did not say he was also a qualified dentist, juggling his football while working part-time in his small practice while also caring for his father who had dementia, currently in a respite care home to allow this short trip to visit his aunt.

"Ur ye any good?"

"Aye, Ah'm no' too bad."

"Hey, you speak Scottish!"

"Aye, ma Granny, Nonna Isabella wiz frae Govan, near Ibrox even though she was a Celtic supporter."

"What's yer name son?"

"Marco Bolinchetti."

"So, yurra wing-back. Right or left?"

"Both. I'm two-footed. Right and left-handed too."

"Hey, so is ma youngest lassie, Susanna, Susie. She plays centre back for Killie Ladies which is wan o' the oldest ladies' amateur teams in Scotland, maybe the World. Ah used tae play right back fur them back in the day and Ah'm still playin' five-a-sides twice a week wi ma man and his pals. Helps keeps the weight aff, eh?"

The one-sided conversation continued until they arrived in Bridge of Weir by which time Marco knew everything about the garrulous Rita Minto's life and family:

Her husband Billy was a police sergeant in Traffic; her older daughter Mari (Marissa) a Chief Superintendent in Glasgow, chasing drugs gangs; Susie (Susanna), twenty-seven, was a veterinary nurse who lived in Prestwick with her husband Kenny Dawson, a computer guru, specialising in IT and Comms while studying for an Open University degree in computer science. Kenny was hoping to become a "digital cop" if Police Scotland would have him. Rita's other child, her

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"baby" Freddo (Alfredo, named after Alfredo di Stefano), now eighteen, was at college, studying sports science.

As the taxi entered the tree-lined avenue called Glennifer Grange, the Sicilian assassin watched and waited, readying herself to act but only when the moment was exactly right.

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The Grazioni of Ercolano

The Grazioni family were originally Sicilian, from the small town of Mascalucia, near Mount Etna, part of the original Mafia, a clan which had already expanded their influence to mainland Italy, encroaching on Camorra territory.

While still a 'soldier', Franco (Francesco) Grazioni had earned respect for his intelligence, loyalty and ruthlessness. As a result, the young man had been 'sponsored' by his Uncle Lorenzo Vitelli to 'go North' and re-establish the Vitelli family olive oil business near Naples where the Vitelli and Bolinchetti clans owned land on the outskirts of a village called Ercolano. This land, with its large, rambling and ill-managed olive grove was a cover for a Mafia business which had traded in alcohol and drugs since the 1920s while also running brothels in Naples near the docks, a combined trade known as 'the olive oil business'.

In Ercolano, Franco Grazioni was the replacement for Andrea Bolinchetti who had met with a tragic death when he and his entire family died in a mysterious explosion which had caused the home to burn fiercely to a fine ash, another episode in the Mafia-Camorra power struggle for control of the highly lucrative 'olive oil business' in the greater Naples and Rome metropolis.

After the death of Andrea, the local remnant of the Ercolano Bolinchetti had fled Naples to join their namesakes in the North of Italy. This offshoot Bolinchetti clan had moved to Milan and Turin the squalor of the South long before Franco Grazioni had been sent from Sicily to take over the olive oil business.

In the North, in the more sophisticated cities of Milan and Turin, the dominant members of the Bolinchetti clan had diversified, setting themselves up as lawyers, merchant bankers and investment houses, funnelling the Mafia profits of their cousins in the South into safe and legitimate investments. By tradition and ancient writ, their claim on these Ercolano lands remained strong, which meant they were also participants, sharing the fortunes which the Grazioni 'olive oil business' continued to generate.

With each new generation, these northern Bolinchetti evolved to become educated professionals. Among themselves, they despised their heritage links to the Vitelli/Grazioni family, considering their southern cousins to be uncouth, uneducated, seedy and dangerous; most decidedly beneath their dignity.

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In response, their Southern cousins set up their own network to launder their illegal earnings, often diluting the amounts which they were due to remit each month to their Bolinchetti cousins in the North.

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Within ten years of arriving in Ercolano, Franco Grazioni had established his dominance and had negotiated a marriage to Nadine the eldest daughter of Aldo Perazio, the head of the local Camorra clan. Unfortunately for Aldo, he had been unable to produce any male heirs, only daughters. In due course, Franco and Nadine produced a son, named Aldo Perazio Grazioni who in turn produced an heir called Sergio Grazioni.

Under Sergio, the Grazioni family of Ercolano would in time evolve and expand, learning lessons from their American cousins by using profits from their olive oil business to morph their Rome and Naples operations into quasi-legitimate enterprises. However, when Sergio was being trained to inherit from Aldo, he realised the Grazioni of Ercolano needed help to regain traction to wash their money into the mysterious world of international banking and investing.

To achieve this goal, Sergio realised they needed a 'clean hands' presence in Milan, the financial capital of Italy. For the sake of business, old family squabbles and rivalries had to be forgotten.

In pursuit of his as yet unspoken dream of establishing a global presence, Sergio made an extra effort to re-establish and 'smooth' relations with the Bolinchetti clan, preferring to deal with 'family' rather than strangers.

As opportunities arose, using their Bolinchetti cousins, working carefully and patiently they spread their tentacles to other major cities in Europe by sending out suitable 'apostles' as and when they became available. Avoiding the well-established competition of other Mafia and Camorra clans in London and Birmingham, the Grazioni of Ercolano chose coastal cities such as Southampton, Bristol and Liverpool (with a linked operation in nearby Manchester).

In the late 1930s, this expansion process would lead them to Greenock, a dockland area with strong links to Paisley, Glasgow and beyond to Motherwell and the other working-class towns at the heartland of Scotland's industrial and shipping wealth, a large and sprawling metropolitan area which reminded them of Naples with its poor housing and squalor.

Although from the outset they had made plans to expand to Edinburgh with its older wealth and its financial, legal and political influence, they had not yet found the right 'apostle' to make such a venture likely to succeed.

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However, the Grazioni of Ercolano were patient, believing in time such a man would be found, someone they could trust.

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Heritage

Although Angie Simpson (nee Vitelli) was Greenock born and bred, her father's roots were in Ercolano, a suburb of Naples, on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. This was a heritage which would shape her life but in her early years, Ercolano and Italy were a far off mystical and romantic land of grapes and olives. Her connection to the Grazioni family would remain hidden from her by her father until it was her time to become part of it in the same way he had been sponsored by his great-uncle, Aldo Grazioni.

Before Greenock, the younger Tommy (Tomaso) Vitelli had worked in his father Vincenzo's café/bar in Ercolano. In 1949, aged twenty-one, it was Tomaso's time to accept his place in 'the family' which at that time was headed by Aldo Grazioni, Vincenzo's uncle.

At Vincenzo's request, Zio Aldo paid for Tomaso to study and improve himself. For this he was sent to Bologna to learn 'proper Italian' and 'good English' where, posing as a budding overseas agent, he was easily hidden in a small city packed with students, anonymous and safe from prying local eyes and ears.

Then aged sixteen, Sergio was just starting out on his own journey, hoping he was good enough to become the future Godfather of the Grazioni of Ercolano. The teenager was secretly pleased that Vincenzo was being 'sent overseas', as he was more than a little in awe of his much taller, powerfully built, quick-tempered and ruthless cousin. After Tomaso went off to Greenock, it was Sergio who had seeded the rumour that his older cousin Tomaso had gone to work for a related Grazioni clan in Chicago and was no longer being considered as Sergio's future rival.

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In 1951, newly twenty-three and fluent in good Italian and standard English as delivered by the BBC World Service radio programmes, Tomaso Vitelli completed his initiation into the Grazioni of Ercolano clan.

This assassination was done openly, as a statement, a warning to others. The target was Alberto Boninno, an upstart rival who had encroached onto Sergio's turf in Naples. Tomaso had walked up to Boninno at lunchtime as he left a favourite bar with a favourite girl on his arm, slicing Boninno's throat before walking off nonchalantly.

Later that afternoon, Tomaso boarded a coastal trader out of Naples bound for Greenock, sent out as an 'apostle' to Scotland to replace his second-cousin Enrico Perazio.

Enrico had always been a poor gambler, over-fond of alcohol and, worst of all, he had become a wife-beater which, being a weak man, he relished. In accordance with his

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instructions, Tomaso at once replaced his uncle, slitting his throat, removing his head and hands which were incinerated on a beach bonfire. His body, wrapped in hessian sacking weighed down with boulders, was later consigned to the seabed in mid-channel, directly in line with the Cloch Lighthouse, food for crabs and other crustaceans.

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Funded by money from Ercolano, the hard working and sober young Tomaso ambitiously expanded his entirely legitimate business premises twice while building up to a staff of ten employees, serving sit-down fish and chips, teas, coffees, sandwiches, fancy bought-in cakes and assorted wrapped biscuits in a café setting alongside his busy carry-out fish and chips counter. In his second year in Greenock, he met a local girl, made her pregnant and married her.

Unknown to his new wife and infant daughter, there was another side to Tomaso Vitelli's business activities where he served his superiors in a highly profitable enterprise which he kept quite separate and very secret. This was based on importing and retailing a selection of soft and hard drugs, special tobacco, much sought after tranquilisers and pick-me-up pharmaceuticals normally only available on prescription.

There was also pornography in various forms and to suit all tastes, sex stimulants, exotic dildos and similar paraphernalia popular with middle-class professionals and businesspeople, those with plenty money, people who already had everything but longed for something extra.

These items were shipped to him hidden in imitation drums of the olive oil used to fry his fish and chips, drums which came by sea on small coastal trading vessels from Naples.

On occasion, and only to special order, pre-paid upfront in cash (US Dollars), Tommy would use his Grazioni underworld contacts to supply illegal weapons and ammunition but only when authorised by Ercolano.

Like other Camorra and Mafia clans, the Grazioni of Ercolano were gradually evolving their enterprise into a global organisation, seeking opportunities to launder their undercover profits (usually cash) into suitable legitimate businesses and onwards into legitimate bank accounts from which they levered their way into other businesses used to form their *la maglia de rete* (mesh shirt).

By the early 1960s, based in Naples but working with his cousins in Milan, this international side of the evolved business was now being run by Tommy's cousin Sergio Grazioni who also had good Italian and BBC English, having followed Tomaso to the same tutors in Bologna. During his time in Bologna, Sergio had styled himself as a sophisticated man, a man who prided himself on being non-violent, except when the code was

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deliberately broken. In such cases punishment would be swift and final, deeds always carried out at far hand, by his foot soldiers.

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When Tomaso had first arrived in Scotland, it was to the Simpson family he looked for guidance and advice. At that time, the Simpson organisation was headed by a Scot called Hugh Morrison Simpson who lived in the posh village of Bridge of Weir, a man who had attended a fee-paying Catholic school in Glasgow. Simpson had good contacts with the professional and upper classes who controlled the scene in the West of Scotland. He did not advertise that he was a fluent Italian speaker learned from his deceased mother, Anna Maria Artusi, eldest granddaughter of the legendary Concetta Bolinchetti, the matriarch of the Bolinchetti of Milan.

Although born in Milan, Anna Maria had arrived in Glasgow decades earlier as a babe in arms with parents who had been selected to become the first ever apostles of the Grazioni family business under the reign of the patriarch Franco Grazioni, one of his earliest overseas initiatives.

Based in Ayr, the Artusi family were lawyers and forgers, their task to seek out legitimate investments to be used to launder the Grazioni wealth and to facilitate a steady flow of illegal immigration into the UK and onwards to the USA by providing high quality documentation.

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Early Years

In Greenock, from age ten, the tall, slim quick-witted Angelina (Angie) Vitelli was already working front-of-house in her father's fish and chip shop take-away cum café, serving and wrapping fish and chips from early evenings and at weekends.

When Angie was coming up for her eleventh birthday and already serving at the café tables, Tommy's wife, Reena, (Irene Vitelli (nee MacNaughtan)) was demoted from doing the till to work in the back shop where her bruised face and black eyes were out of sight.

Reena's broken nose and puffy black eyes were from a punishment beating. Tomaso had been sent a letter from a former employee, a flirtatious, bucktoothed twenty-year-old called Sally Mitchell who had moved away to Port Glasgow with her new husband. When giving up her job, she had boasted to her former workmates that:

"Ahm, sortit noo, awright. Ah'll be livin in *the lappy luxsheery*."

Sammy Trainer, a frugal fifty-eight-year-old plumber's helper in the shipyard at Scotts of Greenock was a gullible bachelor struggling to live alone since losing his mother to cancer. The couple had met at the local evangelical fellowship where Sally's Aunt Pamela played the harmonium.

Nudged awake at midnight to try for the third time to satisfy his hefty young wife, his strenuous exertions were a burden but Sammy, being a devout and kindly man, did his best while praying this phase in his life would soon pass and Sally would take up crochet and embroidery as he had suggested repeatedly, not wishing to see his mother's supplies languish unused.

Sammy, a repeated victim of premature ejaculation, found these exertions too great for his weak heart and died during attempted intercourse, leaving Sally with no income and no job, forcing her to move back to Greenock to re-join her mother, Masie, a bustling and energetic woman who had never married but claimed the status of 'widow', cleaning communal stairs in tenements on her hands and knees for a living. In her heyday, before finding Jesus, Masie Mitchell had been an occasional prostitute when the opportunity presented itself at the docks, where she had worked as an office cleaner.

Sally, ever hopeful Tommy might reinstate her to her previous job in his café, a wish which would remain unfilled, wrote:

big tommy ah jist thoat ye shed be telt that yer reenas a rite hoor so shee iz an shees et it evray chans shee gits wi cummershall travlurs oot et tha big hottl in

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*Gooruk (this part was speculation) an oan hur nites aff shees et it doon the doks
ahnaw wi darki sailors aff the bots (this revelation was true)*

aye big tommy yer reenas aywiz been a hoor jist ask onywan

ah jist wish ye hid merit me instead coz ye ken fin ah eywiz fancied ye

big tommy dae ye ken ma mans deed so ahm ahvailuble if ye get ma meanin

Sally xxxx en SWALK.

From that night onwards, Reena was forced to sleep on a couch in the living room. To be fair to Tomaso, these reported acts of passion by Reena as imagined by Sally probably had some truth in them. It was well-known locally Reena MacNaughtan had always been oversexed, flighty, a man-teaser.

Angie was promoted to Reena's place on the till as Tommy's 'trusted other'. Reena remained in the back shop, even after her face had healed.

In appearance, Angelina Vitelli was quite obviously her father's daughter, tall for a girl, filling out, already with obvious breasts and a strong, attractive face. From age twelve, with her face made up, she could have passed for fifteen.

Like her father, Angie had a jovial, cheery, cheeky, commanding and lippy style with her customers, already bossing her main server Maggie Donovan, a widow in her fifties with two older children and renowned locally as 'a hard case'. Angie's second server was Teresa Perazio (nee Vitello, from the Milan branch of the Vitelli clan), wife of her abusive husband Ernesto, the man who had 'left for America' the same day Tomaso had arrived.

All who worked for Tommy Vitello were aware of his quick temper when things did not easily go his way, and Maggie and Teresa kept their heads down and worked quickly, taking and then re-barking customer orders to Tommy as the Fryer. These orders were then repeated aloud by Angie as she totted up the amounts due while 'her girls' served up and wrapped. Rooted like a statue Angie worked from an open till, coins only. Any cash in the form of notes, was kept separately in a zipped pouch inside a locked drawer under the till, its distinctive golden bronze key dangling on a heavy chain which hung around Angie's neck, her badge of office inherited from her mother.

After Tommy, 'doing the till' was the second most prestigious position in the Vitelli establishment. This meant the waitresses serving in the adjacent café side of the business were required to bring Angie their collecting plates with all payments. Tips received by these girls must be returned to Angie intact and emptied, ceremoniously, into a large, recycled sweetie jar to be divided equally to all staff members at the end of the evening with Angie claiming her due share. By tradition, only Tommy did not receive

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a share. Any girl found skimming was chastised by Maggie Donovan, sacked on the spot and sent packing, usually with a severely bruised body from a 'good punching'.

Perhaps it was inevitable. A few days after Angie's thirteenth birthday, Reena took her chance and signed up as a kitchen assistant on a cruise ship, ending up first in New York then Chicago and various other east coast cities of the USA.

Five years after leaving Greenock, Reena's birthday postcards to Angie stopped arriving.

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Coming of Age

Aged sixteen, Angie Vitelli was in her prime, with a good figure, her mother's naughty vivid green eyes, and a good line in witty repartee for her customers. Like her father, she was a chameleon speaker, using Greenock dialect and twang in the fish shop setting and a slower, careful, correctly intoned and cadenced version of BBC English in other situations, as required. This need for 'good spoken and written English' had been drilled into her by Tommy who knew the importance of presentation when dealing with his sophisticated and well-heeled clients in Bridge of Weir, Pollokshields and Glasgow's posh West End.

From the outset, Tomaso was working to a plan for his daughter's future. To make this feasible, Italian was also important. Fortunately, Angie was a bright child and enjoyed his constant attention to detail.

From a toddler, alongside proper English, proper Italian vocabulary and grammar had been drilled into Angie incessantly by her father. From her first months at primary, she was almost always top of her class. By age eight, she was a fluent reader of English. To reinforce his personal tuition, Tomaso had provided correspondence courses which provided structured learning with assignments to be submitted for marking but only after he had checked her work. To help her with spoken Italian, he sourced tapes which required her to repeat what was broadcast. These lessons they played many times, sitting together with Tomaso correcting and 'polishing' her pronunciation.

From about age twelve, he bought a special international radio linked to speakers he installed in the café kitchen and prep area. This radio was always tuned to talk programmes from Italy's north, especially phone-in shows from Bologna where the poshest Italian was spoken.

Also drummed into Angelina was that she must 'command respect' which, as an immigrant Italian, Tomaso Vitelli saw as vital in all aspects of his business and personal life, another essential thread woven into the fabric of her upbringing.

With his wife Reena now history, Tommy had a new partner called Masie Delany, a widow with a grown-up son who now lived and worked in Melbourne, Australia where he was a successful computer salesman for IBM.

Outwardly, Masie was a hard-working, docile woman with a shy smile who was slow to speak and happy to work as a fill-in for any of the girls who were absent due to illness, monthly complaints or other women's troubles. Wisely, Masie did not attempt to counsel

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or discipline her strongly willed stepdaughter and the two females rubbed along without undue friction. In her private life with Tommy, in their bedroom, Masie was a generous, passionate lover who knew how to praise him and make him feel like a king. Within weeks of their trial common-law marriage, the pair settled quickly to become a good team.

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It was time to release Angie from her position in the fish and chip shop and bring her into the 'olive oil business'.

One day, Tommy took Angie with him in his Ford Prefect when he made his rounds, taking her first to Bridge of Weir to speak to his main contact then onwards, making his deliveries. She was not invited into these houses and remained in the car through the whole of that day. As they moved from point to point, Tommy explained to her in detail how his local operation of the 'olive oil business' worked, adding a potted history of the Grazioni of Ercolano.

When they arrived back in Greenock, still in the car, he made his statement:

"Angelina Vitelli, sei una ragazza molto intelligente e meriti la tua occasione. Anche se hai solo sedici anni, potresti essere preso per una donna di ventun anni. Credo che ora tu sia pronto a cogliere l'occasione. Ho deciso di inviarti a Ercolano con una lettera, raccomandandoti di introdurti nel commercio dell'olio d'oliva come mia discepola in vista di un giorno prendere il controllo qui. Credo che questo sia il tuo destino. Sarebbe stato più facile se tu fossi mio figlio, ma forse è meglio così. Il mondo sta cambiando, le donne forti devono avere la loro possibilità."

("Angelina Vitelli, you are a very clever girl and deserve your chance. Although you are only sixteen, you could be taken for a woman of twenty-one. I believe you are ready now to take your chance. I have decided to send you to Ercolano with a letter, recommending that I bring you into the olive oil business as my disciple with a view to one day taking over here. I believe this to be your destiny. It would have been easier if you were my son but perhaps this is for the best. The world is changing, strong women must be given their chance.")

"Franco sta già cedendo il posto a Sergio, un uomo ambizioso che ha intenzione di rimodellare la nostra attività ed espanderla per coprire l'intera Scozia. Vuole che ci spostiamo di fascia alta, per raggiungere le persone ai vertici. Questo significa Edimburgo. Voglio che tu vada a vivere lì per un mese e ti faccia un'idea del posto. Poi, quando sei pronta, devi andare a incontrare Franco e Sergio e presentarti. Hai un ottimo italiano e un ottimo inglese. Non potrebbe mai trovare una persona migliore e sono sicuro che quando ti avrà incontrato, sarà d'accordo."

"Sei disposto ad accettare questa opportunità?"

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"Franco is already giving way to Sergio, an ambitious man who plans to re-shape our business and expand it to cover the whole of Scotland. He wants us to move upmarket, to reach people at the very top. This means Edinburgh. I want you to go and live there for a month and get the feel of the place. Then when you are prepared, you must go and meet Franco and Sergio and present yourself. You have very good Italian and excellent English. He could never find a better person and I am sure when he has met you, he will agree.

"Are you willing to accept this opportunity?"

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When Angelina Vitelli arrived in Ercolano in the early summer of 1967, she carried a sealed letter from her father addressed to Franco Grazioni, her prozio (great-uncle). Although Franco was still the Godfather of the Grazioni of Ercolano, it was increasingly Sergio who was in charge, pulling most of the strings.

The epistle was a joint effort by father and daughter. As Tomaso explained: Franco was not well-educated and would almost certainly ask Sergio to read the letter to him. For this reason, it was carefully phrased to appeal to Sergio, Tomaso choosing words and phrases to describe his daughter in modest terms, stressing the virtue of her innocence combined with her cleverness and willingness to learn while emphasising that despite her apparent youth, she had a core of steel upon which the Grazioni of Ercolano could depend.

Although Angie was fully aware of everything Tomaso had written, she must pretend to be unaware of the details. It was important that Sergio be allowed to take the initiative in what would almost certainly be a difficult negotiation.

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In preparation for her visit, Tomaso had explained what he knew of Sergio's changes, a new approach which Tomaso approved of wholeheartedly.

During the previous decade, with Franco's health in decline, Sergio as future head of the olive oil business was changing it away from alcohol, imported contraband tobacco and brothels, moving the business into drugs and high-end pornography.

Sergio had researched his ideas, studying the profit margins. Brothels were no longer as profitable as in the past, and there was always trouble with the girls and their minders. He believed the way ahead was pornography. Further research led him to an experienced director (a man with a serious cocaine addiction) with whom he entered into un contratto vincolante (a binding contract).

Under this initial arrangement, Alphonso Esposito agreed to furnish a set of one thousand poses from which he would provide batches of colour prints, high-quality

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professional images captured in his studio. Alphonso was allowed free range and his content was eclectic, to suit all tastes.

(Tomaso had been sent samples of Sergio's new wave pornography and although he described them to Angie, he did not share this material with her.)

Alphonso's players were handsome well-endowed men and ravishingly beautiful scantily clad women either posing alone or together in pairs or in group sex scenes, some artistic and teasing, some explicit. Particularly popular were those arranged in booklets of romantic encounters starting with innocent first kisses, followed by mutual undressing, moving gradually in step-by-step poses to final consummation.

These booklets of images proved popular beyond expectation and a second series of one thousand images was commissioned, this time featuring more ordinary older men and women, mostly aspiring actors who had not quite made their breakthrough. There was a particularly popular booklet in which these older actors posed in scenes from the Kama Sutra.

Other booklets depicted outré love affairs featuring man-on-man, woman-on-woman including scenes of bondage and fake torture. By popular demand, a further series of romance booklets were created with participants drawn from a variety of age ranges and skin colours, some exotically beautiful often matched with others of odd appearance some even deformed or with missing limbs and, as before, revealed in sequences choreographed to satisfy all tastes.

Every individual image in every booklet was professionally photographed, faultlessly reproduced and the booklets finished and presented to the very highest standards. The demand for ownership soared and prices were increased accordingly.

The popularity of these amazingly erotic stills proved what Sergio had suspected.

These 'romance booklets' where exactly what his more sophisticated clients of both sexes yearned for. His meticulous records showed these were mainly older men and women with established wealth and jaded palates, willing to pay handsomely to be able to view vicarious safe sex, repeated fantasy experiences enjoyed in the comfort of their own homes.

Based on this research, Alphonso's contract was extended, and he moved on to make a long-running series of 8 mm movies, sex fantasies shot in romantic locations such as castles and luxury villas.

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In Europe , during this era, there was nothing on the market to match the quality and content of these films, only amateurish, grainy, low-quality offerings from Amsterdam and Paris.

Sergio also saw that his profits from smuggling cheap alcohol and tobacco products was in steep decline while, by contrast, there was a burgeoning demand for recreational drugs such as marijuana, heroin, morphine, sniffing cocaine and the many other uppers and downers not available without prescription.

Sergio made his move into serious drug dealing but with one strict caveat. He had seen the fate of many drug dealers addicted to their own products. Although he was willing to supply these items, none of his people were permitted to use them.

On pain of death, no second chances.

Starting slowly and moving carefully, he began to offer his drugs to his more sophisticated pornography clients. This move also proved successful. Seeing an opportunity, he added a range of high-quality sexy lingerie, specialised make-ups and perfumes for both men and woman, tapes with erotic music, dildos and other sex toys including aphrodisiacs and novel condoms in a variety of colours, some with ribbing to heighten the pleasure of both partners.

To market his products, he invented a phrase:

un grande pacchetto per il piacere personale

(a full package for personal pleasuring)

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During the first few weeks of her stay in Ercolano, Angelina was chaperoned closely by her great grandmother, bisnonna Iseppa Vitelli. Small, wiry, industrious and quick-witted, Iseppa was then in her late eighties, a fierce, outspoken and disagreeable woman who suffered from weeping haemorrhoids and irritable bowels. Her sole pleasure was to rule her family with a rod of iron and a caustic tongue. She dressed entirely in her widow's black, her outfits relieved only by a large silver crucifix which she raised to her lips and kissed after every pronouncement as if confirming her words were direct from Heaven.

A generous description for Iseppa might have been *scorbutico* (cantankerous).

Angie quickly realised she was being 'tested' and curbed her tongue, listening, learning new dialect words and idiomatic phrases, nodding or shaking her head in agreement when appropriate, careful not to reveal her annoyance when criticised.

To Sergio, already an established womaniser, his flirtatious auburn-haired cousin's daughter Angelina Vitelli, seemed like exotic fruit. Even though he was already engaged

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to a local beauty, this was no deterrent; after all, most of his friends had compliant wives who turned a blind eye to their husbands' mistresses. However, in a family which paid lip service to the Church of Rome and the deeply ingrained mores of the southern part of the Italian peninsula, his cousin's daughter was strictly out of bounds, at least in theory.

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Luna di Miele

It was suggested Angelina needed to learn 'proper Italian'. This was a ploy introduced by Sergio even though it was clear the Scottish girl was already fluent in the polite version of the Italian of the North. As part of their agreement, Angie became more talkative, making deliberate errors of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, enough to satisfy bisnonna Iseppa.

Sergio volunteered to make the necessary arrangements. At the start of her third week in Italy, Angelina was sent to Bologna, waved off from Rome station by Nonna Iseppa on a slow train, scheduled to stop at every village.

By prior agreement, Sergio, a suave man many years her senior, collected Angie three stops up the line from Rome, whisking her away in his *Maserati* sports car, presenting her with a large box of chocolates which, below the top layer, contained a supply of *Durex* condoms, contraband items banned in Italy of that era.

That night, in a luxury hotel in Milan, after a shopping trip to buy her several new outfits and sexy lingerie, they ate an intimate meal then slipped up to the bridal suite where Angie had her first experience of intercourse in a comfortable bed, lying on her back, with a deep pillow under her buttocks, her legs wide apart with her knees raised, cupping Sergio's head in her hands while arching upwards as he thrust down rhythmically into her until they climaxed in unison.

Throughout, she pretended she was a virgin, squealing and shouting for joy at his climax, determined to boost his ego. This ecstasy was not entirely faked as her past encounters had all been based on *coitus interruptus*, the traditional method she had practiced since puberty, standing in draughty back tenement closes with handsome boys of her choice.

This night of passion began their *Luna di Miele* (honeymoon). Never discussed, both understood that while they might continue as secret lovers, they could never marry. Although she liked Sergio well enough, Angelina was not ready to settle to the role of an occasional visiting second fiddle to the girl he was engaged to marry in a few months' time, on her twenty-first birthday.

However, to her complete surprise, Sergio had a bolder and more expansive plan to reveal.

As they lay side by side recovering, he outlined his proposal for her future as his 'personal apostle', reminding her she was 'family' which gave her rights and privileges. Listening and imagining, the astute Angelina Vitelli was by now aware of the opportunities of being on intimate terms with Sergio, the future Godfather of the Grazioni clan. Lying naked

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beside him in the dark while he smoked, she listened as Sergio talked passionately, revealing his plans to create a dominant position throughout Europe, repeatedly telling her she and Tomaso would enjoy their share of his empire, as it evolved.

Intent on impressing her, Sergio also confided the main purpose of his current business trip was to meet new partners, men he was sure he could persuade to sign *contratti vincolanti* (binding contracts) designed to help him build a stronger supply chain for the most popular drugs favoured by his clients. These men were from Milan, Venice and Turkey. He also had very special contacts in Trieste, (the gateway to the Far East). These agents were representatives of Chinese and Korean government scientists who were already manufacturing cheaper cloned versions of the expensive American and European prescription drugs his clients craved.

As he talked, murmuring in 'adoration' at his brilliance, she eased onto her side, pressing the tip of her tongue into his ear then licking along his neck, sending her right hand on a slow journey in the direction of his swelling manhood to cajole him to fullness. As she sucked gently on his nipples, he stubbed out his cigarette and reached for a fresh condom.

They continued into the small hours, enjoying three further rounds of increasingly passionate intercourse.

Later, as he slept, she turned away smiling as she stared at the streetlights shining through a small gap in the drapes, seeing the possibilities of a brighter, richer future, sounding the words inside her head:

When he makes his 'offer' of un contratto vincolante, no matter what he requires of me, I will not refuse it.

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During the remaining five weeks of their Luna di Miele which followed, Angie was whisked away on a grand tour, visiting all the major towns in the north of Italy, watching and learning, playing her role as Sergio's latest dumb floozy, the attractive girl with green eyes who spoke only English. Prepped by Sergio in advance, she studied him as he regaled and cajoled his business associates. Sitting demurely in the background, polishing her nails and touching up her make-up, Angie was picking up snippets, absorbing the codewords and nomenclature of the Camorra's business patois, learning how the Grazioni of Ercolano's modernised drugs and pornography network operated under Sergio, the rising star.

Angie Vitelli judged Sergio's new ideas were sound, profitable, forward looking. As she listened and learned she realised that her father's present role was small, low key, almost irrelevant. But she also saw there was great potential to grow his West of Scotland

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operation and expand it to serve Edinburgh and the other towns in the East and North of Scotland. Here, in modernising Italy, she learned the ambition of the Grazioni plan was to target the uppermost echelon, the moguls of industry and their paid-for politicians and the others who swirled around these honeypots of wealth and power, seeing it as a perfect model for herself as the future inheritor to her father.

What impressed her most about her older baby-faced second cousin was his sense of self-importance, a realisation which made her think of her father and his stress on the importance of 'commanding respect'.

Like Papà, cugino Sergio is a man who demands and receives respect wherever he goes.

But unlike Papà, Sergio has no doubts, he believes in himself without reservation.

This is what I too must do to succeed.

This was the principal lesson she learned during her Luna di Mele, a lesson she would use to advantage during the years to come.

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Their first stop after Milan was Bologna, a city that Sergio knew well. At his direction, Angie bought a batch of postcards and stamps. These cards she completed with the usual short banal messages expected by her readers back in Ercolano, one postcard for each week, to be sent off by the hotel concierge whom Sergio knew from student days. These postcards provided her cover story for the remainder of their pretend honeymoon.

As they moved from place to place on his business trip itinerary, Sergio coached her in the idiosyncrasies of Italian grammar, adding native speaker refinements of vocabulary and pronunciation for the Naples and Ercolano dialects while imparting a potted version of Italian history.

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They ended their romantic trip at Pescara, on Italy's Adriatic coast, a smaller town used by fishermen and coastal trading vessels which connected to Trieste and Yugoslavia.

Over a long private dinner, they discussed plans for her future. His ambition for her matched her own and she gave her commitment, sealing it with a long night of passion.

When she woke, she was alone: he had packed and cleared the room of his possessions. At breakfast it was evident that their honeymoon was over.

Over a second coffee when their table had been cleared, she studied both copies of his offered *contratto vincolante* noting that Sergio had already signed them.

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Matching his gaze, she signed and presented him with his copy then signed her own which she folded and placed in her handbag.

Unsmiling, they rose and shook hands. Moving forward, their relationship would be (almost) strictly business. Leaving Pescara, he took her to a smallish town called Sora less than three hours away, a rustic, sleepy village midway between Naples and Rome. It was here in Sora that Sergio had bought a former army training complex where he was currently developing a distribution network for his olive oil business and building a film studio for Alphonso Esposito.

After lunch, Sergio dropped her off at Rome station where she caught the train to Bologna to enjoy a further few weeks at the previous hotel where she retrieved the remaining postcards from the concierge, creating new ones with more expansive detail and adding a few to send home to her father and the girls in the café.

In his car, before they parted at Rome station, Sergio had given her a large, well-worn black leather purse stuffed with more than \$2,000 US and £500 in Sterling, 500,000 Lire and 1,000 Swiss Francs. This he explained, were monies she should keep aside and use for personal expenses, clothes, travel, hotels and so on. In Scotland, she must also buy a small car, something reliable, preferably Italian.

When Signorina Angelina Vitelli returned to Ercolano, laden with clothes and shoes and a new hairstyle, her hair lightened to a golden blonde, she was changed forever, carrying herself with the poise of a 'married' woman.

During the remainder of her stay with Nonna Iseppa in Ercolano, Sergio was largely absent, wisely keeping clear of her to avoid temptation and detection.

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Morrie Simpson

On her return to Greenock, and after the usual conversations about the family in Ercolano in which she related a highly edited version of what she had been doing during her six months absence, Angie had a long and difficult session with her father.

Tomaso read the hand-written letter she brought from Sergio, her mandate (*il suo mandato*). What he read made him deeply unhappy. Initially he refused to comply with the terms outlined in Sergio's letter.

Second guessing this reaction, Angelina had prepared her response:

"Ma papà hai detto che devo essere pronto a cogliere l'occasione quando si presenta. Ecco. Devi telefonare a quest'uomo. So già chi è, Sergio mi ha detto tutto. Ho anche una lettera da consegnargli. È sigillato ma l'ho letto prima che Sergio lo sigillasse. So chi è e che è il tuo capo, l'uomo a cui devi obbedire. Per favore papà, chiamalo adesso. Non devi negarmi questa opportunità. Questo è il mio destino, nel bene e nel male."

("But Papa you said that I must be prepared to take my opportunity when it came. This is it. You must telephone this man. I already know who he is, Sergio told me everything. I also have a letter to deliver to him. I read it before Sergio sealed it. I know who he is and that he is your boss, the man you must obey. Please Papa, call him now. You must not deny me this opportunity. This is my destiny, for better or for worse.")

After a long period of silence with his eyes closed, Tomaso Vitelli shook his head, sniffed back his tears and, at last, nodded his acceptance. Shrugging off her outstretched hand thereby refusing to bind himself by shaking on Sergio's proposal, he ducked past her and left the room.

Minutes later he drove away.

Despite this outcome, Angie Vitelli remained determined to fulfil her side of the *contratto vincolante* she had signed with Sergio, with or without her father's approval or support.

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Unusually for a first meeting, it was agreed that Angie would meet Mr Simpson at his Glasgow city centre office, an arrangement which surprised and reassured Tomaso in equal measure.

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Hugh Morrison Simpson, known as Morrie to his intimates, was a Glasgow University trained lawyer turned Estate Agent and Property Developer whose home was one of the grandest of the huge villas in Bridge of Weir. Although she had not seen this man, Angie remembered visiting his home with her father on the day he had told her about his role in the Grazioni olive oil business, the day she had travelled with him while he made his deliveries.

Only a select few knew Morrie Simpson was also part of the Grazioni network in Scotland, the connection through his mother, Margherita Artusi, a second cousin of Sergio. Like Tomaso Vitelli, Morrie had a long heritage of ancestors who were part of the Sicilian Mafia. Like Sergio, Morrie was part of the new wave of Camorra-Mafia forward looking 'thrusters' and had already evolved, moving up into supplying celebrity drugs and sophisticated pornography provided by Sergio, with Tomaso as his courier and go between.

When he first arrived to displace Enrico Perazio, Tomaso had been under 'far hand' supervision, treated with caution until he had earned Morrie's trust. Initially subservient, in those early days Tomaso was a mere node in the Grazioni supply chain network, watching for olive oil drums which arrived in Greenock addressed to 'Tomaso Vitelli' but coded 'HMS' to show the hidden contents contained in sealed packages were to be delivered unopened to 'HM Simpson, Esq' at his mansion in Bridge of Weir.

While Angie had been growing up, Morrie grew to depend on Tomaso, providing him with a small car and promoting him to be his trusted courier for onward deliveries to some of his older and less influential clients now living in retirement. These individuals, mostly men, more rarely women, were generally those coming to the end of their influence and commercial usefulness, people no longer part of the day-to-day commercial cut and thrust.

Meanwhile, Morrie continued to personally retail his highest value items discretely and judiciously to his prime clients, generally friends and neighbours he met and mixed with socially, well-heeled residents of Bridge of Weir, Pollokshields, Newlands and the like.

Other trusted olive oil business clients were usually people like himself commercially active in the property market and others in the related professions of banking, surveying and land management. These 'business friends' were permitted direct access to collect their personal supplies from him at his head office located on the top floor of a grand office building in Union Street, in Glasgow's city centre. However, this service was by appointment only, arranged by a person-to-person telephone call with payments in hard cash, no cheques or promissory notes accepted.

This office suite comprised many locked rooms on a single floor where Morrie kept his 'supplies of olive oil'. His office was staffed by only two trusted employees, both older

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spinsters with Italian heritage and Mafia/Camorra family ties. Marianna Papalardo, the senior of the two held the position of office manager but also acted as receptionist/telephonist. She also operated a fixed tube intercom system connected to her younger brother Mancuso employed as the concierge on the ground floor, who kept the inner glass doors always locked. He also controlled the lift using a key which prevented it from travelling to the top floor without his enabling.

When required, Mancuso was also Morrie's chauffeur and lived in a basement flat at *Rosemount*, Morrie's home in Bridge of Weir. During the Mussolini era, Mancuso had served as a bodyguard for the *Il Duce*, part of his personal entourage.

Without Mr Simpson's specific instruction, no one was allowed entry.

The requested items were prepared by a shorthand typist cum dispatcher called Savarina Parisi who made up the goods into a sealed package to be collected from reception as the client was leaving after their meeting with Mr Simpson.

All appointments were during normal working hours, no evenings and no weekends allowed.

Recruitment of new clients involved a slow, careful vetting process. Those hoping to be allowed onto Morrie's list must be first 'nominated' by an existing client. Fullest details of the individual candidates must be provided as a first step after which Morrie used a private investigator to check the details. Nominees wishing to become clients were usually well-heeled and established people. Those who were in any way weak or shady were eliminated ruthlessly. Those considered potentially suitable were contacted by telephone at home, mid-evening when they were gently but thoroughly cross-questioned, Morrie introducing himself with a pre-agreed coded message communicated to the candidate in advance through his sponsor.

"Hello, Mr So and So, I am David Solomon of Solomon Holdings. Are you alone? May we discuss matters of a confidential nature?"

Those who passed this final screening were then invited to meet him at one of his other offices, (sales outlets, flashy shop fronts with walk-in public access), these located in the well-heeled suburbs of Pollokshields, Newlands and around Glasgow's West End. Reinvesting his profits, Morrie had added offices at Bearsden and Milngavie and had plans for an office in Helensburgh.

In a recent bi-annual pilgrimage to Ercolano, while Angie had been enjoying her break alone in Bologna, Morrie had been primed by Sergio to expect her visit. Their agreement was that she was to be sent as an 'apostle' to Edinburgh where Morrie had recently opened a new Estate Agency (Commercial and Domestic), a swish establishment in the heart of the deuce New Town, the area where Scotland's richest and most powerful

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people held sway. This was Hugh Morrison Simpson's first foray outside the West of Scotland, his first attempt to expand the influence of the Grazioni of Ercolano.

At this initial stage, this expensive speculative venture was entirely legitimate, awaiting the right person to spearhead a sales campaign and grow a Grazioni share in the drugs and pornography trade. Morrie's careful research had revealed this lucrative market was currently being served by a small group of independent suppliers, people Morrie and Sergio regarded as amateurs, nonentities, parasites, individuals who imported their pornographic products in piecemeal amounts from Amsterdam, material which was mundane, nothing with the pizzazz of Sergio's erotic short films which had been created to Hollywood cinematic standards. Likewise, their drugs offering was limited and its quality poor. The market was ripe.

On the day of their meeting, Morrie Simpson was celebrating the 'final conclusion' of his recent divorce from his second wife, an event which had caused a minor splash in local newspapers. Priscilla Simpson, nee Walters, an ex-supermodel from the catwalks of Milan, Paris, London and New York, was now living in Guernsey, with her disabled father, or so the planted story in local newspapers claimed.

The reality was quite different. Morrie had already resolved never again to become involved with personality cult women. Unfortunately for Priscilla she knew far too much about Morrie and his clandestine business to be allowed to live.

A week after the divorce was finalised and the Scottish tabloids lost interest, Priscilla tried to tap up Morrie for more money, even though she had been awarded a generous monthly annuity payment to keep her quiet. Morrie responded politely, phoning to agree a meeting the following week, promising to send her 'a special weekend present', to be delivered to her rented villa in Pollokshields by Tomaso Vitelli, a man she knew well and trusted. Tommy had telephoned his intention and called to the rear door just after four o'clock on Saturday afternoon, his items gushingly and gratefully received by an already inebriated Priscilla.

Elaborately presented, the gift box was accompanied by a huge vase of cut flowers. In addition to her favourite Coco Chanel perfume, Frey Swiss chocolates and two bottles of vintage Amarone there was also a large phial of heroin to which Priscilla was irretrievably addicted.

Sadly, for *la donna che conosceva troppo* (the woman who knew too much), the heroin was poisoned with a fast-acting brain-freeze chemical, its effect indistinguishable from a massive stroke.

Mid-evening, Tomaso returned with a private ambulance to transport her corpse to a warehouse in Greenock where she was suitably processed, assigned as deck cargo. Near

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Ailsa Craig, an hour before dawn and without ceremony, her hessian wrapped remains were consigned to the deeps from a coastal trader bound for its home port of Naples.

Angie did not learn of her father's role in Priscilla's demise until she visited him in a care home decades later, a locked ward where he was being managed through the advanced stages of vascular dementia. During a long fraught session, Tomaso Vitelli had confessed fragments of his involvement in Morrie's wife's removal and his role in *altre cessioni finali* (other final disposals).

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Initiation

On the agreed day, the attractive young woman arrived precisely on time to find Mancuso Papalardo standing to attention on the inner side of the glass doors.

She gave her name and he greeted her deferentially, locking the doors behind her before announcing her arrival via the *citofono* (voice tube) then leading her to the *ascensore* (lift) where he used his key to send her alone to the top floor at level seven.

Tall, full-figured, golden blonde, stunningly dressed to impress in a figure-hugging dark blue dress from Milan styled in the latest 'above the knee' fashion, Angelina Vitelli judged she had never looked better.

From before dawn, she had been prowling around her newly rented flat in Shawlands, holding herself erect before her wardrobe door mirror, stopping time after time to touch up her lightly applied make-up, talking firmly to her reflection, holding her own gaze, aping Sergio's demeanour, trying to capture for herself his understated swagger from their business meetings in Milan and the other northern cities, projecting her notion of a confident businesswoman and practising her chosen phrases, coaching herself like an actress preparing for a first night performance.

After many weeks of waiting, her moment was now!

From their first handshake, which lasted longer than necessary, there was a strong attraction. Morrie, who had become a regular at a private gym, had slimmed down and looked fit. He too was dressed to impress in a new three-piece pin-striped suit of dark grey mohair, his hair expensively groomed and expertly tinted. Angie knew from Sergio that he was fifty-six but he looked at least ten years younger.

Their late afternoon business meeting extended to an evening dinner engagement at the *Colonial* restaurant in Glasgow's Blythswood Square. This was followed by an overnight stay at the *Royal Scottish Automobile Club* where HM Simpson Esquire was a Life Member.

Angie was already on the pill, these supplied in bulk by Sergio during their honeymoon trip with the advice:

"tutti gli uomini preferiscono un'esperienza di rilascio naturale e completo, senza una pelle di gomma in mezzo"

("all men prefer a natural, full release experience, without a rubber skin in between")

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This evening of passion sealed their deal and now everything moved ahead with pre-arranged swiftness and efficiency.

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Over a long and elaborate wedding breakfast served in their room, they agreed the terms of the new business arrangement to be sealed irrevocably by marriage, as Sergio had insisted. Given Morrie's age and Angie's ambition to succeed and become the first woman to lead *un sindacato in diaspora* (a syndicate in a foreign land) there would be no children.

Informally, at Morrie's suggestion, they agreed they would both be free to enjoy other partners, provided they were discreet.

Mid-afternoon, from Morrie's City Centre office, the happily betrothed couple embarked on a long three-way telephone conversation with Sergio in his Naples office. Written in Italian, the legal documents binding Morrie, Angie and Sergio had been brought by Morrie from Ercolano. They were already signed by Sergio. Morrie and Angie's signatures were notarised by the aging Dr Ricardo Artusi who had made the trip by train from his office in Ayr.

A registry office marriage was arranged, to seal their relationship under Scottish law. There was no reception, no fuss or fanfare of any kind. Witnesses were provided from the close-knit Artusi clan.

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A month later, after due process, a further Scottish Limited Partnership was established to facilitate the agreement between the three principals, Sergio Grazioni, Morrie Simpson and Mrs Angelina Simpson (nee Vitelli).

This paved the way for a meeting in Ercolano where Sergio, Morrie and Angie signed a second edition of the original agreement incorporating the marriage certificate and details of the SLP. This *contratto vincolante* was then endorsed by other key members of the Grazioni clan with Tomaso Vitelli present but not a signatory, merely an observer.

After adding his scrawl, Aldo Grazioni (the Godfather) dozed in a wheelchair, already drifting to the end of his life. Although Tomaso had been reluctant to give his daughter away to a man nearly three decades older than her, he knew protest would be useless and possibly dangerous. He also saw that his daughter had changed and was no longer biddable, politely ignoring his requests and suggestions if they did not suit her purpose.

Nothing had been said by Sergio or Morrie but Tommy already knew his return to live in Ercolano in retirement had never been on the cards, not with Sergio soon to become the Godfather of the Grazioni clan. Now that he was to pass the reins to Angie, Tommy was already planning to move to a new life under the Australian sun where he and Maisie would

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buy a vineyard and hope to escape from the demons of remorse which had started to haunt his dreams. Prior to his attendance at the Ercolano signing ceremony, he had negotiated his *accordo di rilascio* (release agreement) through the good offices of the elderly Dr Artusi. After a long wait for Sergio's reply, this request had been granted on condition he never return to Europe for any reason.

Thomas Vitello was being quietly retired into exile.

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Three months after the Ercolano signing ceremony, Morrie and Angie were formally re-married at a family-only church wedding in Ercolano. At Sergio's insistence this was attended by most of the active Grazioni, Bolinchetti, Artusi and Vitelli families with Aldo in the background strapped into a wheelchair, his head slumped forward and wearing a bib to catch the drool from his slack jaw, a new deterioration caused by a further mini stroke.

The only person missing was Tomaso Vitelli who was rumoured to have 'emigrated to somewhere hot'. Most of those present thought this was a euphemism for his disposal but wisely kept their thoughts to themselves.

However, Tomaso and Maisie had indeed moved to Melbourne. His Greenock fish and chip shop café was sold in a private deal to an Italian family based in Largs, a few miles along the Costa Clyde from Greenock, a deal brokered by *Artusi and Family, Solicitors*, based in Ayr. The proceeds of this sale were shared fifty-fifty with Tomaso and Morrie, designated as an informal dowry, a concession made to avoid upsetting Angie.

For Sergio, the pomp and ceremony of hosting Angie Vitelli's wedding to Morrie Simpson was his way of reinforcing his new power, already widely acknowledge.

Aldo died in his sleep a few weeks later and the transformation was complete: Sergio was the new Godfather of the Grazioni of Ercolano.

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On her return from Italy after the funeral, Mrs Angie Simpson moved into a sumptuous south-facing four-storey town house in Moray Place, one of the most sought after addresses in Edinburgh's New Town. Operating from Morrie's *Simpson Estate Agency* where she held a nominal appointment as a sales executive, Angie first created a small suite of rooms for herself on the top floor, her *fortezza sicura* (secure fortress), copying the arrangement which Morrie used at his Union Street office.

From this base, she set about creating her supply network among the rich and very rich, people who valued discretion and were willing to pay for it. Over several years, she chose and trained helpers, her own *Soldati* (foot soldiers), people she manipulated and

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monitored closely to be sure they were loyal. Those who let her down were 'disappeared' using a migration travel service provided by Sergio which collected the offenders she wished to be removed, sending them to the deeps near Ailsa Craig in the zone where Glasgow's sewage sludge was discharged.

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Ten years into their marriage Morrie died of an overdose, a combination of amphetamine-based 'energy' pills and an extra-strength non-prescription drug called Reviato (a forerunner of Viagra), stimulants taken with Cognac while watching explicit pornography at his Bridge of Weir mansion.

The next day his cold, blue and flabby overweight corpse was found curled naked on his bed, discovered by Titania his live-in housekeeper, a majestic nineteen-year-old Russian beauty he had 'rented' for a month from a Moscow agency, a girl who reminded him of Angie when they had first met, before his libido had started to falter.

To prevent the details reaching Sergio of this *comportamento di violazione del codice* (code-breaking behaviour), with the assistance of the septuagenarian Dr Artusi who *chiudere un occhio* (turned a blind eye), Angie intervened and paid for the post-mortem results to be recast as a heart attack.

Within the Grazioni clan, although pornography was considered as natural in men, drug-taking in any form was strictly forbidden by Sergio, as it had been by Aldo before him. Alcohol, nicotine and discreet adultery by husbands were the only treats allowed. Wives were expected to remain faithful, preferably teetotal and must never smoke, an act thought of as grossly uncouth in a woman.

Angie now inherited Morrie Simpson's various enterprises heralding a new era of controlled expansion for Angie and the Grazioni of Ercolano.

With Sergio's backing, she reconfigured and slimmed down the protocols for laundering the overseas inflows of Grazioni dirty money, using them to increase Grazioni investments in legitimate property and business developments in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

These new ventures, each entirely stand alone, were enabled by a series of Scottish Limited Partnerships organised at far hand by the Artusi of Ayr through a solicitor in Edinburgh. Dermot Malachy Black was a sole trader whom they had arranged to be filmed while performing sex acts on a variety of animals, mainly dogs and sheep, famously caught in the act with a Shetland Pony in an outbuilding at his smallholding near Haddington where he lived with his disabled mother.

With Morrie no longer a limiting factor, Mrs Angie Simpson moved ahead to fill his role, now working *mano nel guanto* (hand in glove) with Dr Alfredo Artusi, Ricardo's son, a man in his early fifties, recently promoted to become joint-senior partner at *Artusi and*

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Family, Solicitors, a small and secretive practice based in a large seafront villa in Ayr with an open aspect, with Ailsa Craig on the horizon. The impressive front gates to the large grounds were always locked, opened only for those with an appointment.

These and other SLPs were in turn controlled by a Guernsey-based holding company named SPII (a code for Simpson Property Investments International.) This arrangement was facilitated by a Guernsey residency bought in the name of Mrs Angelina Simpson. This privileged status had been arranged by Ricardo Artusi who held a similar residency, regularly visiting his island home called *Villa Somnambulista*, a large property protected by extensive electronic and physical security and a husband-and-wife team called Marco and Norma Regnetti and their six Doberman Pincher guard dogs.

The ultra-secure basement of this property was protected by a Halon gas fire suppression system, a confusing maze of corridors and locked storage rooms which gave hidden access to a spacious walk-in vault housing the extensive written and electronic records for the worldwide Grazioni enterprises of which Alfredo Artusi was custodian.

Over time, step by slow step, inferred, never stated, Angie would learn that the Artusi of Ayr (the father Ricardo, Alfredo the eldest son and his younger brother Bruno), dealt only with the richest people in Scotland. It was through Bruno, who was also an accomplished pianist, Angie was introduced to Maria Bolinchetti and her neighbours Ronald and Edith McKindless, another branch of the Grazioni network, influential people who also lived in Bridge of Weir.

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The Diva

By tradition, only Bolinchetti/Vittelli/Grazioni males were ordained to lead. The taller and more handsome Bolinchetti were prone to birthing mainly girls. From these many girls, arose a gifted soprano called Maria. When her talent became evident, she was enrolled in the highly prestigious *Scuola dei Cadetti della Scala* a part of the world-famous *Teatro alla Scala*.

In due time the striking and full-figured Maria Bolinchetti became a world-renowned opera diva, making several successful marriages and lucrative divorces before settling in Scotland. When she married for the final time, Maria was now forty. Her new husband was Kenneth Mackelleran, a wealthy shipping magnate who was fifteen years her senior, with a great passion for opera, ballet and high-brow theatre. In his youth he had studied ballet for a decade before being forced to take the reins of the family business on the sudden death of his father from a heart attack. From a late teenager, Kenneth had been an extremely cautious but active homosexual during an epoch when such activities were against the law and subject to imprisonment, with the added possibility of corrective medical interventions.

Maria had never been much taken with the messy act and rather distasteful practise of sexual intercourse, preferring to read steamy fiction in bed, preferably alone. Meeting and marrying the handsome, personable and very wealthy man from *Bridge of Weir* had been a godsend for both, providing Kenneth with a perfect cover.

The ideal couple set about establishing themselves on the arts scene, refurbishing the Mackelleran family home, renaming it *Bellavista*.

Five years into their marriage, Kenneth was dead of a massive heart attack, a congenital weakness in the clan Mackelleran.

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Outcast

In early May 1994, newly seventeen, Francesca (Franca) Vitelli was summarily despatched to Scotland, arriving with six large travel bags containing her entire worldly wealth, mainly clothes, music CDs and DVDs of favourite films. She did not have a passport nor did she have any identity papers, making her an illegal immigrant.

In Ercolano they had told her it was for her safety. However, she knew she was being sent away as punishment for repeated disobedience and for her most recent attention-seeking behaviour, deliberately creating panic among her minders by absconding, leaving a fake trail suggesting she had been kidnapped by a rival faction for ransom and leverage.

Had she showed contrition, even this might have been forgiven if not forgotten.

However, her final *peccato imperdonabile* (unforgiveable sin), was getting caught snorting cocaine, an adulterated low-grade product bought from Grazioni rivals, grubby street vendors who were also users, people her Zio (Uncle) Sergio Grazioni consider to be trash, below respect.

As she was made to pack, she was told she was lucky to be alive and would never be allowed to return to her homeland. Terrified by what might lie ahead, she prayed for a reprieve, hoping that after a year or so she might be allowed to return provided she was obedient and did not cause trouble.

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It was Franca's first ever flight. When the plane levelled out after take-off, she had been filled with dread, believing that at any moment she would be seized and thrown from the plane to her death. Then came the ignominy of the clinging dampness in her crotch while she waited for the rough hands to grab her again. During the flight, she was blind and impotent, her head muffled inside a thick hood, handcuffs binding her thin ankles together, each wrist strapped tightly to the arms of her seat. Nearby she could hear whispered voices of other passengers. Unable to make out what they said she became convinced they were staring at her, wondering what dreadful crime she had committed.

During her incarceration at the hotel she hardly slept, each new set of footsteps heard from the corridor raising the spectre of being grabbed, forced back into the hood and taken to a remote spot where someone would subject her to a 'friendly death' with a bullet in the back of her head; or that a noose would be dropped over her head and tightened before the sharp drop to infinity.

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As a spoiled and privileged teenager in a rich and powerful family, Franca had only a vague grasp of the influence of Sergio Grazioni and did not understand how fiercely he fought to preserve his 'clean hands status', paying off politicians and police officials as required to preserve his image as an upright member of society. Although Ercolano had remained the Grazioni clan stronghold, Sergio and his inner circle had moved years earlier to a large villa in a rich suburb called Chiaia, where celebrities and the upper echelons of the local business community rubbed shoulders with politicians and the judiciary, those who ruled over the teeming metropolis of Naples with its four million inhabitants.

From this redoubt, the Grazioni organisation kept a low profile while on the backstreets their foot soldiers fought to gain and hold key territories for the Grazioni drugs and pornography distribution empire. Sprawled below Chiaia around the Bay of Naples, the grey wealth of its inhabitants provided easy pickings and Sergio had grown their family business to become the dominant suppliers of common drugs such as uppers and downers and well-regarded high-quality heroin and cocaine.

While Chiaia was the most prestigious among these enclaves for the richest, there were opportunities in other aspiring suburbs and over time Sergio Grazioni developed parallel networks supplying his growing menu of illegal products to other upmarket communities.

In recent years there was also a new and growing strand to his business, supplying Chinese and Indian cloned pharmaceuticals in apparently genuine packaging, as if imported from the US or Great Britain. These products offered a variety of cures such as medically controlled weight loss, preservation and restoration of hair growth, elimination of cellulite, restoration of sagging boobs and regeneration of shrinking penises, courses of treatments which found willing purchasers who paid top prices for of these grossly over-hyped products.

Serving these more sophisticated markets, Sergio prided himself on his small cadre of smartly dressed professional delivery agents, well-spoken women posing as health insurance sales executives. These women, most in their early forties, were ex-catwalk models saved from an alternative future as a call-girl or brothel maid, a recruitment pathway hailed by Sergio as another of his personal innovations.

The Grazioni clan had also become dominant in the lucrative market supplying Viagra and contraceptive pills, items nearly impossible to obtain by prescription in Italy and very much frowned upon by the Vatican and (at least officially) by politicians of almost every persuasion. These highly valued drugs were often sold packaged with MDMA (aka Molly or Ecstasy). For older men and women, Sergio had his suppliers provide him with a product he branded as Sextasy, (MDMA combined fifty-fifty with Sildenafil (Viagra)), a 'medication' used by both men and women to enhance sexual performance and pleasure.

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Sextasy packages were usually marketed with an option to purchase an episode from a series of soap opera style pornography videos produced and filmed to a high standard, tastefully erotic, packages distributed by his salesgirls on a monthly basis in a subscription arrangement, creating *un arrosto grondante* (a dripping roast).

These short films were in high demand with aging, jaded, individuals of both sexes, offering something for everyone, raunchy fantasy romps choreographed by a sophisticated film crew based in a former Scottish baronial home. Apart from the production crew, only a restricted few in the Grazioni hierarchy knew that this fairy tale castle was in a remote glen near Oban, a seemingly unlikely spot well away from other properties, a former shooting, hunting, fishing estate which in earlier times had been much frequented by well-heeled Italians, Germans, Swiss and Austrians.

Unlike other Camorra-Mafia groups, the Grazioni adhered to the strict rule: they themselves must never succumb to using their own products. This discipline was also enforced on the lower echelons of the Grazioni organisation, recruits who were non-blood members of the Grazioni clan. For these employees, drug-taking or *rubare o diluire* (pilfering or diluting) was punishable by *scomparsa definitiva* (permanent disappearance). In most cases this fate was preceded by a vicious garrotting, applied with a thick cord, tightened slowly with a long pinion to make the process excruciatingly painful, the victim strapped into a restraining jacket and tied into a chair to increase the sense of impotence and inevitability.

Sergio made a point of attending all such punishments and, from age sixteen, Raffa was also made to attend, soon discovering a sado-masochistic flaw in his nature, a trait which he had previously suppressed but now began to relish.

At induction, all new recruits were made to watch a film of a series of these executions, the experience designed to impress on them the consequences of transgression.

Only on special occasions was the quicker 'judicial' and relatively pain-free method of sudden drop hanging used where rapid death was caused by cervical disruption or 'hangman's fracture'. This method was generally reserved for women and special favourites among the entourage who had disappointed.

This was the fate which Franca Vitelli had narrowly escaped and which she had been told awaited her should she attempt to return to Italy. The tiny whisp of a girl had been spared partly because of her youth, partly because of her medical condition but mainly because of special pleading by Nonna Iseppa.

Franca had not been spared because of Raffa as he had told her, another lie to add to the many he had used to gain control over her, to make her compliant. This was behaviour imposed on her from childhood, when she had been 'rescued' from Sicilia and brought to Ercolano as a six-year-old.

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What was true was that everything regarding Franca's removal had been arranged in a rush, before Zio Sergio changed his mind, as he might well have done.

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Disoriented and fearful, Franca Vittelli arrived in Scotland in a medium sized executive jet which landed in the summer half-light a few minutes before midnight at a private airstrip. This airstrip was located in the grounds of a sporting estate near Oban, a property registered in the name of Ove Moller.

Ove was a Danish recluse, a second-generation spendthrift inheritor of a thin slice of the great wealth from what had once been a powerful Copenhagen shipping family. Moller, now in his late fifties was an alcoholic who lived in a Peter Pan dream-world with a harem of ever-changing and underage slim Thai girls and well-built golden-maned Russian boys in a party atmosphere where Sergio's porno film crews came and went on a regular basis.

The Dane was a long-term business associate of the Grazioni of Ercolano and this landing strip doubled as a secure link in a well-oiled chain in a *servizio di trasloco* (relocation service), an arrangement which Angie Simpson supervised, operating at far hand as the intermediary for Ricardo Artusi.

The plane in which Franca travelled landed on the Moller airstrip made its deliveries most weeks, disembarking persons who usually needed to take a 'sudden holiday'. Their reasons were many, such as a need to escape rivals or unbribable officials in their respective countries.

As part of this relocation service, the Artusi of Ayr usually provided fresh papers to enable these *viaggiatori clandestini* (clandestine travellers) to enable them to resettle in the UK or to facilitate onward travel under British citizenship. Almost without exception, these fugitives were men, the majority staging through Scotland en route to South America or South Africa.

Franca Vittelli's sudden removal from Ercolano was very different.

Because Sergio had given a *promessa solenne* (solemn promise) to Nonna Iseppa, a most reluctant Angie Simpson had been forced to accept the role of *guardiano personale* (personal guardian) to the Sicilian girl, ensuring she would be *nutrita e curata come una figlia* (nurtured and cared for like a daughter).

Angie knew enough about Franca to expect trouble. The only upside was that she was given a generous lump sum and an ongoing monthly allowance to fund the girl through her initial years, after which she would be given increased licence. The backstop, which had been hard to obtain, was that if Franca showed signs of threatening Angie's olive oil business, she had won agreement to dispose of her, provided Sergio gave prior permission.

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Like most planned arrivals at the Oban airstrip, the Sicilian teenager had entered the UK without travel documents and with only a smattering of street English of the kind used to call out fun words to tourists. While Angie and the Artusi made preparations, Franca was temporarily quarantined in a locked bedroom of a country house hotel set in an exclusive golf course located near a village called Langbank. This upmarket golf hotel twenty miles from Glasgow was another Grazioni enterprise purchased as a legitimate investment for Sergio's growing portfolio, an establishment used to wash Angie's grey money profits.

Forced to remain in anonymous isolation, Franca's meals were delivered by an unseen, unspeaking person, announced by a quiet warning tap on the door. This was followed by a key turn, the door eased slightly by a hidden hand. In exchange for the previous tray handed out through the gap, a fresh tray was eased across the threshold with a foot. Fresh towels and bed linen were provided every second day. The telephone did not function. Her only companionship was a television which provided programmes only in English. There was also a jumbled pile of glossy magazines and tourist information leaflets, again everything in English, a language she was yet to master.

For Franca, this was the first time she had been forced to live without people around her to talk to. Apart from the voices on the TV, it felt like she was in solitary confinement but in a comfortable prison.

With each passing day she became increasingly depressed, morose, desperate, the first assault on her fragile psyche, the beginning of her long journey into debilitating mental illness.

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A New Life

Two weeks later, Franca Vitelli was moved from Langbank to a flat in Shawlands, on the south side of Glasgow, delivered in a red *Fiat Panda* by a woman who called herself Mrs Verdi (Angie Simpson) a tall, statuesque woman wearing a lime green trouser suit with a long and lustrous black wig and tinted, wrap-around glasses. When she spoke, which was seldom, she did so in haughty Tuscan Italian, as if a Queen speaking to her maid.

They arrived at the narrow street in the darkness, just after three o'clock in the morning. Standing in her new tenement home with her possessions at her feet, Mrs Verdi gave Franca a scuffed passport in the name of 'Julia Smith'. This passport showed that during the previous six months she had been to Russia, Ukraine, Serbia and twice to Italy, both via Rome. Franca was also given a sheaf of other false papers, suitably distressed to make them seem authentic, everything in English, which Franca could not read.

Mrs Verdi told her although the passport was real enough, it had been registered with Europol and if she tried to leave the UK she would be arrested and sent to Italy to face charges of drug dealing and theft. Verdi also warned Franca that the Julia Smith passport had been registered with the Italian border police, classifying her as *una persona non grata*, an undesirable.

"Ora sei Julia Smith. Non rivelare mai il tuo vero nome, anzi, dimenticalo, dimentica il tuo passato. Se mai verrai trovato in Italia, in qualsiasi parte d'Italia, sarai eliminato, nessuna seconda possibilità. Accetta la tua nuova identità come Julia Smith e vivi la tua nuova vita da ragazza di Glasgow. Questa è una città abbastanza buona, abbastanza grande da essere anonima. Le persone qui sono amichevoli. Ti adatterai, nonostante il tuo aspetto. Se disubbidirai, verrai eliminato, in un secondo possibilità. Ripeto, se disubbidirai, sarai eliminato. Questa è una promessa personale, da parte mia a te. E non la vedrai arrivare."

("You are now Julia Smith. Never reveal you real name, indeed, forget it, forget your past. If you are ever found in Italy, any part of Italy, you will be eliminated, no second chances. Accept your new identity as Julia Smith and live your new life as a Glasgow girl. This is a good enough city, big enough to be anonymous. People here are friendly. You will fit in, despite your appearance. If you disobey, you will be eliminated, no second chances. I repeat, if you disobey, you will be disposed of. That is a personal promise, from me to you. And you will not see it coming.")

Mrs Verdi also provided her ward with a pristine passbook for a Bank of Scotland account in the name of Julia Smith showing an opening deposit of £5,000, money which had been sent originally from Guernsey, routed through various cut-out banks, through accounts

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now closed. There was also a cheque book and an ATM card operated by a pin code. There was a slip of flimsy paper with her new signature, a signature she must copy, and copy, and copy until she had it perfected after which she must burn the slip. There was a large purse, dark green, also scuffed, well used.

"Julia Smith, a condizione che tu osservi le regole e rimani lontano dai guai, a partire dal 17 agosto, ogni mese riceverai un deposito di £ 2,550 su questo conto. Disobbedisci e il denaro si fermerà immediatamente e verrai espulso da questo appartamento. Ora, dì il tuo nuovo nome e dimmi che capisci quello che ho appena detto."

"Julia Smith, provided you obey the rules and stay out of trouble, starting on 17 August, each month you will receive a deposit of £2,550 to this account. Disobey and the money will stop at once and you will be ejected from this flat. Now, say your new name and tell me that you understand what I have just said."

"Sono Julia Smith e sì, capisco che devo obbedire alle regole".

("I am Julia Smith and yes, I understand I must obey the rules.")

Mrs Verdi also provided an official looking card with an NHS registration number for Julia Smith to be used only if requested as a back-up to her new identity and in cases of medical emergencies should her condition flare up again. Based on Franca Vitelli's medical records obtained from the Swiss clinic, a synoptic history had been embedded in the paper and microfiche documents of the NHS records system for Glasgow's Southern General Hospital. The attending neurosurgeon who had allegedly carried out the procedures on this invented version of Julia Smith had died two years earlier but his signature had been easily faked.

Julia was provided with a backstory for her life. It was part fiction and part reality, dreamt up by Angie Simpson and loosely based on a real person, a young man who many years earlier had once been an international courier for her until he was executed then dumped at sea, caught stealing drugs for personal use.

In this narrative, Julia Smith was a girl from a series of broken homes, most recently from a housing scheme called Arden, five miles to the west of Shawlands, fifteen minutes by bus. There was also vague, patchy detail of living in Greenock and Port Glasgow as a child, many miles away in the estuary towns of the River Clyde.

Franca was given photographs of these locations to study then destroy. According to this version of her early life, her unmarried mother had been a prostitute who had been forced to flee to live with an old boyfriend in Arden when she was caught stealing from her Greenock pimp. Her mother was now dead of a drug overdose and Julia was entirely on her own.

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Mrs Verdi stressed repeatedly that as the 'new Julia', having escaped from her dysfunctional family, she must only reveal her sordid history *in extremis*, a situation which, fortunately, did not ever arise.

Julia Smith was also given her first ever mobile phone¹ and warned this was strictly to be used only to *receive* text messages by checking twice daily at 7:00 am and 7:00 pm when her mobile phone should be activated for a maximum of ten minutes. At other times, it must be kept switched off, its existence never revealed to anyone.

As Mrs Verdi made to leave, Franca had asked:

"Qual è il tuo vero nome? Lavori per Zio Sergio? Perché devo restare qui? Cosa succede se prendo i soldi da questo conto bancario e scappo?"

("What is your real name? Do you work for Zio Sergio? Why do I have to stay here? What happens if I get the money from this bank account and run away?")

"Per te sono la signora Verdi, Vera Verdi. Tu sei la signorina Julia Smith, sempre e solo Julia Smith. Sei una vergogna per la famiglia Vitelli. Non usare mai più il nome Franca Vitelli. Mai. E sì, lavoro per Sergio. E sì, corri, se lo desideri. Se lo fai, sarai morto entro una settimana e il mio fardello di responsabilità per te sarà sollevato. Quindi, per favore, corri. Vai, corri, sii mio ospite. "

("To you I am **Mrs** Verdi, Vera Verdi. You are **Miss** Julia Smith, only ever Julia Smith. You are a disgrace to the Vitelli family. Never again use the name Franca Vitelli. Never. And yes, I work for Sergio. And yes, run, if you wish. If you do, you will be dead inside a week and my burden of responsibility for your will be lifted. So, please, do run. Go, run, be my guest.")

¹ In 1994 mobile phones were still uncommon in the UK, owned only by the elite in society. In criminal circles it was widely believed all live mobile voice calls could be easily monitored by police and other government agencies but that text messages, which were sent asynchronously, were probably secure.

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First Steps

The door closed and Franca was alone in the hall with the documents which verified her new identity as Julia Smith. She opened the purse and counted the money, wondering what it might be worth in Lira².

Does this mean I am rich?

Later, with the money from the bank account, she would learn she had £7,500.

From the bedroom she looked down from the top floor onto the dark street below. The *Fiat* was gone but she stood at the window for ages, expecting the tall, fierce woman to return soon to check on her, to be sure she had not absconded.

Returning to the hall, she discovered the exit door was locked, protected by a single mortise lock for which she had no key.

She thought:

Ancora una volta sono rinchiuso, prigioniero.

(Once more I am locked in, a prisoner.)

Feeling bolder, she moved about the flat slowly, checking drawers, the wardrobe, the tall refrigerator, the kitchen appliances and the huge television fixed to the wall with a special bracket, a bulky item which dominated the kitchen cum living room.

Unlike the small TV in the hotel, it was brand new, the largest she had ever seen, making the faces of newsreaders and presenters seem larger than life size, almost like real people. This TV was operated by a complicated remote control with many buttons she did not understand. Underneath the TV stand, lying on the carpet, she spotted a user manual. She found the section explaining the controller in Italian and began to experiment. She enabled Teletext and by trial and error discovered how to display on-screen dialogue, a feature available only for certain programmes with the text only in English. The TV had many other features which at that time seemed pointless but which she would come to appreciate later.

The cupboards were filled with tins of food, packets of pasta of various shapes and sizes, tins of tomatoes, jars of ragu and curry sauces, tins of tuna, and sardines. There was a long loaf of crusty white bread with grains in it. In the refrigerator there were several

² Italy adopted the Euro in January 2002.

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kinds of cheese, a dozen eggs, two packets of bacon, cartons of fresh milk, orange juice and tubs of cream and yogurt.

Almeno non morirò di fame.

(At least I will not starve.)

By the bedside there was a small, portable transistor radio. She fiddled and found a music station but kept the sound low. Feeling safe at last, in the long narrow bathroom she enjoyed a leisurely hot bath with bubbles, singing along quietly with her transistor radio, aping the voice of Dolly Parton, one of her favourite Country and Western singers.

Later, dressed in her fleecy pyjamas, she snacked on orange juice, fried eggs and very salty bacon, toasted bread with butter and marmalade with a litre-sized cafetiere of strong black coffee, doping the large mug with two heaped tablespoons of white sugar. From a child, she had disliked the taste of cow's milk, alone or in food or coffee.

Watching cartoons with the sound switched off, she fell asleep in the large leather chair.

When she wakened it was already light. The TV had switched itself off.

The clock on the cooker displayed 13:23.

She had slept through the time when she should have activated the mobile phone to check for messages. Checking, there was no message. Over time, she would learn any such messages were deleted when the ten-minute viewing window closed.

She revisited the problem of the locked exit door. After a search, she found a single key hanging from a hook inside the kitchen cupboard. It fitted. She opened the door enough to peek out. There was a similar dark green door to her own across the landing but like her own door, there was no nameplate. She used the key to re-lock the door and left it in place to stop anyone else from entering without warning.

For long spells, she looked through her kitchen window. Swirling, screaming swifts hurtled towards her, swooping up at the last second to visit a nest above her window. Studying the view of a backcourt with washing lines and refuse bin sheds, a wide rectangular area surrounded by other tenements, she caught glimpses of people working at their kitchen sinks. In time, she would learn that once a week, a lorry entered from a gap in the houses and men ran around, gathering and emptying the bins from the sheds.

At the front, from the bay window in her bedroom, she overlooked a residential street and across to a nearly identical stone fronted terrace of tenements like her own. To the side, to the left, she could see another street busier with people and traffic. She would later learn this was Kilmarnock Road, a main thoroughfare with lots of shops. In the other direction, she could see another street, with passing traffic and pedestrians. This she

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would discover was called Deanston Drive and that her own street was called Skirving Street.

She tried the TV again but was frustrated by its very quick English. As at Langbank, everything was in English. She soon tired of endless cartoons made for kids, the kind without dialogue. Frustrated and bored, she switched it off and resorted again to her transistor, listening to pop music.

By mid-afternoon, feeling tired, she went to bed and lay under the covers, feeling sad and lonely. Listening to the sounds from the street below, she fell asleep, waking with a start, suddenly fearful she was not alone.

She raced around the flat, checking, but there was no one there and the outdoor key was still in the lock.

She was still safe.

A huge wave of relief surged up in her chest and she began to weep with relief and a dull sort of happiness.

The clock on the cooker showed 20:46.

Once more she had missed the time to check for a message on the mobile phone but when she did so, there was nothing.

From the selection of available microwave ready meals in the freezer compartment of the upright fridge-freezer, she heated a meal called *Green Lasagne* supplied by a firm called *Marks & Spencer*. Such meals were a novelty to her. In Ercolano, all food was prepared from scratch by Nonna Iseppa and her maids.

Since her treatment at the Swiss clinic Franca had a poor sense of taste but she enjoyed the comforting feel of its warm gloopiness in her mouth, spooning it directly from the container while curled up on the sofa chair, watching the TV with the sound off using it just for company.

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Her second and third days alone at Skirving Street were replicas of her first with many hours spent observing from her two windows back and front while snacking on dark chocolate biscuits. At other times she dozed while watching TV usually with the sound off but occasionally choosing channels with Teletext, trying to match the sound of the words with the stream of text displayed.

Her late evening routine became firmly established because it was comforting, helping her to get over to sleep. It started with a slow, languid bath, adding bubbles and making the water as hot as she could stand and topping it up to keep it hot while singing along

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quietly to the radio, mimicking the English words and intonations, enjoying the sound of her own voice. One night she added:

"In realtà, Franca, sei proprio una brava cantante. In effetti, sei molto meglio di un semplice bravo. Sei quasi eccellente."

("Actually, Franca, you are quite a good singer. In fact, you are much better than just good. You are almost excellent.")

Sitting forward to add more hot water, she suddenly realised that she had spoken her thoughts aloud and laughed at herself:

"Franca Vitelli, stai diventando come Nonna Iseppa!"

("Franca Vitelli, you are becoming like Nonna Iseppa!")

By the end of her first week alone in the small tenement flat, she established a more normal sleep pattern. Gradually the terror of her night flight to Scotland subsided, becoming almost like something which had happened to another person, someone she had known but lost contact with.

(Franca would never discover that her top floor flat was being monitored by tiny presence-activated audio sensors poked through from the attic above, sensors which continuously relayed the sound of her movements over a telephone landline to a remote recording machine at Angie's home in Bridge of Weir, details used to monitor Franca's behaviour. The information revealed was utterly boring. The system was an inexpert emergency lash up installed by Kumar and when it failed after a few months, it fell into disuse.)

Another element in her routine was checking her green purse. Several times a day she opened the purse. It had an outer flap held shut by a magnet, slots for notes and a zipped section for coins. Spreading these unfamiliar coins on her kitchen table, she counted. They totalled £30 exactly, every time.

Thus far Franca-Julia had not yet ventured across the threshold of her flat.

"Almeno ho soldi da spendere e potrei uscire, se voglio."

"At least I have money to spend and I could go out, if I want to."

But not yet, not until she was sure the tall, angry woman was finished with her. The thoughts tumbled in her head:

La signora Verdi si metterebbe in contatto con il cellulare per organizzare un incontro? Se sì, lei andrebbe? Comunque, come avrebbe fatto a sapere dov'era il luogo dell'incontro?

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(Would Mrs Verdi make contact by mobile phone to arrange a meeting? If so, would she go? Anyway, how would she know where the meeting place was?)

Now Franca was up earlier and going to bed later, she was able to check for messages on her mobile phone at the designated times. Still nothing. Certain there would soon be a message, she became obsessed with the routine of checking at 7:00 am and 7:00 pm. In the immediate weeks to come she would discover there were seldom any messages for her. However, this would change, over time.

Moving Forward

As midnight approached and straight from a hot bath, already in her pyjamas, Franca was heading for bed. At first the Sicilian girl thought she was imagining the quiet, incessant tapping at her front door.

"Chi è là?"

("Who is there?")

Angie Simpson hissed back.

"Chi pensi? Apriti! Non ho tutta la notte per stare ad aspettarti!"

("Who do you think? Open up! I do not have all night to stand about waiting on you!")

When she opened the door to check, Vera Verdi looked fiercely into Franca's eyes, causing the tiny girl to step back, cowering, fearing she was about to be struck. As Franca retreated, the towering woman strode into the hall, heeling the door closed behind her, her eyes widening as she looked the girl up and down, seeing her without her ponytail wig for the first time, aghast at her wispy baldness.

"Buonasera, Julia Smith. Vedo che hai trovato la chiave della porta. Avrei dovuto avvisarti, non uscire, non ancora. Dovresti avere abbastanza cibo e latte per durare qualche giorno in più, vero? E quando esci, avrai bisogno di un codice per rientrare attraverso la porta d'ingresso nella parte anteriore dell'edificio."

("Good Evening, Julia Smith. I see you found the key for the door. I should have warned you, do not go out, not just yet. You should have enough food and milk to last you a few

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more days, yes? And when you do go out, you will need a code to get back in through the entry door at the front of the building.")

"Mettiti i vestiti da esterno e vieni, aiutami a portare alcuni oggetti dalla mia macchina. E ti mostrerò come utilizzare il sistema di citofonia."

("Put on outdoor clothes and come, help me bring some items from my car. And I'll show you how to use the door entry system.")

Although Franca could tell the woman was Scottish, Vera Verdi's Italian was flawless, spoken in a posh northern accent.

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Speaking rapidly in Italian, Angie Simpson laid out her plan for Julia Smith, a plan which would challenge her and give her a focus for her future life. Because of her disconcerting appearance, Julia was directed to enrol with the *Open University* and given a prepared application to sign and send off for entry in January 1995, a schedule which gave her only seven months to learn English with sufficient fluency and get her knowledge up to a level to match the forged entry qualifications provided.

In less than twenty minutes, Mrs Verdi was gone, leaving Franca to consider her options. When she had attempted to ask questions, she had been ignored, Mrs Verdi riding over her objections, keen to impart her information and move on.

Franca emptied the contents of both soft leather travel bags. Inside she found unopened boxes of equipment and plastic bags containing dozens of books, CDs, and video cassettes, all new, many still wrapped in plastic film. There were three power bars, each with five sockets and long extension cables. There were several packets of AA and AAA batteries for remote controls and several lengths of thick black cables with multi-pin socket ends to allow the kit to be hooked up to the TV.

There was a small bedside clock (battery operated) with an alarm function and a simple digital Casio watch with a plastic strap, a poor replacement for the fake *Rolex* she had bought from a street vendor in Naples, a prized item which had been stolen with everything else when she was strip-searched prior to boarding the aircraft.

Franca checked every user manual; all had instructions in Italian. Settling to the task, she accepted the challenge. It took several hours but eventually she had mastered everything and before she crept into bed, she enjoyed another bath with the radio playing and the mobile phone resting within reach on the toilet lid, ready to check for messages at seven o'clock. Yet again, nothing.

At her fee-paying convent upper school in Naples, Franca Vittelli had been one of their brightest students but had not engaged with the educational process, desperate to avoid

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being singled out as clever and 'put on show', made to perform for parents and family like other clever but better-looking, normal height girls.

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Angie Simpson's challenge proved to be Franca Vitelli's first great enthusiasm in her new life as Julia Smith, a test which helped blunt her resentment at being sent into exile.

Starting that afternoon, Franca-Julia threw herself wholeheartedly into the structured lessons provided by the tapes, videos and textbooks, working at them many hours each day, becoming obsessed as she immersed herself in her task.

With a growing knowledge of the basics of English and an expanding vocabulary, Franca now began watching and recording television again. But now she was concentrating, dissecting what was being said; stopping, rewinding and replaying key words and idiomatic phrases, talking aloud, repeating and repeating and repeating what had been just said.

Very early in her quest, she found BBC children's programmes most helpful, enabling her to tune her ear to proper English. After a few weeks, she was able to follow most of these programmes, recording and replaying them, speaking along with the presenters, answering their questions in a childish version of English, slowly gaining confidence by hearing confirmation from the presenter.

In parallel, she devoured the learning materials which Mrs Verdi had given her in the package. These included Italian to English dictionaries and primers, workbooks, with graded sets of lessons, and audio tapes to be played on her new audio tape player.

Moving forward, she focussed particularly on news and talk programmes, using her new video cassette recorder/player and a blank cassette from the dozens provided to copy programmes and replay them over and over, practicing her comprehension and spoken English.

As the days went by, this habit of speaking aloud to herself, rehearsing, trying out new words and new sounds, became embedded in her new way of life. Without being aware of what was happening, Franca-Julia was indeed becoming like Nonna Iseppa.

Eventually, driven by a need to top up her supplies of food and a desire to investigate the streets in her neighbourhood, she made her first trip down three flights and out into Skirving Street, choosing to turn left for Kilmarnock Road, hoping to find a self-service supermarket where she would have time to browse and find what she needed.

It was on that first day she discovered Twix bars, returning later in the day to the shop to buy ten packs of six.

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Each day, embedded in her routine with her alarm clock set to remind her, she checked for mobile phone messages. At first, she was anxious at this lack of interest but after a while she found it strangely re-assuring. Slowly the memory of Mrs Vera Verdi began to dim as the Sicilian morphed slowly to become a new person, a girl called Julia Smith, a girl who at some vague future time hoped to become free of Verdi's authority and live as she wished, without constraints.

Another factor which boosted Franca-Julia's confidence was she was growing richer with more money than she had ever possessed before. She had used the card at the ATM with the code, drawing down the maximum allowed at each visit, hiding the growing surplus of unused cash in a variety of secret hiding places around her flat, fearing a future when things might change.

After her first foray into the streets of Shawlands, she limited her excursions to a maximum of thirty minutes, fearful that Mrs Verdi or anyone with a matching key or able to pick her lock might enter and rob her. She took comfort in the added security of the door entry system at the common close, three floors below. And the rear door to the courtyard was securely locked from the inside.

Franca's mind was running free, asking awkward questions:

She had seen seven others who lived in this tenement, all youngish men, all with the entry code.

Could their locks, like their green doors also be identical to hers?

Would they break and enter and steal from her?

Were these men drugs dealers or couriers?

Or were they refugees, on the run?

Logic told her that the only person who could rob her would be Mrs Verdi, the very person who was depositing the money into her bank account. If she was protected by Mrs Verdi and Zio Sergio, would her neighbours dare to rob her? These thoughts swirled in her head constantly. Another odd thing worried her. These neighbours seemed invisible, silent, coming and going but never making any sort of contact with her or each other, so far as she could tell. And like her own door, none of the others had name plates and all were painted dark green, all with a single mortise lock, just like her own.

From her bedroom window she saw them enter and leave, furtive, scurrying, with parka hoods up, even in warm sunny weather. All were men of a kind, some dark-skinned, mostly young, in their late teens or early twenties. She saw no other females. Every week or so some left and new people came.

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Franca-Julia surmised that she was the only long-term resident, ignored, shunned, perhaps even feared by the others passing through.

A new question became dominant, plaguing like a mosquito:

Why did Mrs Verdi not make contact?

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On the Edge

Safely closeted behind her locked door with the key in place, listening to language tapes and video lessons Franca/Julia was steadily acquiring a growing command of English, practised by watching television, ready to chime her new childlike vocabulary, not yet fully understanding what she was saying.

Over these early months, a subtle transformation was taking place in her mind. By the end of her third month in Shawlands, closeted in Skirving Street with only her new television friends for company, afraid of her neighbours and seldom venturing out into the unknown of the busy shopping streets nearby, Franca Vitelli's mental health was in decline, heading for a breakdown.

As the end of the year approached, for long periods of each day, sometimes for up to a week at a time, Franca Vitelli began to think of herself as being *truly* Julia Smith, the first step on her journey to a form of mental illness classified as SzPD (schizoid personality disorder), in which she increasingly morphed from one person into another.

At other times, desperate to be wanted, she thought of herself as a vivacious, chatty girl called *Laura Green*, the favourite niece of Mrs Vera Verdi.

This direction of travel was partly to escape from loneliness and partly to escape from her tiny, childish, spider-like body and her lack of self-esteem. To satisfy her need to talk to someone who would welcome her conversations, she began to use a variety of voices, rotating from her new sensible self as Julia, then to Laura and, increasingly less frequently, reverting to her old self as Franca, an Italian girl she had once known, long years ago. These flights of fantasy were often sparked by girls she saw on television game shows featuring pop singers and actresses or seen in glossy magazines of the sort where every image was of a perfect girl, a budding superstar.

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This warping of her mind had its roots in her past, caused by an undetected trauma, a blocked memory of her early life in Sicily, a memory she would never be able to face without psychiatric treatment, help she would never receive. Struggling alone during the years to come, this hidden issue would steadily skew her life, leading her to escape into yet another alternative world where every problem could be solved by 'resetting', a new place where her old self could become another stronger person who could start again, begin anew, unburdened by Franca Vitelli's physical drawbacks and the constant surges of fear which stalked her mind.

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When the six-year-old Franca Vitelli first arrived in Ercolano, Nonna Iseppa would not allow her orphan grandchild to learn the truth about her parents, telling her only that they had died in a car crash. The reality was that Maria Vitelli (nee Grazioni) had been plagued by episodes of mental illness, even before her arranged marriage to Stefano Vitelli, her equally strange second cousin.

After a sojourn as a hippie in India where his mind had been permanently damaged by LSD, the locals held to their belief that Stefano was a sorcerer, the person responsible for poisoning their animals and blighting their vines with his weird spells and incantations.

What had finally broken Maria, was finding the naked body of her husband crucified in an inverted star shape to the inner wall of his barn, his eyes bulging as a result of his garrotting; his drooping penis inserted into his mouth front part outwards; disembowelled, his entrails on display, hanging down across his stomach.

Her mind cracked beyond repair, Maria ran from the scene chased by the six-year-old Franca who had been standing by her mother's side and had also witnessed the gruesome tableau.

Two days after the discovery of her father's corpse, the child was found by a goatherd, miles from her home, dehydrated, badly sunburned, curled into a ball, in a tiny cave amidst a jumble of rocks high in the rugged hillside, a place where she had escaped a second shock by retreating into a trauma sleep which would last a further three days. Nearby, at the base of a deep and narrow rock-strewn ravine, lay the smashed remains of her mother, her face unrecognisable as the corpse had been feasted on by vultures.

Rescued by Zio Sergio Grazioni and taken to Ercolano, Franca had been included into his already fractured family as an older sister to her cousin Raffaele then two years old. Raffa's mother had died in childbirth which left both children to be reared under the stern discipline of Nonna Iseppa and her maids, both children later schooled by nuns at a local convent during their primary years.

With his only sibling Maria now dead and no other members of the Grazioni or Vitelli clans remaining in Sicily, Sergio cut his ties with his original homeland, expunging the family record of his mad sister and the odd and wayward Stefano Vitelli, her equally bizarre husband.

As she grew up in Ercolano, Franca Vitelli had been watched carefully to see if she had the same weakness as her parents.

The third trauma in the unfortunate Franca's life occurred as she approached puberty. Initially it was believed her strange behaviour was hormonal until it was generally accepted that it must be genetic, from her parents. When medical help was sought, her

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condition was incorrectly diagnosed as meningitis but she did not respond to treatment and again fell into a coma.

Many months later, at a clinic in Geneva, a brain tumour was discovered. Repeated surgery left Franca with unsightly cranial scars, damaging her skin, leaving it paper thin. Secondary tumours were discovered. Novel radiological and chemotherapy treatment destroyed her womb and arrested her transition to womanhood. Before the clinic, her hair had been thick and wiry, now it was thin, wispy and prone to falling out. Wigs were provided but it was the lack of eyebrows and eyelashes which made the Sicilian grow to despise her appearance, turning her into what she thought of as a freak.

In truth, Franca Vitelli had never been a pretty child, with a narrow face dominated by an overlong thin, hooked nose, sunken, bird-like eyes and a small, thin-lipped mouth.

Before the tumour, Franca had been small and slightly built. When she was discharged from the clinic aged fourteen, she was a mere 1.42 metres tall, (4 ft 8 ins) tiny, even for a Sicilian. Over the next few years, it became evident that she was destined to remain at this height forever. Tests showed her growth hormones had been irreparably damage by the aggressive chemicals used to kill her tumour.

Returned to reasonable physical health she became rebellious, wayward, stubborn, undisciplined. This was judged to be attention seeking behaviour which it was believed would pass as she grew older. However, it was the drug-taking and her influence over Raffaele which had led to her banishment from Ercolano.

In her mind, Franca had only two redeeming features: her pale blue eyes and her flawless 'young skin', a dark golden colour inherited from the genes of Arab invaders and traders who had occupied Sicily repeatedly in centuries past. During subsequent check-ups at the Swiss clinic, comprehensive testing revealed that Franca's 'young skin' condition was likely to be a beneficial quirk arising from the tumour treatment, information which was not disclosed to her family.

Her pea-sized eyes, often unsure and fearful, combined with her childlike skin and diminutive stature gave her a waif-like appearance, an attribute she would learn to exploit as events unfolded by masquerading as a harmless twelve-year old.

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Although her journey into SzPD was just beginning, it was already taking a firm hold of her life.

During those early months alone in Shawlands, she did not have any notion of what would happen in her life and did not know that in the years to come she would develop an extensive wardrobe of costumes and a large selection of wigs, all top quality, fashioned from real hair.

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Many years into the future, in her dressing-up room, viewing herself in the magnifying section of her all-around, full-height mirror, in full warpaint, wearing a body suit and a golden hair curly wig, seen through the lens of alcohol and drugs, she would gaze with satisfaction at her new self, a bizarre version of Dolly Parton, her singing icon.

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Kumar's Stores

When Franca Vitelli first moved into Skirving Street, her flat was well-stocked with food. In the upright fridge-freezer, she found a wide selection of frozen meals, a dozen cartons of frozen milk and several loaves of bread.

In a leaflet left beside the sink, she had been instructed to put her daily rubbish in a tied plastic bag to be left outside her door. This must be done before midnight. It was a method also used by other residents. What she did not suspect was that these bags were opened before disposal, to check what the residents were consuming and looking for signs of drug use.

The ground floor entryway to these eight flats was protected by a heavy, ultra-strong security door which could only be released by keypads, one outside, another inside. The rear door of the common close was sealed by a security door, this one bolted internally and secured with two heavy digital padlocks. This high level of security led her to recurring thought:

Questo edificio è una fortezza, una sorta di prigione aperta di alta classe.

(This building is a fortress, a sort of high-class, open prison.)

The access code for the front door keypads was constantly changing. Franca worked out this signalled the departure of someone moving out or the arrival of a new tenant. This new code was provided on a slip of paper inside a small blue envelope dropped through her letterbox during the small hours of the night, at the time when the rubbish bags were collected. When she tried this code on the digital padlocks which secured the rear door in the common close, she found the padlocks opened.

Mail deliveries and other requests from the external keypad buzzer must be ignored.

If Franca wished to purchase educational books and suchlike, she must never use her Skirving Street address. Instead, she must have items sent to *Kumar's*, an Asian convenience store located at the far end of Skirving Street, away from the main bustle of Kilmarnock Road. When she had a delivery waiting for her, a 'collect code' was sent by text to her mobile phone, always a single codeword which she must write on a small matchbox sized official-looking code-token, pre-printed on thick yellow card with a thin red border, from a batch of several hundred which Mrs Verdi had provided. To authenticate the code-token, Franca must add her name (Julia Smith), the code word and the date and time the codeword was issued by text.

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At Kumar's, she presented the code-token in exchange for her mail order purchases. This busy establishment was run by a bushy bearded, mixed-race man with an older Indian woman who appeared to be his wife, a woman dressed in sari and pantaloons. This woman, 'Babhru' according to her name tag, did the major share of the counter work and spoke with a pleasant high soprano voice coloured by a lilting pidgin Glasgow dialect.

To make these collections, Franca-Julia always dressed as Laura Green. In this persona, she wore skin-tight denim jeans, Nike trainers, a dark auburn wig under a hooded parka and grey tinted Rayban glasses, items brought with her belongings when sent into exile. It was a disguise she had previously used on her defiant escapes from surveillance at Ercolano, worn when wandering the streets of Naples, seeking out drug dealers.

At Kumar's, she bought chocolate bars and cola drinks and while paying for them, revealed only the blank side of her code-token to Babhru, after which she was directed to a small windowless office behind the counter, out of sight of the other shoppers. This office cum cupboard was grubby and chaotic, filled with boxes piled to the ceiling. Kumar's dog ends were heaped on a large ashtray used as a paperweight to hold down receipts and invoices on his battered wooden desk. On submission of her code-token, which he always scrutinised, she was made to turn her back to him while he opened a large firesafe to retrieve her package.

Kumar was largely silent during these encounters but over a few months of catching snippets of him speaking on one of his several mobile phones, Franca detected a Naples accent, confirming in her mind he was almost certainly one of Zio Sergio's agents.

To validate her theory, she spent a few days haunting the area around the small shop from early to late and saw a steady stream of smartly dressed men and women enter and leave to drive off in fancy cars, Mercedes, BMWs and Porsches.

Later, when she came to understand how Mrs Verdi and Kumar operated, she would work out that the small, nondescript shop was one of several cut-out hubs which Mrs Verdi had developed to supply her Glasgow clients with drugs and other contraband, items she guessed they ordered by text and paid for by cash on collection when they submitted their code-token. Franca further deduced that if her theory was correct, she was an anomaly in Kumar's system, foisted on him by Mrs Verdi, an arrangement he was forced to accept as she was his superior.

When the OU material arrived at Kumar's in late November, Franca-Julia-Laura was impressed.

Redoubling her efforts, she began to obsess over the OU introductory programmes, a television series broadcast at odd hours, episodes she would record and watch repeatedly until she was certain she fully understood every word and phrase.

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All assignments would be conducted by correspondence or, if she could access a computer, some would be online, at her option.

Now at last Franca Vitelli could excel without attracting the stares and snide remarks she had suffered as a day student at her exclusive convent senior school in Naples.

This had been a fee-paying establishment she had been forced to attend by Zio Sergio, at Nonna Iseppa's insistence. Another factor which separated Franca from the other girls was that she was a day student, not a boarder. Each day she had been transported from Ercolano by a white-haired woman driving a *Fiat Doblo* taxi, a woman with a scarred cheek, wearing an old-fashioned hearing aid and who had never uttered a single word, even when Franca tried her best to be pleasant to her.

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Credit Card Account

On every occasion that Franca-Julia ventured into the outside world dressed as Laura Green, she made an immediate beeline for the nearest Bank of Scotland ATM and withdrew the maximum amount permitted by the machine, hoarding this cash, fearing her monthly allowance money might be cut off at any time without warning.

Initially, afraid she might be burgled or 'inspected' while she was out of her flat, she had carried the cash concealed on her person. As the amount of cash increased, she realised it made her a target for pickpockets and muggers, the sort whom she had seen operating among the tourists in Naples.

This vicious circle of fear and paranoia played on her mind constantly, making her even more reclusive, a further step along her pathway to the mental illness which would blossom in the years to come.

After several months of considering her options, she compromised, deciding to hide most of her hoard in the flat while always carrying around £2,000 with her, an emergency amount to be used to run away if things went suddenly badly wrong and the police raided Skirving Street to arrest her drug dealing neighbours, sweeping her into their net.

Later still, when she had better English, Franca hatched a plan to open a savings account for Julia Smith with the Trustees Savings Bank (TSB) at their HQ, walking all the way to the centre of Glasgow, still unsure about using buses. She had been at the threshold of the branch on three previous occasions, turning away, unable to force herself to enter. On the day she took this first step, she was jittery, awkward, fumbling in her actions and stumbling over her words. Apart from her short exchanges with Vera Verdi, Babhru, and Kumar and a few ladies at supermarket check-outs and clothes shops, since arriving in Scotland, Franca had not spoken with anyone in a normal interactive conversation.

Inside the bank, she was welcomed with courtesy and kindness, accepted at face value, despite her slow, accented English. Using her passport as proof of her identity as Julia Smith, she gave her address as Kumar's, hoping he would not open her bank statements.

(In the months to come these statements were passed to her without comment, crumpled and bundled with other items she was collecting using her code tokens, unaware he had steamed them open and photocopied their statements for Vera Verdi.)

To the bank teller, to cover her halting English, she explained she had recently arrived from Italy where she had lived from age four, sent home to Glasgow to care for her

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elderly aunt, Zia Vera Verdi. As she chatted, becoming more relaxed, she began to enjoy her role play.

Before this first encounter at the TSB, speaking to her reflection at the wardrobe mirror in Skirving Street while dressed as Laura Green yet pretending to be Julia Smith, Franca had practiced this over-elaborate charade for hours, talking back and forth to her tape player and joining in, parroting her own voice, self-correcting her grammar. This was an extension of what she was already using while replaying recordings of TV chat and quiz shows, her first attempts at sophisticated role play, an activity which would become a vital part of her future life.

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In total, during her first year at Skirving Street, Mrs Verdi made five visits to Julia Smith. These calls were never announced in advance, Angie Simpson appearing at Franca's door without warning. On what proved to be her final visit, Mrs Verdi reiterated her previous instructions.

In a final long harangue, Franca was warned, in English:

"Julia Smith, I am happy with your progress, so far. You have made a good start. If you continue to progress satisfactorily in this new life, you are free to make your own way provided only you remain in the Glasgow area under my supervision until you are twenty-one, after which you will be free to move wherever you like. However, I remind you most strongly, you must never, ever attempt to return to Italy, not to Ercolano, Naples, Sicily, nowhere in Italy. You are now Scottish, as your passport proves. If you attempt overseas travel, your passport might fail. They have new checks nowadays. You could be arrested as an imposter and deported to Italy. Need I repeat what will happen to you there? So, no overseas travel of any kind. You must steer clear of trouble with the British authorities. If you do this, the monthly allowances to your bank will continue as promised. You have three years to establish yourself. The final payment will be made on 14th of May 1998, on your twenty-first birthday. There will be no more money after that date. Further, on that date, the entryway code will be changed denying you access to these premises. Anything you leave in this flat will be removed and incinerated. Until then, I will be watching you and if you cause me trouble, you will be punished. Do you understand me, Julia Smith?"

"Yes."

"Goodbye."

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Within a few months of opening her TSB account, the bank was rebranded as Lloyds TSB.

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Julia Smith was issued with a welcome pack which enclosed a Silver level Bank Card and a replacement cheque book. This dual card allowed her to make ATM withdrawals and verify cheques. In addition, Lloyds TSB gave her a Credit Card with a limit of £1500. These two cards gave Julia Smith new power to make purchases without reference to Mrs Verdi.

Franca-Julia's first venture into reading everyday English had been glossy magazines for women, particularly their advertisements. Now, with her credit card, when she saw an item she wanted, such as make-up, sexy lingerie and sleep clothing, high quality wigs, sunglasses, rings, earrings, and other trinkets, she could use the cut-out coupons with her credit card and have the items sent to her by mail order for delivery to Kumar's Store.

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Morphing

By February 1995, her eighth month in exile, Franca-Julia-Laura had gained a secure smattering of basic English. Becoming more adventurous, she discovered the nearby down-market suburb of Govanhill where there were more mixed-race faces in the streets including some from Bangladesh, Pakistan and a few from India. On foot, Govanhill was only around twenty minutes from Skirving Street.

In these busy streets, window shopping while mingling and listening, she heard no Italians and very few of the posher Glasgow voices she heard in Shawlands. Seeing Asian women move around in close-knit chattering groups made her feel lonely. One day, she trailed two older women into a shop. With the help of the younger shop assistant called Aneesa, using mainly sign language, she bought various outfits chosen for her by the girl.

By taking to the veil and sari, using her tinted Raybans to hide her blue eyes, she was now able to merge into the cosmopolitan swirl of others in the streets around her, discovering a small park near Govanhill Library where she could make new friends.

In her new disguise, Franca-Julia-Laura soon morphed again, giving herself the name Aneesa Kumar, inventing a script for herself as a Bangladeshi second-generation teenager who had fled from her controlling family who lived in a council house in Easterhouse. Aneesa Kumar was now living with a friend called Julia Smith, a girl she had met at language classes.

Increasingly during that second summer of 1995, whenever the weather was suitable, wearing a different sari outfit each day, Franca-Aneesa Kumar went out and about seeking one of her regulars or choosing another lonely elderly park-bench lady to practise her English with. Role-playing, inventing variations of people she saw and studied in TV chat and game shows, Aneesa became more and more talkative with whoever was available and amenable, but always one-to-one, strenuously avoiding mixing with groups of people.

As winter approached, Franca's romance with Aneesa faded but the Bangladeshi remained at Skirving Street as a person who mostly kept herself in the background, in awe of the more forceful and accomplished Franca-Julia-Laura.

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While enduring another lonely period, Franca fell under the influence of the spirit of a woman called Frances Verratti.

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This happened when she read in a glossy magazine an obituary, a gushing eulogy of praise for a recently deceased Dublin-based author who was also a world-renowned jewellery designer sought after by film stars and Royalty alike, a transcendental mystic with a global following. This veritable polymath had once been a qualified solicitor employed by UNICEF before becoming the inspirational chef-patron of a Michelin Star restaurant in Monaco called *Fusion*. Renouncing the good life, Verratti then sold up her restaurant and moved to Vidisha in the Hindi speaking province of Madhya Pradesh where she founded a transcendental retreat movement and detoxification clinic called *gurutvaakarshan kee achchhaee* (The Goodness of Gravity).

According to the magazine article Frances Verratti had then moved home to Dublin where for the last twenty years until her recent death she had authored a weekly page in the magazine called '*Healing Words*', offering a free agony aunt service encouraging readers to share their dilemmas, promising in return an insight into a new way of living called:

'Success through obedience'

Franca Vitelli wrote to the magazine and, after several exchanges with its Editor, paid generously for photocopies of the entire back catalogue of Frances Verratti's '*Healing Words*' articles.

Reading them over and over, Franca began to see the value of Verratti's mantra of '*success through obedience*'.

With Franca's mind prepared by this intensive reading, the final shift came late one evening, as she was drifting off to sleep after her bath.

Frances Verratti spoke in a clear, firm voice:

"Franca Vitelli now is your time to move ahead. I promise that one day soon you will enjoy great success. A few years from now you will be rich and powerful and then you will free yourself from Vera Verdi's manacles and escape to a life of your own choosing. Tell me Franca, who am I and how will your success be achieved?"

"You are Frances Verratti and with your help I will achieve success through obedience."

"Franca, if you believe and obey, you will be granted whatever you wish. Now, sleep soundly my darling and tomorrow we will begin anew."

"Frances, I love you. We all love you."

"I know my darlings and I love you all too. Now we are together at last we shall grow and succeed. But only if everyone does what?"

"Everyone must obey."

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*"Well said, Franca-Julia-Laura-Aneesa. Yes, **only through obedience** we will become one strong, happy and successful family.*

"Now sleep my darlings and dream your dreams.

"Tomorrow we will start out on the path to success and power."

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Making Friends

As a diversion from her gruelling OU study schedules, Franca-Julia-Laura-Aneesa often made far-ranging shopping trips, always on foot, browsing in clothes shops, finding those which specialised in garments and shoes for the smaller woman.

(Frances Verratti firmly declined any invitations to leave Skirving Street, saying she preferred to avoid contact with outsiders.)

If she found something new to wear, Franca would race home, change into it and go out at once to show it off to one of her elderly well-dressed ladies she had met in Queen's Park or Govanhill Park. These lonely widows and spinsters were always glad of company, eager to talk, desperate to share their present health worries or impart long-winded story versions of their past lives, boasting of times when they had been important.

If these lonely old ladies noticed Franca's ever-changing names and outfits, they did not mention it, happy to be encouraged by someone willing to listen without interrupting. Over time Franca-Julia-Laura-Aneesa learned to become a good listener, noticing how at each repetition of a story they had told her before, they elaborated, becoming more revealing of themselves, desperate to share a truer, more detailed version of their lives, stories in which they were either successful heroines or unfortunate and downtrodden victims.

One lady in particular reminded Franca of Nonna Iseppa, the only person who had ever cuddled her, a recent friendship which became increasingly important to the now flamboyant, sari wearing Franca-Aneesa. Her friendship with Feray Veli, soon to be eighty had started by accident a few months earlier. It was clear the woman's health was failing. During those hot summer months of 1996, the unlikely couple met most evenings on a bench beside the boating pond in the grounds of Queen's Park, Franca-Aneesa dressed in her latest sari and pantaloons and wearing highly decorated shoes. During these encounters, the Sicilian heard many versions of her elderly friend's life story.

Feray was from Turkey. When her mother died, she had travelled overland alone to England, to join her father in Leeds where Dr Emre Veli worked in the NHS as a medical physicist. Encouraged by her father, Feray became a microbiologist. When she qualified, they had moved to Glasgow where her father had worked out the rest of his career at Glasgow University as a backroom boffin, supporting medics, helping them invent new treatments for brain tumours. Feray, who had never married, had worked for the Blood Transfusion Service. Now that her father was dead and she was long retired, Feray was part of a team of volunteers at Langside College helping refugees to learn English.

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One day Feray was not waiting at the bench where they had agreed to meet in the small park in Govanhill, near the public library on Langside Road, near to Feray's home. About a week later, Aneesa learned from another elderly lady that Feray Veli had succumbed to an untreatable cancer of the bowel, a cancer which had quickly spread.

Convinced this death was a sign that Nonna Iseppa had also died, the loss of Feray affected Franca Vitelli badly, blowing her emotional ship off course again.

In the aftermath of this loss, Franca-Julia-Aneesa gave up courting elderly ladies and turned to online chat rooms, accessed from the newly installed computer terminals at the Mitchell Library, a place which became a favourite haunt as it was open from early to late, seven days a week, a new sanctuary where she was close to real people, mostly students like herself.

However, this experiment was short lived. Increasingly she was shunned because she found it difficult to contribute to their online chats when they talked about their boyfriends, girlfriends, sisters and brothers, parents, and best friends. In these situations, Julia Smith had nothing to contribute that seemed to be acceptable or believable, even to herself. One by one the others deleted her from their round robin email groups.

Once more Franca Vitelli was alone.

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Genny

From the start of her OU Foundation Course, Julia Smith had been ready enough and was soon submitting her assignments on time, meeting with good success, obsessing over regular plaudits received from her personal tutor, Dr Geneviève Smyth.

Emboldened by her growing success in assignments, Franca Vitelli morphed again.

Wearing her first proper real-hair wig of long black ringlets purchased from a magazine advertisement, she ventured outside for the first time without her Raybans, no longer hiding her blue eyes, wearing false eyelashes and black and dark purple eyeshadow, dressed in her nicest clothes from Ercolano, presenting herself in the persona of a polite Goth girl called Genny Jones from Cambridge.

In her new backstory, her adoptive father Dr Francis Smyth-Jones, a specialist in eye surgery, had moved the family to Glasgow when he was promoted to become a Consultant at Gartnavel Hospital.

This fiction was concocted from the anguished potted history told to her by another of her park bench ladies. Mrs Myra Jones, originally from Wrexham, North Wales, was a lonely widow whose only son Francis had abandoned her when he moved to Cambridge to become a Consultant Eye Surgeon. Sadly for Myra, Francis had married a 'horrible' local woman called Hermione, whose father was a Rector in the Anglican Church. Cutting Myra out of his life., her son had forsaken his Welsh protestant roots.

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Month on month as she progressed with her studies, working intensively to keep up her success rate and driven mercilessly by Frances Verratti, Franca Vitelli's SzPD was taking stronger hold causing her to morph from Julia to Genny to suit her mood and meet her goals.

During this period, Frances Verratti was ever present, floating just above Franca's conscious mind, guiding and controlling her thoughts.

At home and sometimes walking along a street, Franca vocalised her conversations with Julia and Genny and Laura, debating and arguing about the best course of action to take on an assignment, what new item to order from a magazine, what to buy for her meals and so on, creating a pretend family for herself.

In and around Skirving Street the tiny girl-woman was avoided by locals and visitors alike, seen as most definitely peculiar, probably unstable.

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As Frances Verratti's mind hovered above Julia and her new best friend Genny, what she heard in their conversations was two girls speaking in what she perceived as being 'perfect BBC English'.

Frances said, firmly:

"Franca, now that you have a perfect Home Counties voice, we really don't need Genny, do we? Get rid of her at once my darling, she has become an unwanted distraction, always causing arguments. As we agreed with Julia, our studies must come first. Get rid of Genny. Now, please!"

It seemed that Franca had at last achieved her goal and was now speaking 'proper' English, just like her OU tutor. Her short-lived love affair with Genny was at an end.

(The reality was different: what her elderly ladies heard was an odd childlike girl who spoke clear enough English with passable grammar but tainted with a slight Glasgow-Asian lilt, placing her in their minds as an odd, reclusive, introverted woman of mixed race, probably some sort of refugee.)

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Ejected

On 14 May 1997, Franca Vitelli's twentieth birthday, as she was approaching the end of her third year living in Shawlands, the Sicilian made a discovery which would alter her previous trajectory.

Near Shawlands Cross, while standing at traffic lights, Franca-Laura saw Mrs Verdi in her car, a black *Maserati*, waiting for the lights to change. Her passenger was Kumar, not in his slovenly shop clothes but smartly dressed in a dark business suit, white shirt and tie, his beard trimmed. The side window was down, Kumar was smoking. Oblivious to her presence, the couple were talking in an animated manner in Italian, arguing she thought, discussing an overdue shipment expected from Naples.

As the car moved away, Franca noted its numberplate details, model type and the sticker on the rear window which proclaimed the sales outlet which had sold the car. Later, using a phone card in the public telephone in the foyer of Langside Library, she called the sales desk of this outlet and asked for the name of the car's owner, explaining she had seen the lady driver drop a valuable earring at a filling station and would like to repatriate it. The receptionist duly obliged and Franca Vitelli now had her first positive link to the whereabouts of her Scottish minder.

Dressed as Laura Green in a floral-patterned summer dress with pale green Nike trainers, Franca-Julia took two buses to get to Bridge of Weir to visit a woman called Mrs Angelina Simpson, the woman who must be Mrs Vera Verdi. On foot, she made a start, combing the streets, looking for the address she had been given, marvelling at the grand villas and enormous gardens of this small, rich town. She found *Rosemount* and saw the black *Maserati* and the red *Fiat Panda* which she thought was probably the very car Mrs Verdi had used to drop her off at Skirving Street. Both cars were parked outside a triple garage.

It was then that Franca-Julia made a grave mistake.

She walked up the long driveway to the grand front door, pushed the doorbell and waited. There was no reply. She tried again, pressing for longer, hearing the repeated musical chimes from inside. After another wait, she set off to explore, wandering to the rear of the building, amazed at the extent of the vast, well-tended grounds. At the rear entrance she pressed a second bellpush to hear a higher, sharper ring from within. Once again there was no reply.

After peering through several ground-floor windows, Franca-Laura gave up and left.

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The concealed CCTV cameras had picked her up when she entered the front gate and had tracked her every move during her hour long visit to *Rosemount*.

Two days after her visit, Franca received a text which stated:

Get out of Skirving Street.

You have a week to find your own accommodation.

Never come near my home again.

Do not visit Kumar's shop again.

Disobey and your allowance will stop.

You are on your own.

I will be watching your every move.

If you leave Glasgow, you will be erased.

No second chances.

Later that day, the mobile phone from Mrs Verdi ceased to work, its subscription cancelled. The next day when Franca checked, Kumar's store was closed, shuttered.

Checking over future months, the once thriving shop remained closed.

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A Second Exile

During her first days reeling from Vera Verdi's dismissal text, driven by the effect of a second rejection and with the fear of failure pressing down on her, Franca-Julia's mental health deteriorated further.

Calling herself Frances Verratti, she found a large single room with an en suite shower (no bath) with a tiny scullery cum kitchen, part of a rambling, four-level multiple-occupancy house in Strathbungo, a short walk from the Queen's Park boating pond. Dressed as Aneesa in her saris and pantaloons, hiding behind her Raybans, she restarted her meetings with elderly ladies, some she remembered, she thought, others were new.

To fend off her desperate loneliness and for additional support, Franca-Julia-Laura-Aneesa was morphing constantly, holding audible conversations between themselves, causing people in streets and shops to avoid eye contact and veer away or cross the street out of her path. As in the past, Frances Verratti remained at home, shunning the company of outsiders.

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In the early days in Strathbungo, time passed slowly then accelerated before slowing again while Franca-Julia's pendulum swung from extreme fear and uncertainty to steadfast defiance and boldness.

There was no further contact from Mrs Verdi (Angie Simpson). Each month Julia Smith's allowance appeared in her Bank of Scotland account. Constantly she watched for people tailing her but saw no one who looked suspicious or familiar. Nothing bad happened.

As the first weeks became months, the pendulum slowed and stopped.

Under the stern control of Frances Verratti, Julia re-engaged with her OU studies, working furiously to catch up. As Julia Smith, becoming dominant, she believed herself to be an outstanding OU student writing and speaking BBC English. As proof, she had good grades in her assignments and was on course to earn a good degree, hoping to find a post which suited her skills and lifestyle.

Scanning the employment pages of local and national newspapers at the Mitchell Library, she saw the burgeoning opportunities for computer operators. Her sole focus now was to get the qualifications she needed to get the sort of job she could cope with while keeping herself funded to try to make her way alone.

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Browsing the OU courses available, she applied for enrolment on a further degree course to add another string to her bow. As an existing student with an exemplary record, she was welcomed enthusiastically and the admissions tutor agreed to enrol her as an accelerated student, compressing her studies to allow her to complete her supplementary degree within a one-year period.

Her new Strathbungo neighbours ignored her. Immersed in her studies and living a mostly solitary life, Juila Smith became dominant, supported and driven by Frances Verratti.

During this period, Franca-Aneesa retreated, watching and waiting, living in the shadows, her only real conversations now with her bench park ladies.

Laura Green was ignored then forgotten.

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Gainful Employment

Franca Vitelli began to worry about what would happen to her finances when the money from Mrs Verdi stopped on her twenty-first birthday.

Julia was well ahead with her Assignments for the OU, with only a few essays left to top and tail. In eight months, the autumn of 1998, she expected to graduate with a Master of Arts degree: *Applied Law for Medicine* and a second degree, entitled *Master of Science: Computer Database Structures*.

By this stage she had accrued just over £78,000 in her Lloyds TSB account.

Now more or less free of her studies, she bought her first home PC, connecting to the *Internet* over a very slow and frustrating telephone line. In parallel with her OU studies, she had used her growing expertise to establish herself as an expert in building databases. *Internet* advertisements were offering posts for data input operators. She targeted those who encouraged employees to work remotely, interacting online, as self-employed agents.

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Julia Smith's first ever employment was for an agency called *Inputation.com* who needed an operator to enter personal details into a series of spreadsheets designed for their client, a bank based in Guernsey. Franca-Julia was astonished at the sums these people held in their accounts. Although this job as a data input drone was boring, the money was reasonable and within a few days, she had devised a technique based on her OU studies which allowed her to automate her entries, using an Optical Character Reader (OCR) to scan the raw data directly into the spreadsheet templates provided by her employment agency, an approach which ensured this raw data was entered error free.

Feedback from her online manager at *Inputation.com* was excellent and she was judged to be the fastest data entry operator the agency had ever employed. They sent her extra work for which they paid well. By her second month, Julia Smith was earning a good steady income.

As an experiment, she added a new entry in the name of Dr Genevieve Jones, giving her address c/o Miss Julia Smith at Strathbungo. After a long debate with her other selves, she decided to allocate Genny a deposit of £15,000 which she thought not too high and not too low. Finally, she ticked the box requesting that all communications should be paperless, by email alone.

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A month later, by email, she received a statement confirming that her account was active and that her balance of £15,000 plus interest was secure. Using the details provided, she sent a further £5,000 from her Julia Smith account at Lloyds TSB. A few days later she received a confirmation email that this money had arrived safely and that her balance of £20,000 plus interest was secure.

Without prior notice, Julia Smith's lucrative income stream dried up. *Inputation.com* advised the Guernsey bank project was at an end, thanking her for her sterling work. They did not advise the agency had ceased trading. Franca-Julia's final invoice for £535 remained unpaid. When she tried to pursue them for this money, she discovered *Inputation.com* was hidden inside a Scottish Limited Partnership (SLP), an organisation which ignored her demand letters.

Almost at once she found a replacement job working directly for BT, again as a data input operator. Once again, using her OCR technique, she was soon a star employee earning substantial monthly bonuses. By this stage the slowness of her domestic telephone line, a shared line used by other residents at Strathbungo was becoming a major frustration, a problem she could no longer thole.

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After a long, long search in many estate agents' windows, Franca-Julia-Laura-Genny-Aneesa found a property which they were sure would be suitable.

Once more Frances Verratti again resisted the whole idea of a move but after a day-long acrimonious debate, Franca-Julia made her decision and they moved to a rented two-bedroomed flat in a recently completed development in Newlands, about twenty minutes on foot from Strathbungo. Her brand-new flat was on the second floor, one-flight up from the common entryway which served six apartments in total. Now at last Franca had a bath again, a luxury which she had greatly missed at Strathbungo.

At first, Frances Verratti was agitated, on edge, desperately observing their five neighbours, learning they were singletons, up-market versions of Franca-Aneesa's park bench ladies, older widows and spinsters who drove out to shops and lunch engagements in their posh cars, two Mercedes, two Audis and a huge BMW. So far as Franca-Frances could discover, her new neighbours did not socialise with each other and although they nodded politely when they met Franca-Julia on the stairs, these women seemed insular, wrapped up in their own world.

After weeks of silence, Frances Verratti settled, voicing her approval:

"Franca-Julia-Laura, I sincerely believe this move to Newlands has been a wonderful success. But my darlings, when you go out as I know you must from time to time, please

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leave my dear Aneesa here with me. As I explained to her, we must not let these people see her, it would only draw unwanted attention to us."

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As Julia Smith had been promised, her new dedicated domestic telephone line was much faster. And, with help from her BT manager, she paid for a second business line with even higher speed.

Convinced she could never be caught, she routinely made copies of this BT Client Data which she reconfigured and sold to advertising agencies and to several of the new rival dot.com mobile phone companies springing up as the Millennium approached.

After a few false starts, she enrolled herself as *GJ Computing* with the Guernsey bank, quoting her account in the name of *Genevieve Jones*, declaring her company to be a small entrepreneurial business planning to set up an offshore account to shield her savings from the dreaded Millennium 'bug'.

Although her application took two months to be processed, she was eventually accepted and opened her new business account with a first deposit of £25,000, money she transferred electronically from her Julia Smith account at Lloyds TSB. By return, an algorithm in the Guernsey bank sent her an application form inviting her to open a super-saver account which promised an annual APR of 11.3% provided she was willing to deposit a minimum of £2,000 per month over three years. Julia Smith now had a safe, tax-free home for her new income stream.

Within a few months of starting with BT, in parallel, she relaunched herself online as a database consultancy called *J-S-Computing.com*, offering to design and populate databases for public bodies, sometimes bidding for contracts under two or more of her host of other trading names.

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Entrepreneur

By May 1998 when her last Bank of Scotland payment from Mrs Verdi was deposited in her Bank of Scotland account, Julia Smith immediately transferred to her Lloyds-TSB account. In total, Julia-Franca had just over £180,000 in her various accounts. In addition, she now owned her Newlands flat outright.

Frances Verratti was delighted to point out that her prediction of Franca's success had been proved true.

In August 1998, just over four years after being sent into exile, Julia Smith was already an established computer consultant when her OU scrolls arrived confirming the award of two degrees, both with Distinction.

She was now ready to dedicate herself full-time to making enough money to guarantee her financial security.

Free of the need to study, earning money and avoiding taxes became her new obsession.

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After careful research, she made email contact with Messrs James Mooney an online only business. For an upfront fee of £1,300, this specialist firm guided her through the process of setting up her first Scottish Limited Partnership (SLP) by sending the forms online, already completed, ready for signing and mailing,

Like *Inputation.com*, Julia Smith could now process her legitimate consultancy earnings while minimising tax. In the years ahead, other SLPs would follow.

During the first two years in Newlands, working up to eighteen hours a day, Franca-Julia used her powerful PC to run a series of automated tasks for her various contracts as a computer consultant. This equipment was housed in her spare bedroom where she kept the venetian blinds permanently closed to cut out distractions.

During any free time, she skipped to the kitchen table to use her new laptop and second BT line (now also upgraded) to browse the rapidly developing *Internet*, seeking opportunities to exploit her talents, exchanging money-making ideas with others in chat rooms, always with her camera disabled.

In this new world of online commerce, Franca-Julia was working long hours every day, relentlessly building her wealth risking mental and physical burn out.

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Visiting a variety of online recruitment websites, Franca-Julia entered her real qualification details while adding fake experience resumes, modified versions copied from others like herself offering themselves as freelance legal consultants. Although Julia Smith had a good law degree, she was not a registered solicitor. This made her, in effect, a paralegal.

By persisting and refreshing her offering many times, invitations to bid for contracts began to arrive in her inbox at *J-S-Consulting.com*. Within three months of starting this new venture, Franca-Julia had a fistful of rolling contracts providing an additional and income stream to supplement the earnings from her data entry work.

In her new role as an online consultant/adviser, she strenuously avoided *Skype* video calls preferring either voice-chat meetings or email-only consultations. If forced to participate by video, she dressed and applied make-up carefully, modelling herself as a version of the aggressive and diminutive Scottish journalist who appeared regularly on *BBC Newsnight*. In this disguise, the Sicilian's beautiful blue eyes appeared hooded, spoiled by overly long artificial lashes, painted-on black eyebrows, cake-thick purple eyeshadow which clashed with her bright orange lipstick, glossed to a high shine.

As the paranoia of the approaching Millennium 'bug' drew nearer, Franca Vitelli's empire expanded and in combination with her income streams for her work as an online IT consultant and HR trouble-shooter, her savings were growing steadily.

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Temptation

During her early years in Glasgow, Franca's drug of choice was caffeine, consumed as strong black coffee made from *Nescafe Gold* freeze-dried granules loaded with sugar and stirred to form a thin syrup.

However, the memory of those times in Ercolano with Raffa, popping Molly and sniffing cocaine kept returning. Repeatedly and increasingly the suppressed worm of temptation returned as she recalled the thrill, the rush, the soaring freedom of the hit.

Each time she was tempted, she was dogged by two questions:

Where in Glasgow can I find a 'safe' drug dealer, one who won't supply me with impure drugs or mug me at the point of sale?

And how can I be sure the drugs are not coming from Vera Verdi, giving her an excuse to eliminate me?

Reading online news forums and sitting in chat rooms without contributing, she realised that as a teenager in Naples, she had been wildly reckless and incredibly lucky, resolving never to buy drugs from a street source again.

However, the allure of finding drugs on the *Open Internet* appealed, if only she could find out how this could be done safely and securely. After hours of searching without success, Franca felt certain there must be another way. This became a recurring temptation, an itch that demanded to be scratched.

In the early months of 1999, working slowly and cautiously, using a 'cleansed' and dedicated laptop protected by three levels of backup firewalls and long series of fake email addresses and profiles to preserve her anonymity, Franca-Julia eventually found her way into the *Dark Web*. This first incursion frightened her and after many weeks of browsing without moving to make a purchase, she paused her search to think matters over.

Frances Verratti offered unwanted advice:

"Franca-Julia, roaming around in the Dark Web looking for illegal drugs is madness. It could let crazy people into our lives. You must stop now, while we are still safe."

But the pull of the Molly-Cocaine 'highs' would not go away and Franca's debate with Julia and Laura returned time after time:

"Julia, it can't be that difficult, can it?"

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"No, Franca, you're right, of course you are. We have two good degrees and zillions in the bank to prove it. We can do this, no worries."

"Laura, what do you think?"

"Listen up Franca honey bunny, it's really down to you and Julia but don't forget Genny has those bank accounts in Guernsey. They could be way useful, yes? So, why not buy what we want overseas and supply it to others too? We read somewhere there is a ton of money to be made, selling on that Black Thing, or whatever it's called."

"It's called the **Dark Web** and yes, I'm sure we can figure a way. And yes, there must be money in it for us, good money. Done properly this could provide a safe tax-free income stream. Are we agreed, Julia?"

"So, Franca, you mean we should set ourselves up as an importer-retailer?"

"Yeah, sure. After all, if Mrs Verdi and Kumar could organise a way, so can we."

Frances Verratti chimed in, forcefully, winding up the discussion:

"Well, my darlings, there is no denying you have the expertise and the brains but if you are set on doing this, don't rush at it. Take as much time as it needs. Dig into the Dark Web and master it. After all, it's just another game and we already know we are good at games, right? And we do have other items on our agenda, right?"

The decision was made but it took almost a year for Franca-Julia to perfect their plan.

Meanwhile, there were opportunities to exploit with the coming Millennium 'bug' issue with its threatened chaos already working everyone into a frenzy and good money to be earned by pandering to this paranoia.

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In preparation for her new drugs business and to conceal her identity while browsing both in the *Open Internet* and in the Dark Web, Franca-Julia set up a separate batch of fifty email addresses using all the available global providers. To keep track, she added these names to a separate look-up table on a USB memory where she could access and copy and paste her login names and passwords for each of her party sites.

In this new anonymous online vista, believing she was safely concealed, she ventured more widely out into the burgeoning *Internet*, visiting various forums and chatrooms, searching for 'safe intimacy', discovering a new world of expensive 'subscriber only' shadowy audio chat rooms inhabited by other lonely oddballs. Inside these virtual rooms, with her laptop camera switched off and covered by a *Post-It* sticker, she could be free, able to let go, indulging herself, dressing up to get fully in the mood, enjoying her

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fantasies, sliding easily from Franca to Julia to Laura to Aneesa and others invented on a whim, usually based on someone she had read about in a recent magazine.

Frances Verratti steadfastly refused to attend these so-called 'parties' and to stop her from sniping from the sidelines, Franca would usually 'banish' her to Strathbungo.

Flirting, making and breaking friendships, flitting from room to room, she slipped slowly but steadily towards a fantasy life which soon grew into her new obsession. Increasingly, fuelled by strong coffee and 'long Vodka and Tonics' mixed half and half in a pint glass, these swirling party sessions might last for several days without a break.

Living online with no conversation or interaction with real, normal people, on occasion Franca deluded herself into believing her new online friends were completely trustworthy. In her desperate loneliness, she sometimes wandered over the line, revealing intimate snippets of her life and identity, recklessly exposing herself to exploitation, to be saved by the scolding intervention of Frances Verratti:

"No, Franca. NO! Turn off that laptop now! You know you must, don't you?"

Saved by this inner voice, she obeyed and retreated into a deep sleep to recuperate.

When she surfaced, she would be greeted by a gentler version of Frances:

*"Time to wake up my dear one. Come now, dearest, dearest Franca do come back to us, we miss you so much. Please, my dear one, why not have a nice breakfast of milky porridge? Eat a few slices of buttery toast. Wash it down with orange juice. No coffee today. You **must** care for yourself better, dear one. If you go on as you are doing you will damage your body. If they take you to hospital, you may never be allowed to return to us. What would we do then, dearest? You know we would not survive without you, don't you?"*

Following a few days of sobriety spent catching up on her consultancy assignments, Franca's cycle of partying would resume. Inevitably, relentlessly, this downward spiral led her deeper into the *Dark Web* where the bizarre was normalised, where she enjoyed the added thrill of living on the edge while secure in her belief that she was safe, unfindable behind her Cut-Outs and Firewalls.

Encouraged by others she met in her party rooms, she used the *Dark Web* links they shared and began to buy drugs, sniffing cocaine, Ecstasy and Molly and other pills in a variety of colours and flavours, washed down with near tasteless Vodka mixed fifty-fifty with caffeine-laden *Red Bull* to provide a syrupy sipping liquor with an intensely sweet taste which suited her palate.

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Game On

A further strand to Franca's digital life was gaming, a pastime which became another obsession. Initially she had played only for fun, as a diversion and to demonstrate to herself and her opponents how clever and skilful she was.

Revisiting her previous casual approach and by delving into online chat rooms and email forums she learned how to improve her skills. By investing in the very best gaming equipment (a dedicated PC with a high-speed processor, supersensitive ergonomic handheld-controllers and a visualisation visor helmet of the type used by NASA) she was far better equipped than most of her competitors.

Dedicating herself over many sessions she mastered the most popular online games, honing her skills to near perfection. What started out as fun, soon became more serious when she discovered subscription-only gaming rooms where addicts played for cash rewards. Throughout the 1990s, this type of online gambling during gaming was still in its infancy and had not yet migrated to the *Dark Web*.

From chat rooms and forums, Franca-Julia discovered the most dedicated gambling-gamers were based in the USA, Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea, learning most of these addicts preferred a gaming slot around midnight in their local time zone. To enable her to exploit this, Franca was juggling her work schedule to fit these lucrative opportunities, facilitated by a newly created SLP with an additional Guernsey bank account as her cut-out.

Early in her gaming career, she learned to hide her expertise by joining and re-joining these gaming sessions using a variety of email accounts and gaming names, always presenting herself as a novice, to gain an edge over others.

Now she had established her routines, she was often working around twenty-hours a day, flitting from one gaming room to the next, eating like a sparrow. She seldom watched television, preferring to relax by taking a bath while singing along with her CD player before relaxing under her duvet with an alarm set for the next work or gaming session.

Mostly by trial and error, she learned how to choose her victims, people she could gamble against and win. Unlike gamers who were fixated on building their reputation and glorifying their online 'game name', Franca-Julia-Laura-Aneesa now created a new pseudonym for each gaming session, posing as a rookie, a beginner then duping her opponents by allowing them to win during early sparring encounters, setting them up then, when their guard was down, moving in to win and scoop the jackpot.

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Now, instead of depleting her wealth and squandering her time paying for talk sex in sleazy subscriber chat rooms, she was earning good money by gaming, making over £20,000 in accumulated winnings during a single marathon session by skipping around the globe during the favoured midnight slots, ending her session with a hot bath then crawling into bed to await the next alarm call.

Earnings of £200,000 per month soon became her norm.

Frances Verratti was pleased with this new behaviour:

"Franca-Julia, at last you have found your true niche. This is your gift, your talent, your genius. I commend you for your dedication, dear one. Set your target for the coming year at five million US dollars and, when you have reached it, reset it to ten million for the following year. You know you can easily achieve this, don't you?"

Year on year, her raft of *Internet* identities expanded. When this list of game-names approached five hundred, she copied the details from her notebook into a lookup table embedded in an encrypted database which she downloaded to a larger USB flash drive before deleting it from her laptop and shredding her notebook.

For added security, she wore this new flash drive suspended from her neck on a thin silver chain long enough to be plugged into her laptop or as a pendant inside her clothing, with the memory stick snuggled inside her nickers.

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Crypto Queen

Franca-Julia-Genny was increasingly attracted to the new concept of 'e-cash', a form of electronic cash using crypto-currencies, a method of trading which preserved the anonymity of both buyer and seller. It was a hot topic in certain chat rooms where a new 'Gold Rush' was being predicted for those bold enough to buy early.

Using a *Dark Web* link provided by a chat room buddy, she bought US\$10,000 of these e-cash 'tokens' in Genny's name. To Franca this act felt like a low-level form of gambling akin to gaming. When they arrived in her cut-out inbox, fearing they may harbour a virus or viruses, she immediately isolated them on a USB flash drive, using a high-quality version made by IBM. Then, with a newly purchased, bare-backed laptop containing no personal details, she began to experiment using special software, trying to break the encryption codes but without success.

As a further test, she used her e-cash for a small value drug purchase. Her online payment was accepted, her goods were delivered, their quality was satisfactory. ***Her new e-cash tokens worked!*** Further repeated purchases proved the concept was sound.

Soon she had US\$ 100,000 in e-cash tokens and saw online that their value was soaring. On the run up to the Millennium, taking further chances, she bought another batch, then another, then another until she had invested US\$ 500,000 in various forms of *Dark Web* crypto currency. Checking repeatedly, sometimes two or three times each day, she watched as her 'investments' swung ever upwards in value to more than a million US Dollars.

At this point, she sold off half of her e-cash tokens for US Dollars and used the cash to buy another Millennium Secure Bond to add to her Guernsey account. This bond, backed by a group of Guernsey banks was guaranteed to return an APR of 9.3 % tax-free to registered clients.

Meanwhile, the Millenium watershed passed and her remaining *Dark Web* crypto currencies continued to increase in value. She was hooked.

Franca Vitelli would become an early investor in *Bitcoin* when it launched in 2009.

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Theresa

Franca, in the guise of Julia Smith, had made the bulk of her early wealth by exploiting the corporate fear and paranoia which characterised the hype prevalent at that time. During an intense six months period, she made over £800,000 from her consultancy activities, half of which she used to open an online secure account in Liechtenstein, using the remainder to buy further e-cash tokens.

By her twenty-fourth birthday (May 2002), Julia-Franca had accumulated £3 million equivalent, now held in a variety of currencies and investment instruments quoted in US dollars and Swiss Francs, secured offshore in her Guernsey accounts, holding only a reserve of £50,000 in cash at Lloyds TSB in Glasgow. She now owned two further flats in the development at Newlands, flats she rented out, choosing middle-aged single women she felt would be easy to dismiss if they stepped out of line.

To celebrate her birthday, Franca-Julia decided to buy her first car, a notion which had been building in her mind for months. Averse to exposing herself to hands-on driving lessons, she used an online teaching platform developed by gamers. The six-month subscription to the simulator course cost £3,550 up front but multiple online reviews suggested it was well worth the money. To make it even more realistic, she purchased an add-on cockpit option comprising a car section with a seat, steering wheel, dashboard, pedals and so on, rented at £500 per week backed by a £2500 surety. The cockpit 'plasma windscreen' was linked to the driving package on her PC. Wearing special goggles, the whole experience was very realistic.

During an intensive, obsessive four-week period she progressed through the graduated course. After two failed online driving tests, she succeeded at her third attempt and was awarded a framed 'Pass' certificate.

To celebrate, she bought herself a new style yellow Mini, a real version of the simulator car she had driven in her lessons online.

Unwilling to risk driving without a licence, she went to the *Dark Web* again and bought herself a genuine UK driving licence of an unnamed girl. This item had been offered for sale by the girl's brother, who claimed his sister had died of leukaemia a few months earlier while living in Morocco but that her death had not been reported to the UK authorities.

During email negotiations, this brother offered a matching passport. The face displayed was a passable likeness of her own, showing a sallow-skinned Mediterranean girl not unlike

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herself when dressed as Aneesa. Taken together, at US \$23,000 the driving licence and passport seemed like a good buy but before sealing the deal, using other *Dark Web* sources, Franca-Julia discovered she was being scammed by the alleged 'brother'.

Challenged, the seller changed his story. According to his new version, until a year earlier Theresa had lived off grid in a small Buddhist colony on a remote west coast Scottish island. During a huge winter storm, the commune's buildings had been destroyed. Without any means of calling for help, its members had died of exposure. Only the group's leader, the seller, had survived by escaping on a makeshift kayak, taking with him all the valuables of his followers.

To Franca-Julia, this story seemed more likely. She was desperate to believe it. Her brand-new car was waiting in the car park behind her Newlands flat. She had sat in it, even starting it but never driving without the security of a driving licence which would pass inspection, if required. Desperate to get driving, Franca-Julia went ahead with the deal, stipulating the documents must be posted to an unmanned *Mail Boxes Etc* outlet in the centre of Glasgow, holding back fifty percent of the agreed sum until they arrived safely.

Checking online, she was relieved that both documents proved to be valid.

Further delving revealed Theresa Maroni from Bristol was listed on several missing person websites with images showing a small girl with anxious eyes, a thin face and long, lank hair, wearing Goth clothing and thick, garish make-up in shades of black and green. Her family thought she was probably living in a hippie commune in France and were praying for her imminent return.

Experimenting with digital imaging processing software, Franca-Julia was able to reproduce a passable likeness of herself to match these images of Theresa. In a bold step, she first distressed the Maroni passport by partially immersing it in hot water, as if it had suffered an accident. Then she used it to apply for a replacement passport using her own photo image but in the name of Theresa.

The new passport arrived. Repeating the process, she obtained a replacement driving licence for Theresa. She now had a further valid identity, one which gave her the opportunity to travel outside the UK, even to Italy and to Ercolano to see Raffa without being caught by Interpol.

Franca decided to act to secure her new identity.

Using the *Dark Web*, Franca-Julia eventually tracked down the fake brother and was able to verify that he had recently lost a commune on a remote Scottish island, a group comprising entirely of misfit young women like Theresa. Her *Dark Web* informant suggested it was unlikely they had died in a storm. This informant seemed certain the

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man had sacrificed his harem as part of a weird sexual ritual which he recorded and sold on the *Dark Web* as a series of snuff movies. Currently this sex guru, (a forty-eight-year-old Norwegian called Hans Ullrich), was in the process of establishing another New Age free-love commune in a remote valley in Bulgaria.

Franca kept delving in the *Dark Web*.

An album of images and potted history of Hans Ulrich revealed he had studied at Manchester University, gaining a degree in *Ecology*. After graduating, he had failed to return to his family farm on the outskirts of Oslo where his older brother was still in business, running a large herd of milking cows.

This second *Dark Web* informant confirmed Ulrich was a serial killer, preying on young women. The informant offered to broker the elimination of this monster for a reduced fee of £30,000, this to be paid in two equal instalments to a bank in Douglas, on the Isle of Man.

To secure Theresa's identity for herself, Franca Vitelli ordered her first ever 'hit' on the *Dark Web* and deposited the first instalment as directed.

Six weeks later she received a link to a *Dark Web* video site where she was shown a highlights trailer, a thirty second clip. Franca deposited the final payment and in return received a password to access the full video, twenty minutes long. It showed the still handsome, fair-haired Viking Adonis suffering a sudden death by electrocution while connecting an array of batteries to a solar collector farm, the sequence part of a grand opening ceremony for a new commune. In the background there was a group of young women watching. After his 'accidental death' most were crying, others blank faced, stunned. But a few were smiling.

Although Franca had destroyed hundreds of thousands of 'monsters and warrior opponents' while gaming, this was her first ever 'human' kill.

Reviewing the footage, the Sicilian found the outcome strangely dissatisfying, eventually concluding this was because she had not been in control, not able to witness the kill live. However, she had enjoyed the weeping and wailing of those among the distraught commune members while trying to render ineffective CPR. An unexpected bonus, which added to her self-justification, was that these girls were all small, thin and unattractive, losers, clearly groomed for their obedience, not their looks. By having Ulrich eliminated, she had saved them from death.

An addendum clip showed the group interring their leader and, later, packing up and leaving the commune site as a straggling group, led by an older, taller macho girl wearing a British Army uniform with REME epaulets.

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With Theresa Maroni's passport and driving licence in her possession and its source eliminated, Franca Vitelli now had a second secure identity to add to that of Julia Smith, an identity which she intended to keep in reserve, both as a contingency and to use when her grand plan for retribution against Angie Simpson aka Mrs Vera Verdi was brought to completion.

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Kelvin Court

Moving forward into the new millennium, Franca's next move was to look for a larger, more prestigious flat. She was tired of living in Newlands; it was too small, claustrophobic. Every room and even her hallway was stuffed with clothes, shoes, jewellery, CDs, video cassettes, DVDs and mountainous piles of magazines some dating back to her early years in Shawlands, this accumulation of purchases considered as sacred possessions, evidence of her wealth and importance.

Sadly, the Newlands property had poor sound insulation. Particularly annoying were her adjoining neighbours playing their TVs too loudly and the new younger woman above who clip-clopped around on wooden and tiled floors on noisy shoes. Franca mitigated these irritations by wearing headphones, listening wirelessly while singing along to tracks broadcast from her Hi-Fi music centre.

When singing became a new obsession, she purchased a dedicated laptop and, as a first step, connected it to a studio-quality microphone. Not satisfied with sound alone, she added a broadcast-quality video camera with a remote control zoom function from a discrete handheld controller. Her next step was to install top-of the range software to edit sound and video clips, a development requiring a new and more powerful desktop computer, full-scale mixing desk equipment and a larger plasma screen to view her 'performances'. This equipment now filled her lounge, with her furniture stacked to one side of the room to create space.

During an intensive six-month period at Newlands, Franca recorded herself performing a growing repertoire of Country and Western songs, mostly singing in duet with Dolly Parton, her idol.

Although she was pleased initially, she soon realised that although her singing was superior, visually her efforts were sub-standard compared to those posted online by other self-recording artists, videos which had better visuals provided by back-drop projectors, often views such as rolling hills and rivers with fields of cows, cantering horses and frolicking sheep, scenes easily recognisable as blagged from old films.

To compete, she must move to the next level. For this she needed more space, a room to be developed as a proper, professional recording studio.

Her singing activities did not pass unnoticed by her Newlands neighbours who began posting notes into her letterbox in the hallway, requests which she defiantly ignored.

The worst moment came when a note was sent to her threatening action:

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Dear Miss Smith,

You simply must STOP this cacophony of sound coming from your flat. Do you not have any sense of time? These recording sessions, if that what they are, are often imposed on us at the oddest hours.

This is a final warning. If you do not desist, we shall report you to the Environmental Control Officers at Glasgow City Council.

Your longsuffering neighbours.

It was time to find a larger flat in a location where she could remain anonymous.

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With the bold decision to move now made, she spent days online visiting websites, chasing up on details, checking, checking, checking until she was sure she had found what she was looking for at Kelvin Court, Glasgow's iconic Art Deco property completed in 1938. Located conveniently for shops and transport with Anniesland Railway Station a few minutes away on foot and with frequent buses to the city centre, it seemed ideal. What she particularly liked was the prospect of a return to higher ceilings akin to those at Skirving Street and Strathbungo.

Before confirming her offer, Franca-Julia purchased a list of current residents from a *Dark Web* source. Then, delving further, she learned many Kelvin Court flats were second homes, often owned through a cut-out and used as a pied-à-terre by wealthy people visiting Glasgow from London, some from overseas, media people involved in the film and television industry. Other owners were often people of substance previously reared in Glasgow, those who had won or inherited greater wealth, whose main properties were in larger, grander homes on country estates scattered around the outskirts of Glasgow or further afield.

Later, she would learn that these were people who used Kelvin Court as a convenient stopover when meeting in the city for business or pleasure or as a convenient location to overnight and park their cars before taking a black cab from the rank beside the railway station to Glasgow Airport.

Using a newly created Scottish Limited Partnership called *West End Property Investors*, she purchased a luxury four-bedroomed penthouse flat on the sixth floor of the West Wing with views of Loch Lomond and the Arrochar Alps to the North, the Campsie Fells and Stirling to the Northeast and, on clear days, due East to Edinburgh in the far distance. From the rear of her flat, to the West and South she had clear views over Glasgow and could even pick out the rooftop of her Newlands property, perched on a hilltop and surrounded by trees. She could also see Queen's Park, Strathbungo and

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streets around the busy junction at Shawlands Cross, the area where she had lived when she first arrived in *Glasgow*.

To Franca, who craved security and anonymity in equal measure, Kelvin Court seemed an ideal location. Most importantly, the entire property was operated and maintained to a high standard providing central heating, a secure garage, efficient lifts, everything included in a monthly fee paid anonymously by direct debit.

Later, to her delight, she would discover that her nearest neighbours were often absent for days or weeks at a time. It was as if she was living in the tower of a palatial fairy castle.

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Dark Web Guru

During the first decade of the new millennium, Franca-Julia continued to wander in the foothills of the emerging *Dark Web*, using her *e-cash* and other crypto-currencies to source drugs in bulk which she retailed to carefully targeted high-worth individuals as health supplements. As her drug trading venture developed slowly, she tweaked each element of her purchase and supply chain until she had perfected it, creating an online trading model which would have impressed Angie Simpson, had she discovered it.

Since ejecting the girl from Skirving Street and repairing the disruption resulting from moving Kumar to new premises, Angie Simpson had barely thought of Julia Smith. The monthly allowance payments to the girl's Bank of Scotland account were automated, funded by Sergio and paid on schedule until her twenty-first birthday, an arrangement monitored by the Artusi in Ayr which meant Angie was not directly involved.

Over time, Vera Verdi's memory of the exiled Sicilian faded, the peculiar Franca Vitelli almost forgotten.

By contrast, using *Dark Web* sources, Franca-Julia was gradually building a sharper picture of her former minder, analysing Angie Simpson's Scottish drug empire and its links to the Grazioni clan in Naples and Ercolano.

Thinking of her lost past in Italy brought on a spell of depression which Franca countered by buying a vintage left-hand drive *Maserati* which she had professionally restored, repainted and re-upholstered in red. After several fantasy months as Dolores Dylan, a vamp who flaunted fake cigarettes using a long ebony cigarette holder, she sold the refurbished *Maserati* in an auction online, clearing a tidy profit. Moving on, she bought a new bright silver right-hand-drive Mercedes sports car online. This car she drove as Marianne Morrow, a dismissive and ruthless businessperson.

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In May 2004, ten years after arriving in Glasgow and approaching her twenty-seventh birthday, Franca Vitelli had accumulated just over seven million US dollars in various accounts and investments. In her mind, the exiled seventeen-year-old Franca Vitelli was now a dim memory, a frightened girl Julia had once known in her past, a nightmare to be suppressed, held away in case those demons might re-infect her.

In her new and settled persona of Julia Smith-Frances Verratti, Franca was more discrete, no longer driving flashy cars, preferring the ubiquitous anonymity of a red *Fiat*

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Panda and comfortable in her four-bedroomed flat on the prized top floor of Kelvin Court on the edge of Glasgow's upmarket West End.

For the Sicilian girl, her move to Kelvin Court seemed like completing a circle, an upmarket version of Skirving Street but where her neighbours were like herself, rich, reserved, secretive, and careful.

Occasionally, feeling nostalgic, she would dress as Aneesa Kumar, hiding in her sari, pantaloons and Raybans. Using public transport, she made visits to her old haunts in Shawlands, Langside, Newlands, Strathbungo and Govanhill, watching poor people as they scurried along in their grubby lives, enjoying the feeling of power her wealth and qualifications gave her.

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Phantoms

In the autumn of 2005, with her OU Master's degree in *Computer Database Structures*, Julia Smith enrolled herself at Strathclyde University as a self-funded PhD student, a move which gave her the opportunity to operate inside the university's security net.

Initially, as a mere research student, Franca-Julia had only limited access to the computer system but crucially, she now had details of the system operating staff with whom she interacted as part of her online research project, sending them a series of questionnaires aimed at exposing their prejudices and personal interests. Using this data in a gaming approach she incessantly attacked the computer system defences, seeking to overload it, trying to find a weak point.

It took her four months to achieve a breakthrough.

Inside the internal staff firewall, she created a 'phantom administrator', choosing the name *Madeleine McKay*, a ploy which allowed her to access and operate inside the powerful university computer system while working remotely from her office at Kelvin Court.

As *Madeline McKay*, Franca-Julia used her 'authority' and, conforming to the now familiar system protocols for names, passwords and identities, she created a disparate cohort of fifty fully authorised phantom members of staff, all hidden from the system by a new and more powerful double-encrypted firewall.

At no cost to herself, Franca now had a secure, twenty-four-seven mega-powerful and anonymous platform to be used to develop her various clandestine businesses.

With her goal achieved Julia Smith resigned as a research student, as often happens with new post-grad students in early months. Then, after a delay of a month, from Kelvin Court *Madeleine McKay* wiped all record of the transient Julia Smith from the university database.

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NHS Legal Advisor

In January 2006, armed with her OU Master's degree in *Applied Law for Medicine*, Julia Smith obtained an online post as an outsourced advisor providing legal advice to NHS employees. In this role she was defending malpractice disputes against consultants, doctors, pharmacists, nurses, technicians and administrators.

During a follow up telephone call from her recruiter, a disabled self-employed woman called Donalda, working from home in Stornoway, Franca-Julia learned her appointment was a fiscal convenience, funded from an unused equipment budget which meant she was not officially part of the NHS headcount, making her virtually anonymous.

Under this contract, she must be available for 'instant' online contact during core hours from 10 am to 4 pm, Monday to Friday. From her first weeks Franca-Julia discovered the advice required from her was routine, formulaic, seldom occupying more than two or three hours of her day and, since requests for advice were almost always sent to her by email with no stated deadline for a reply, she was soon able to satisfy her line manager by clearing her backlog overnight, beginning each new day with a clear inbox.

After her second month under this arrangement, an email arrived from her NHS line manager:

Dear Julia,

I have been reviewing your performance and, from the feedback provided by those you have helped to date, I am pleased to advise we are very satisfied with your work.

Would you be willing to handle an increased workload to help me clear a huge backlog of requests from my colleagues?

Under a revised contract (attached), I propose that you would continue as before but offer your services from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm, Monday to Saturday over the next three months when we would review performance and adjust your outsourced contract accordingly.

I do realise this would require an element of service outwith normal office hours and propose to increase your remuneration from £85 per hour to £105 per hour.

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Please review the revised contract in the PDF attached and confirm that you are willing to continue under this new arrangement.

Thank you,

JJ Mulindwa

Jonathon Joseph Mulindwa, BA, MCIP&S

Executive Manager (Outsourcing).

Franca-Julia replied by return, confirming her agreement to this new arrangement and thanking Mr Mulindwa for his confidence in her.

As per her new written contract, she rendered her invoices on the last Friday of each month and the payments were usually made to her Lloyds' bank account within three working days. Rightly, she suspected this was an automated payment requiring only a box to be ticked by her manager or his clerical assistant.

After a further three months during which she was frequently commended for her clear advice and rapid responses, her call-off services arrangement was converted to a six-month rolling contract. With the blessing of JJ Mulindwa, she was afforded full access to NHS patient records. At this stage these records were still a mixture of unreliable digital databases and automated call-up images of microfiche slides copied from the original paper records now in long-term storage, these originals stored off-site and scheduled for shredding at an indeterminate future date.

During an intensive three-week period, acting as Madeleine McKay, Franca-Julia used this access to copy thousands of records across to her secure encrypted password storage area within the Strathclyde University computer system, satisfied she would be able to access this data when her contract with the NHS expired. If the data theft were discovered, which she thought unlikely, there was little chance it could be traced to Julia Smith.

This was the type of information Franca was eager to examine, certain if she looked hard enough, she would find the people she wanted to target. Her work began immediately, employing a scanning routine algorithm, an automated search process to identify these key individuals from patients' records, the start of a discovery process which would unmask the full extent of their misdemeanours.

This retribution imperative had been seeded by several chat room buddies who had been the subject of medical treatments which they claimed had been negligent and which had

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left them crippled or damaged, injuries often inflicted when routine procedures had gone wrong and remedial measures had been ignored.

With expertise gained during her OU studies, Franca-Julia began searching for what she felt sure must be there, the dark secrets of the elite among NHS Consultants, those at the top, the ones who also saw private patients, raking in high fees while exploiting the resources of the publicly funded NHS infrastructure. As she had suspected, these misdemeanours were held in sealed files, weakly encrypted, their codes easily broken with her latest software purchased from the *Dark Web*, software originally developed by Mossad, now superseded.

In Franca's mind, these Teflon-coated individuals were identical to the people at the clinic in Geneva, the ones who had stolen her life from her, turning her into a stunted, barren, hairless freak.

Gradually Franca-Julia built up her list of elite people she would monitor, waiting for the opportunity to make them pay or obey to suit her ends by manipulation or subtle blackmail.

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Greenies and Blues

Under a state sponsored research programme, the original formula for hybrid Captagon³ capsules had been developed in Chinese laboratories from an amphetamine derivative using a distillate of caffeine to give an added kick.

The first use of what soon became known as "Greenies", was to promote instability in the NATO sphere, particularly in the Middle Eastern theatre of operations. To make these new "uppers" attractive to ISIS Jihadist factions, they were sugar coated with a crunchy pale green food colourant designed to match the ISIS flag. What was concealed from all but a few in the hierarchy of the Chinese communist plutocracy was that the real purpose of the 'modified Captagon project' was to distract Western governments while Chinese manufacturers and traders put their efforts into expanding and dominating the global consumer market for manufactured goods.

In a copycat operation, newer and more powerful "Greenies" had been concocted by scientists in North Korea, this work to generate a hidden source of foreign currency for the near bankrupt regime of the Kim family dynasty. Unlike the weaker give-away Chinese version, the North Korean Greenies were marketed as high-end, top-quality capsules for sale only to those who could afford them, distributed through the Mafia and other underworld dealers.

For the Western domestic market, these more powerful North Korean capsules were usually supplied in press out foil strips of twenty containing 10 Greenies and 10 matching "Blues". Blues were cloned from Tramadol in a fifty-fifty mix with Viagra, a bedtime pill used to bring users high on Greenies back down while also restoring their sexual vigour. Without regard to emerging potential negative health effects, these Blues also contained a complementary hormone designed to provide a libido surge in both genders.

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Over time, alongside packets of high purity snorting cocaine, Greenies and Blues had become Franca's best sellers, favoured by all-night clubbers, rock groups and by high-powered executives, particularly those keen to avoid the debilitating aftermath effects of alcohol. Greenies and Blues were also in high demand from top-flight sports stars such as soccer, rugby and tennis players, boxers and their ilk, anyone required to function with high levels of physical performance or work under high stress for long and intensive periods, like surgeons or racing car drivers.

³Captagon, see : <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fenethylamine>

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Unwilling to source her drugs from street vendors, Franca-Julia turned to the *Dark Web*. Within a few months, she realised that with her sizeable hoard of crypto-currencies, there was a clear opportunity to leap-frog her suppliers and go directly to the manufacturers' agents, the people at the nexus of the European supply chain.

Surely this must be what Vera Verdi did?

Julia whispered:

"Franca, we can do this far better than Vera Verdi, we can . . ."

Frances Verratti interjected:

"No, Franca, leave it alone. Stay as you are. You are already rich. Why take such a huge risk? We all love you just as you are, you know we do, don't you?"

But the idea of emulating and surpassing Angie Simpson and her Vera Verdi operation took hold and the seed once planted grew steadily until it became another full-blown obsession.

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Moving carefully around the *Dark Web*, each step made with great caution, Franca-Julia began to research the Grazioni of Ercolano operation. In a breakthrough moment, pretending to be in the market as a drugs supplier, she persuaded one of Raffa's former mules to reveal the broad outline of how the Grazioni/Simpson business model worked, selling vitamins as a cover for drugs and other contraband to well-heeled clients in Rome, Naples and other cities in Europe. For a hefty fee, he was persuaded to reveal what little he knew of the Vera Verdi operation in Scotland.

With this starting point, Franca delved further, using a variety of names, applying a gaming approach, using voice-changers and cut-outs, paying for information when necessary, building up a sketchy picture, trying to fill in the detail. Scrutinising what she had discovered about the Grazioni/Simpson methodology, Franca Vitelli saw only its weaknesses. To her mind, their distribution method was both insecure and outdated, primarily because it relied on couriers, always the weakest links in any drugs supply operation.

A far superior alternative which had been buzzing in her head for months became manifest when Julia put it into words:

"Franca, why not supply directly and put the risk element onto the user rather than the supplier?"

"Yes, Julia. Let's make Martina our cut-out, give her something worthwhile to do, eh?"

Martina, always keen to show a willingness to obey, immediately chirruped:

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"OK Franca. Yes, I'm up for it!"

Conceding defeat, Frances Verratti spoke:

"Now Franca make sure you take enough time to do this properly. There is absolutely no rush. Listen carefully to me dear one and write this down, please:

Security and Anonymity go hand in hand, as you well know.

Finance is key. Why not use Guernsey? After all, you know how it works there, don't you?

Secure delivery to your Clients is the key but you must avoid Couriers. Why not use Royal Mail, just a thought."

Julia chirruped:

"Well said Frances. Good to have you onside with us at last."

Frances Verratti ignored this barb and added:

"So please, my dearest Franca, do this properly and you will make us mega-rich. And remember, if Vera Verdi can do it, we can do it better. And please, please be cautious because we are all depending on you my darling Franca, you know that don't you? Whatever would we do if you were caught and sent to prison? Or those nasty Camorra people found out about you operating on their patch?"

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Business Start-up

In the unlikely event Franca was detected by the authorities or her rivals, she would ensure her trail led not to Kelvin Court but to a person called Martina Maroni who, her documents would reveal, was now based at a convenience address on the secretive island of Guernsey and whose 'residency status certificate' had been purchased online from the Dark Web and linked to her new passport which was then updated to show she had moved from Bristol to Guernsey.

The precursor to Franca's subterfuge was to change Theresa Maroni's name to Martina Maroni online by Deed Poll. Martina was a name Theresa had always wanted. With this change established, Franca applied for a new passport under the name of Martina Maroni. With this passport established and her deed poll documentation, Franca then applied for a driving licence in the name of Martina Maroni, thereby completing the transformation.

In Martina's name, using an untraceable cut-out service at a bank in Zug, Switzerland, Franca signed up Martina to a clutch of worthwhile charities such as RSPB, National Geographic, WWF, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and several other large international charities very willing to enrol another Life Member, especially a low cost member who wished only to receive information online and who had indicated she was willing to consider requests for additional contributions to support special initiatives.

By this means, for a few thousand pounds Sterling equivalent, Franca created what appeared to be a genuine online media profile for Ms Martina Maroni, a person easily found by anyone browsing the web.

Game playing the role of Martina online from Glasgow, Franca set about building a stronger presence in Guernsey for the reclusive but well-meaning Ms Maroni. This was achieved by joining several online worldwide gym classes with hundreds of members. As Franca-Julia knew in advance, these online clubs all had chatrooms, meeting places often frequented by lonely people who clamoured to grab the microphone icon and spout their stories. In these rooms although appearing to attend, Franca never spoke, restricting herself to making banal comments by typed contributions, never revealing her voice, the perfect voyeur.

To reinforce and maintain this subterfuge, Franca regularly visited Martina's many inboxes, sending appropriate responses to certain waiting emails while rejecting, deleting and blocking others so that they 'bounced' back to the senders. This initial set-up of these subscriptions took only a few weeks but she continued with the deception for three months before making her next move.

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Meanwhile, in parallel, Franca was busy setting up her supply chain.

Now familiar with the Guernsey banking system, Franca chose a low-profile bank called "Dove and Company" which *Dark Web* chatter suggested was a money-laundering front for *HSBC*, the behemoth bank well-known to have strong links to the Mafia and drug dealers.

Using her newly acquired documents for her fictional agent, Franca applied online for an account for *Martina Maroni*, who, it was claimed, was an investigative writer specialising in promoting good causes, worldwide. She laced her application with details snipped from her social media profile stating she intended to make an initial deposit of US \$2.5 million (to be transferred from the *Zug* cut-out account) expecting the checking clerk at *Dove and Company* would immediately welcome such a sizeable inflow of funds.

Naturally Franca did not reveal the main purpose for *Ms M Maroni's* account was to process and manage the income stream from her *High Purity Vitamins* clients.

Once established, Franca actively managed the working balance in this drugs money processing account, syphoning *Martina's* profits to a *Lichtenstein* account in the name of *Frances Verratti*.

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Franca was immensely proud of her supply chain arrangement which she considered to be much superior to *Vera Verdi's*.

Although it was complicated, it was well designed and worked effectively with minimum effort on her part, low overhead costs and virtually no risk of discovery as she had no employees to recruit or supervise except an odd woman called *Christine Finch*, a transgender person who knew nothing of Franca or her growing drugs empire.

The first element was a small warehousing cum workshop unit on a micro-business park at *Crossveggate* located near the railway terminus at *Milngavie*, an easy thirteen-minute train ride from *Anniesland Station* adjacent to her flat in *Kelvin Court*.

Wearing a body suit under a pair of green overalls, she presented herself as a small, tubby and heavily bearded man who signed for consignments from a variety of commercial couriers, deliveries which were always strictly scheduled to arrive at *Crossveggate* at designated times.

Franca's drugs were purchased in hermetically pre-packs already labelled as *HPV* products, supplied from a single *Dark Web* source trading as *Inter-Link Forwarding (ILF)*, the cover for a long-established and reliable organisation based in *Istanbul*. All invoices rendered by *ILF* to the cut-out agency employed by Franca's *Zug* bank were in turn

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settled electronically and anonymously by 'Ms M. Maroni' from her *Dove and Company* account in Guernsey. Initially these payments were made in US Dollars, at that time considered the gold standard for drug dealing although from 2010 invoices would be settled using *Bitcoin*.

The exact route travelled by Franca's goods from Istanbul varied but this was not Franca's concern. When her online order was delivered to Milngavie, it was in high-quality cardboard boxes with stickers stating it was from a fictitious company in Guernsey called *Fruits of Mother Earth*.

Each innocuous box was protected by an internal high explosive capsule designed to incinerate the box contents and any other flammable material within a five-metre radius. This meant that anyone attempting to open the box without the electronic remote-control device which disarmed the capsule would meet with a nasty surprise.

Once she was safely behind the locked doors of the unit at Crossveggate, Franca-Julia-Martina wore a clean room coverall, latex gloves, her face masked to avoid contamination by fingerprints and aerosol droplets of DNA.

The first stage involved unpacking, sorting and checking the inward goods against the manifest from *ILF* in Istanbul to ensure they matched the combined individual orders lodged by approved clients visiting Martina's 'Fruits of Mother Earth' website located in the 'open' *Internet* but operated remotely by a master site concealed in the *Dark Web*.

To prepare outgoing consignments to fulfil each pre-paid client order, Franca packed the requested items into six-inch cubical boxes. These boxes were high quality, the expensive double-wall type as befitted the marketing ethos of Guernsey-based *High Purity Vitamins*.

In the first of a two-stage delivery process each client box was labelled with a unique address sequence then encapsulated in transparent heavy-duty heat-sealed plastic film. Each client box displayed an address for a specific mailbox located at *Mail Boxes Etc*. These 24/7 drop-off mailboxes outlets were rented as required using one of many and ever-changing email accounts linked to a Barclays Bank (UK) debit card now owned by Martina Maroni.

In due course, when the boxes containing supplies of *HPV* products were collected, this would make the final link in the delivery chain virtually impossible to unravel.

Prior to despatch from Crossveggate, the client boxes were loaded in batches of twelve into larger heavy duty cardboard shipping boxes to be sent to a remailing service at an address near Dalkeith, a town south-east of Edinburgh. To complete the security process, these batch packages were also shrink-wrapped using thicker, industrial grade plastic sheeting, heat-sealed.

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Dressed again as the tubby, bearded man, Franca-Julia-Martina took the onward consignment to one of the larger, busier Post Offices in the greater Glasgow area, never to Milngavie or nearby Bearsden. Payment at the receiving counter was by cash.

The onward batch packages were then sent to a business which functioned as an anonymous re-mailing service, operated by Ms Finch.

With everything online, there was no hardcopy paper trail to link these boxes to Crossveggate.

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East Meets West

The key link in Franca's supply chain was the Dalkeith cut-out remailing service.

Franca-Julia-Martina had found Christine on the *Dark Web*. The principal cover for this agency was a website available worldwide called "*Mr Fu Wong*" running on the *Open Internet* and managed by a sole trader called Ms Christine Finch. Finch's cover was that she retailed Chinese medicines, (which she did from time to time) although her sales were miniscule by comparison to the income garnered from her *Dark Web* based re-mailing service. In her odd social life online, she presented as 'Kris Byrd' a transgender person with a deep interest in tropical fish, which she bred and retailed from a second site on the *Open Web* called "*Aqua Pets*".

In the *Dark Web*, Kris Byrd also operated a site called "*Inter-On*" for anyone who required a delivery intermediary 'cut-out' to forward goods to their UK clients.

Both the *Open Internet* and the *Dark Web* aspects of her businesses were facilitated by her delivery and collection contract with *Royal Mail Parcelforce*, an arrangement Finch had been using for over a decade before Franca chose her.

Franca was aware the Christine Finch was a potential weak link in her proposed delivery chain and before committing to her, Julia had checked her out in great depth, hacking into her *Open Internet* and *Dark Web* sites and her several email addresses, monitoring her online activity. In parallel, Julia-Martina was sent to physically observe her, watching the vans from *Parcelforce*, *DHL*, *Yodel* (the new kid on the block) and other unmarked vans which visited most days. This surveillance meant sitting for many hours in a series of rental cars parked in a layby above Finch's ramshackle property.

Sifting through Christine's life over a period of three months, pooling their information, they learned the middle-aged woman was the registered carer for her grossly overweight disabled father, a man seldom seen and who never left the smallholding. Everything which they needed was delivered to what was effectively a protected compound inhabited by a pack of noisy dogs who lived outdoors behind high perimeter fences. Julia's online research showed that the crumbling buildings were the run-down remains of what had once been Christine's parents' plant nursery. Through her binoculars, Martina saw that Christine Finch was also solitary and reclusive but unlike herself, Finch was tall, bulky with a shaven tattooed head and a withered left arm. From her NHS medical records, Julia discovered this was the result of an accidental fall which had shattered her elbow beyond repair, at age six.

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In all sightings of Finch, she was wearing blue overalls, a grubby black donkey jacket and heavy work boots, an outfit which made her look like a man.

During a lengthy negotiation in a rented secure *Dark Web* chatroom, using a voice changer, Franca posing as Ms M Maroni, a deep baritone from Guernsey, found herself talking to an equally deep voiced Ms Byrd (Christine Finch). The actual details of their contract were concluded quickly but Christine was keen to talk. Franca sensed another lonely person in the chatroom with her, someone desperate to share details of her life and in particular her fish breeding business.

The cover story, which Christine accepted without question was that Martina (purporting to be a wheelchair bound paraplegic), was the sole owner-operator of a start-up business retailing organic vitamins and food supplements.

A deal was struck, subject to annual review and satisfactory performance. There would be a single up-front start-up fee of £2,500 paid in cash, used notes placed inside the first (trial) shipment crate to Dalkeith. Thereafter, in arrears, there would be a payment of £47.50 per client product box to cover Christine's input and the costs levied by *Parcelforce*, this money included with each subsequent shipment (sent by Franca from Milngavie). In the first months, Franca-Julia-Martina had worried there might be hiccups but five years on, the arrangement was working smoothly with no missing deliveries and no negative feedback from her gradually expanding list of online clients.

In Franca's judgment, it was a clever, well-constructed scheme which provided her with a steady and highly profitable income stream, tax-free and with virtually zero personal exposure, a model which Franca believed to be far superior to the delivery methods used by her Scottish rivals including Vera Verdi and the Serbs, and the courier scheme operated by Zio Sergio and Raffa back in Naples.

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Over time, *Greenies* and *Blues* had become Franca's best sellers alongside packets of high purity snorting cocaine.

From online research she knew these were the drugs of choice for well-heeled people, those willing to pay for anonymity, people unlikely to welcome regular meetings with couriers or expose themselves to risk of discovery.

She also understood the power of personal referrals spread by word-of-mouth recommendation.

However, many of those who applied to her *HPO* gateway website on the *Open Internet* were rejected, unable to satisfy her enrolment criteria. Franca Vitelli did not want estate agents, footballers, media personalities or car dealers on her list of subscribers; she sought out only elite individuals, professionals, people she felt were like herself.

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Elite

Among the list of Franca's clients buying drugs from *High Purity Vitamins (HPV)*, there was a preponderance of top surgeons and medical consultants, several QCs, a sprinkling of minor national and local politicians, a few high-ranking police officers and several dozen solicitors and property developers, people whose names seldom made front page news. Unlike many of her other clients, members of this elite group usually ordered packs of *Greenies* and *Blues*, only seldom ordering cocaine or other products.

Initially what had intrigued her about them was their willingness to order recreational drugs from a source which they must know operated in the *Dark Web*. To her this was re-assuring, these were people like herself, mature, sensible, responsible people who appreciated her discrete approach, rich enough to afford her prices, people she thought of as 'the establishment'. Crucially, these were people who would not over-indulge or bring unwanted attention to themselves, long term minimal risk clients, unlikely to cause her trouble.

To order drugs, the potential buyer must first obtain an 'approved subscriber status' by completing a profile form on a lacklustre Open Web 'shop window' called *High Value Organics (HVO)* which offered familiar brand name vitamins, food supplements, scented candles, fluffy towels, massage oils and the like, all at prices which were exorbitantly expensive. Casual browsers usually flipped through the site quickly, never to return. In any event, future visits from the same email address or IP location were automatically screened and those who were not already clients were blocked by an error code.

In essence, the *HVO* website was a 'filter' mechanism. At check-out, potential new clients who had persisted on their first visit were not allowed to complete the purchase of their desired products without first returning a lengthy and detailed 'in strictest confidence' application form. Thereafter they must wait at least two days and often longer while their details were subjected to rigorous checks. Many were rejected without any sort of explanation or reply to their application.

Approved subscribers were sent an apparently gobbledegook web hyperlink, each unique 36-symbol code string generated by a randomising algorithm. This web link re-directed them to a second cut-out site called *High Purity Vitamins*, (hosted in the *Dark Web*). From this rather sparse and clunky portal, they must select from a simple menu of drugs available. At the point of purchase - initially by direct payment from their bank account or debit card and in later years by Bitcoin - they were issued a pre-paid token (an electronic voucher) generated by a cut-out portal account hosted at a Guernsey bank.

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This account was held in the name of Ms Martina Maroni, although this information was impossible to obtain due to Guernsey banking regulations.

Anyone seeking to order drugs in bulk was immediately ejected and disbarred from re-visiting the site.

On a second visit to the original *HVO* site on the *Open Internet*, armed with their subscriber ID and their purchase token, the client's order was acknowledged on screen as if real vitamins had been ordered, a signal the delivery process was now in progress with a promise their order would be fulfilled within seven days.

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Franca's boxes of drugs prepared at Milngavie were never delivered to the purchaser at a home address or place of work, only ever to each recipient's mailbox chosen by Franca. Generally, she used *Mail Boxes Etc* locations around Glasgow. However, occasionally she varied this, using locations in other parts of Scotland, a deliberate inconvenience used to remind her clients to be wary of their own security responsibilities.

When the box from Milngavie was eventually sealed inside the client's mailbox by the delivery agent from *Parcelforce*, the company's automated electronic feedback loop sent a series of emails confirming 'package delivered' for each item, quoting its mailbox number and postcode location. When received at *Mr Wu Fong*, Finch completed her final part of the re-mailing sequence by forwarding these emails to a *Dark Web* address where they were viewed by Franca-Julia, completing the first part of the delivery cycle.

The final step was collection by the client.

From the *Dark Web*, in a semi-automated process, Franca emailed each client advising:

'Your order has been delivered.'

Attached was the mailbox number and its location with the key-in code to enable them to retrieve their drugs as ordered. With this information clients were also sent a 're-order token' which would not become active until a period of thirty days after their previous purchase had been delivered. This final 'delay tweak' had been added to prevent clients attempting to over-buy drugs they might hope to resell, a situation which Franca-Julia was decidedly against. On the due date, when activated by Franca's automated system, these tokens were valid for forty-eight hours only.

After a few months of practice, a typical weekly shipment serving up to five hundred clients might easily be processed at Crossveggate and dispatched to Dalkeith within a few hours. Such a consignment might contain drugs with a retail value exceeding £300,000 generating a net. Well ahead of this conclusion, the corresponding net profit of around £200,000 would have already passed through Ms M Maroni's Guernsey account

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moving on to Zug and Liechtenstein, representing a steady and secure income of around £2.5 million per year, tax-free.

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Vigilance

From their *HVO/HPV* registration details, by sending scam emails as if from a trusted source (using details cloned from their email contacts), Franca hacked into the accounts of her clients implanting tracking viruses and carefully disguised software code keys which she used to unlock access to other details on their devices including laptops, tablets and mobile phones.

Rooting around in their digital lives, leafing through personal correspondence with intimates and more guarded emails with work colleagues and wider circles of business contacts, provided the Sicilian with a most relished the feeling of superiority and power this voyeurism gave her, seeing it as an added security benefit.

Before accepting a new applicant as a client, Franca-Julia always conducted in-depth checks, unearthing their secrets, understanding their motivations and their weaknesses. If any of her clients had unsatisfactory traits, foibles or idiosyncrasies which might be a danger to her, she would reject them. Further, if her ongoing monitoring of existing clients showed patterns of behaviour which she found unsatisfactory, she terminated their subscription without explanation.

So far, this approach had proved sufficient but if she detected a real threat, she was willing to have any troublemakers eliminated by ordering a further *Dark Web* disposal.

Another pleasure Franca derived from her online voyeurism was that many of her elite group of clients were her near neighbours. Some lived within walking distance of her home in Kelvin Court, occupying stand-alone mansions, grand terraces of four-storey town houses or in the larger tenements of Glasgow's West End. Others lived a short drive away to the north in Bearsden and further out in Killearn and Balfron.

On those occasions when Franca-Julia-Martina drove south of the River Clyde to inspect clients' homes located in Pollokshields, Newlands and a few areas in Giffnock, she saw equally prosperous people living in quiet streets lined with impressive stone mansions. In particular, she was fascinated by Pollokshields where every original property was built to a unique design, as prescribed by the original landowner, Sir John Maxwell.

From her online research, she knew these grand buildings in Pollokshields had once been the homes of ship owners, global traders in cotton, slaves, tobacco, tea and coffee, spices and exotic goods of every description imported from the far-flung corners of the former British Empire. These incoming raw materials and luxuries had in turn been paid for by goods manufactured from steel and wrought iron such as huge boilers, steam engines and

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locomotives exported by the Scottish industrialists and colonial entrepreneurs who had earned Glasgow the reputation of The Second City of the Empire.

Franca prided herself on her vigilance. The Sicilian also relished the feeling of superiority and power this voyeurism gave her, seeing it as an added security benefit. Importantly, her business was growing, slowly and steadily, by word-of-mouth recommendation, which she believed was the most powerful of all marketing methods available to drug dealers, far superior to those who operated by advertising on the *Dark Web*.

On the periphery of Franca's elite group of clients, there was also a sprinkling of others, people scattered more thinly throughout the city, usually based in the less impressive parts of Giffnock, Whitecraigs, Newton Mearns, the newer, up-and-coming areas of the city. Some of these people, those presenting themselves as "Executive Personal Financial Advisors", were usually day traders operating as lone wolves, playing the stock market for easy gains by using their clients' monies without permission and ripping them off in the process. Running her checks, reading email exchanges with her clients, she saw these devious newbies attempting to lure individuals from Franca's elite group into their net.

When this type applied for *HVO/HPV* registration, she took pleasure in excluding them by rejecting them, diverting them on a wild goose chase into the arms of her *Dark Web* competitors.

Importantly, Franca's business was growing slowly and steadily, mainly by word-of-mouth recommendation which she believed was the most powerful of all marketing methods available to drug dealers, far superior to those who operated by aggressively advertising on the *Dark Web* or dealers willing to accept unscreened orders from mobile phones operated by those willing to accept drugs delivered to them by low-life couriers in exchange for cash collected in shady pubs and clubs.

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Market Consolidation

By 2013, Franca's list of those using *Greenies* and *Blues* recruited through *High Value Organics (HVO)* in the *Open Web* and delivered under the banner of *High Purity Vitamins (HPV)*, had stabilised at just under three thousand clients, netting her almost £15 million per year as she gently nudged up her prices each quarter.

Her elite clients included a preponderance of top surgeons and medical consultants, several *QCs*, a sprinkling of minor national and local politicians, a few high-ranking police officers and dozens of solicitors and property developers, people whose names seldom made front page news.

Had these clients shopped around in the *Dark Web*, they would have been able to procure their needs at a much lower price but without the security of delivery and quality which their subscriptions with *HVO* ensured.

Using their registration details, she hacked their emails to plant tracking viruses. Without detection, she was able to monitor their behaviour, discovering many were friends, often socialising in each other's homes, sharing their snorting cocaine, *Greenies* and *Blues*, passing on details of how to apply for registration with *HPO*, a reputable Guernsey-based company able to discreetly supply their 'special needs' directly and anonymously by post.

Before accepting a new applicant as a client, Franca-Julia always conducted in-depth checks, unearthing their secrets, understanding their motivations and their weaknesses. If any of her clients had unsatisfactory traits, foibles or idiosyncrasies which might be a danger to her, she would reject them.

Further, if her ongoing monitoring of her existing clients showed patterns of behaviour which she found unsatisfactory, she terminated their subscription without explanation.

So far, this approach had proved sufficient but if she detected a real threat, she was willing to have any troublemakers eliminated by ordering a further *Dark Web* disposal.

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So far, Franca had no clients from Bridge of Weir, Angie Simpson's home patch.

This missing cadre of elite clients irked her. Despite her success and cleverness, with Vera Verdi still in pole position in Scotland as a whole, Franca knew she would always be second best in the eyes of Sergio and Raffa. This realisation took her back to the *Dark Web* to re-visit her previous searches for information about Vera Verdi. During this trawl

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Franca-Julia discovered a new rival supplier. A group of Serbs based in Blairgowrie near Perth were now making inroads in the greater Edinburgh area and gaining traction in the other East coast cities of Dundee, Aberdeen and Inverness where Vera Verdi was dominant. Worryingly, there were recent signs the Serbs were already moving West to the greater Glasgow area, onto her own patch.

After a long overnight session checking out weaponry available on the *Dark Web*, Franca made her pronouncement:

"Julia-Martina, we need to make a plan to take over and consolidate the market. If the Serbs take over from Vera Verdi, they will then target our clients too. It's how the marketplace works. So, we need to be bold. We will use technology and brain power to fight their superior numbers. This is a test which provides us with an opportunity to show Sergio and Raffa that I am the natural successor to Vera Verdi."

Frances Verratti immediately counselled caution:

"Franca-Julia, my dearest darlings, I hear your chatter and it makes me fearful. We do not need to eliminate Vera Verdi and these odious Serbs. If they decide to merge, they will sweep up the dregs. Your elites will never risk dealing with couriers, will they? My dears, you have created a perfect system that no one can break or replicate. They have many mouths to feed and other masters to answer to while you are fully independent. Leave them alone, my dear ones. You know what I am saying is true, don't you?"

*"Frances Verratti, go at once to Newlands and stop interfering in matters you do not understand. **Now, please.**"*

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Watershed

The months ticked by.

One by one Franca-Julia slipped away from her other business endeavours, concentrating only on her *Dark Web* drugs supply business and her plan for Market Consolidation.

In May 2013, on the approach of the anniversary of her banishment to Scotland in 1994 as a penniless seventeen-year-old orphan, Franca Vitelli had accumulated more than £38M Sterling equivalent, an amount which was rising steadily as she carefully expanded her *HVO/HPV* client list. As money rolled in, it was carefully secreted away in a raft of currencies fifty-odd independent accounts located in tax havens and protected by layers of cut-outs.

It was an outcome which Frances Verratti loved to remind the Sicilian she had predicted and one which gave Franca Vitelli a feeling of omnipotence.

By this stage most of her records were virtual, stored in password protected files in the cloud at *G-drive* and mirrored at Apple *iCloud Drive* and Microsoft *OneDrive*, relieving her of the anxiety that her personal computer equipment might fail or that her system might be 'attacked' over the *Internet*.

Her only remaining vulnerability was the need to store her hundreds of passwords, complicated codes which she kept on a USB memory stick always carried on her person. This USB stick was one of three exact copies updated when a new password was added. One of these backup sticks was hidden in plain sight, dangling in the foliage of a large Mediterranean Prickly Pear cactus - (*opuntia ficus-indica*); the other hidden inside a realistic but fake ornamental *rope-of-soap* hanging in her en-suite wet room shower.

Working obsessively on her 'market consolidation' project, Franca-Julia was gearing up to make her move.

However, there was an elephant in the room which threatened her success.

Unlike Angie Simpson and others working for the *Grazioni* clan, the tiny Sicilian had become addicted to her own products and, like many another in her situation, Franca-Julia-Martina-Genny-Laura-Aneesha remained convinced she was still in total control of her mind. What Franca Vitelli did not understand was that her addiction was slowly but steadily affecting her brain chemistry, further undermining her already distorted perception of reality.

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Franca was enormously proud of what she had achieved. In her mind, she was now convinced that her wealth, qualifications, experience and organisational skills proved she was worthy of being re-admitted as a full participating member of the Ercolano/Naples Grazioni clan.

With this rising surge of confidence, she increasingly thought of herself as a new and stronger Franca Vitelli, fantasising a future life in which she would return in triumph to Ercolano and take her rightful place as the joint leader of a modernised Camorra enterprise, working alongside Raffaele Grazioni, Zio Sergio's heir apparent.

The only hesitant member of her inner circle was the restraining counsel of Frances Verratti, a voice increasingly ignored.

Unfortunately for Franca, she seemed unaware this ambition could never be realised as she was now habituated to a cocktail of *Greenies* and *Blues* washed down with *Red Bull*, living a permanently intoxicated lifestyle completely unacceptable to the Grazioni culture enforced by her uncle. On occasion she would add a few lines of snorting cocaine to enjoy the quick rush which some said was a hundred times better than orgasm, an experience she had never enjoyed since the disruption of her puberty at the clinic in Geneva.

Franca was unaware that she had been long forgotten by her Zio Sergio, a man in steady decline and well past his original powerful self. By the early summer of 2013, if Sergio thought of her at all, it was as an awkward and troublesome child who had refused to grow up. Raffa Grazioni, now effectively in charge of the Grazioni enterprises had long written off his dwarf-like cousin, a reclusive person who Angie Simpson had repeatedly advised was a nonentity, a person verging on madness, possibly due to a brain tumour and most unlikely to survive.

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As notions of grandeur took hold in Franca's mind, she was increasingly living online as Julia Smith. During this intensive period, by using her computer skills and *Dark Web* contacts Julia had been increasingly directed by Franca to carry out surreptitious monitoring of the Grazioni while taking the utmost care not to reveal herself to the Camorra organisation.

Over recent months, Franca's interest in Angie Simpson had become increasingly invasive, her latest obsession. One major drawback was that Angie was old school, running her business hands on, seldom using emails and mobile phones, devices which she had long since learned to distrust. As a result, the older woman's social media profile was almost non-existent. When she went online it was generally only using the *Dark Web* to communicate with a very few trusted individuals and for her negotiations with the Serbs, part of her exit strategy. Unable to be in the right place at the right time, these were activities which Franca-Julia had so far failed to detect.

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To most of her neighbours in the solidly respectable village of Bridge of Weir, Angie Simpson portrayed herself as a quiet, well-heeled widow who enjoyed a little gardening and walking her huge black Newfie. Most people who met this friendly dog with its stand-offish owner, would have been surprised to learn that Angie Simpson was on close terms with Maria Bolinchetti and Ronald and Edith McKindless, the upper crust of Bridge of Weir who lived in much grander houses a few streets away from Simpson's modernised cottage called *Courchevel*. This compact two-level cottage was a mews conversion set in the grounds of the original grand mansion called *Rosemount* which Simpson had once occupied as the apparent owner, although it had always been owned by and SLP controlled at far hand by the Artusi of Ayr on behalf of the Grazioni of Ercolano.

Rebuilt and sub-divided into luxury flats, *Rosemount* was a deceptively larger new build version of the original *Rosemount* building which Franca had visited in 1996 while attempting to establish contact with Mrs Vera Verdi.

As a result, what the computer guru Franca-Julia was able to discover online about Angie Simpson was, infuriatingly, very little.

Through *LinkedIn* and similar low-key employment agencies in the Open Web, Angie Simpson advertised herself as an occasional freelance tour guide, a hobby business occupation which Franca felt certain must be a cover for something more sinister.

Although there was an occasional bidder called 'Vera Verdi' who popped up in *Dark Web* auctions competing for bulk consignments of cloned pharmaceuticals on offer from Chinese, North Korean, Russian manufacturers or the newer Turkish middlemen, Franca-Julia was never certain if this dealer/intermediary was Angie Simpson or another player who was coincidentally using the same nickname.

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On the night of Franca's thirty-sixth birthday, the matter of what to do about Angie Simpson-Vera Verdi became a topic for open discussion during a drugs party at Kelvin Court. High on cocaine and *Greenies*, Franca bubbled over to reveal the first hint of her half-formed plan to deal with her devious rival.

"Ragazze, ho deciso di rilevare la vecchia e scricchiolante rete di distribuzione di farmaci di Vera Verdi e incorporare il meglio e il più desiderabile dei suoi clienti di fascia alta nella nostra lista. Che ne dici?"

("Girls, I have decided to take over Vera Verdi's creaky old drugs distribution network and incorporate the best and most desirable of her high-end clients into our own list. What do you say?")

Laura was the first to reply:

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"Franca, honey bunny, please, please, please, speak only in English, you know I struggle with Italian. Please!"

Julia was next:

"Yes Franca, let's face it, this move is long overdue. The Simpson woman is a dinosaur, a disgrace in this digital modern era. Can you imagine the cost and risk of running a rag-tag bunch of couriers to get your drugs out to your clients?"

Franca popped two *Greenies* and gurgled down a large can of *Red Bull*.

Martina was next to speak:

"Should we just organise a hit by an assassin from the *Dark Web*, take her out and raid her cottage? I mean, we can easily afford it, yes? Aneesa, what do you say?"

"No, I am just saying to you alone Franca we must be sure we have the full client list in our possession before we take her out, yes?"

Martina chirruped:

"Franca and I have an idea, don't I babe?"

"**Do we?** Why is this the first time **I** have heard of it," snapped Frances Verratti.

"**Yesh Frances, we do,**" screeched back Franca, slurring her words:

"*Lishen* Frances, why do you *always* butt in with your negativity? We are totally *shick* of you. Laura, phone a taxi for Frances and *shend* her back to Newlands. **At wonsh, pleash!**"

Aneesa pleaded:

"But please, Franca I am needing to have Frances close by me always. She is . . ."

The extra blood flow caused by anger at being challenged was causing Franca to sober up, making her less sure of herself but more rational, her speech clearer.

"Be quiet Aneesa! Do it now, Laura. Get Frances out of here at once. And **NO!** Don't any of you dare ask. I need to make the arrangements first."

In this fashion, Frances Verratti, Franca's voice of reason and caution, was dismissed, sent away to Newlands, a place in her mythical past.

Temporarily in a world of her own, Franca sniffed another line and popped two more *Greenies*, making this six taken over a single two-hour session, four in the last five minutes.

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Inside her head, this surge of chemicals caused an irreversible change at the overlap of Franca Vitelli's pre-frontal cortex and her hippocampus, areas of the brain which lie at the centre of decision making.

In the aftermath, time stood still.

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When the Sicilian came down from her soaring high, Frances Verratti was no longer at the party. In her place, Genny Jones had returned to the fold, wearing a curvaceous body suit and dressed in a stunning Geisha kimono, holding hands with Aneesa dressed in her bridal sari, both girls smiling.

Franca Vitelli giggled but did not share her flash of inspiration. Instead, she said:

"So, ladies, all sorted. Just leave Vera Verdi to me. Now, girls, it's time to party again, time to dance. Come on, help me into my outfit and let's do some Molly Parton songs."

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Raffa

A few hours later, only partially recovered from her hangover, Franca began to leapfrog from site to site on both the *Open Internet* and *Dark Web* aggressively following leads, paying for information on the Camorra clan known as the 'Grazioni of Ercolano'. During this intensive two-hour session, she behaved recklessly, breaking all Julia-Frances's rules on *Internet* security and safety, leaving a clear trail of digital breadcrumbs.

In less than an hour, she had re-discovered Raffa, learning he was more prominent, apparently the top dog of her clan. She learned nothing of Zio Sergio except that he was not reported as deceased. Franca guessed that like Angie Simpson, both being 'old school', her uncle would be wary of this new way of doing business by computer.

Imprudently, she contacted Raffa by email through his *Dark Web* porn site 'Napoli non dorme mai' (Naples Never Sleeps), pleased when he responded positively, suggesting a video call on *Skype*.

Wary her appearance might be off-putting, she revealed herself in Voice Only mode, logging in using the code link he had provided via her email cut-out address. When connected, she remained silent while she studied him, waiting for him to speak first.

"Sei proprio tu, Franca. Se è così, dimmi come stai, dove sei?"

"Is that really you, Franca. If so, tell me how you are, where you are?"

He was taller than she had remembered, now wearing a smart, pin-striped business suit, sitting at a huge leather-topped desk, smoking a cigarillo, sipping from a balloon glass of a clear translucent liquid, probably *Grappa* (Italian Brandy).

"Franca, non fare giochetti, parla o mi disconnetto".

("Franca, do not play games, speak or I disconnect.")

Many seconds passed before he reached forward and thumped the keyboard, terminating the call.

"Franca, he thought it was a scam email you sent," said Laura. "But he does look quite dishy. You do fancy him, yes?"

"No, not really. This is about business, not pleasure. Anyway, my little honey bunny, why would I want anyone else when I have you?"

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The following evening, while slightly high, she decided to email Raffa again, with an apology, saying he had taken her breath away with his stunning looks, attaching an ersatz image of herself, a modern lookalike of the young Sophia Loren, one of a batch of similar images she used from time to time.

Dressing up had become a large part of Franca-Laura-Aneesa-Martina-Julia's life. Now, with access to a more sophisticated wardrobe, Genny Jones was no longer a Goth. Like Aneesa, she liked slinky outfits which incorporated padding to give her an attractive, slim but shapely body. Franca chose a crimson figure-hugging silk dress for Genny onto which she photoshopped the head of the same sultry blue-eyed Sophia Loren from her earlier email.

Raffa responded enthusiastically and their emails began to fly back and forth as they caught up on their missing years with Raffa showing off, typing in stilted English, a language which for Franca was now second nature.

"How is Nonna Iseppa? Is she still alive? How old is she now?"

At first, Raffa's reply emails were slow in coming, peppered with errors making Franca feel superior. At her suggestion he abandoned English, reverting to Italian.

"Nonna, è ancora forte, vive con papà, ospite delle suore, a Ercolano. Ma nella sua mente, Nonna è tornata in Sicilia, dopo un'emorragia cerebrale. Nonna ha circa novant'anni, pensiamo, non siamo sicuri. Sei felice, come una bambina, ma papà no. Papà soffre di lieve demenza. Per procura io, Raffaele Vitelli Graziano, sono al comando delle Grazioni di Ercolano."

("Nonna, she is still strong, living with Papa, as guests of the Nuns, in Ercolano. But in her mind, Nonna is back in Sicily, after a brain haemorrhage. Nonna is around ninety, we think, we are not sure. She is happy, like a little girl but Papa, no. Papa suffers from light dementia. By proxy, I, Raffaele Vitelli Graziano am in command of the Grazioni of Ercolano.")

In her mind, Franca had always considered herself much brighter than her younger cousin.

This was a poor assumption. What Franca could not know and would never discover was that like his father Sergio, Raffa was quick-witted, shrewd and ruthless when crossed. However, unlike Sergio who had engendered loyalty by being reasonable and occasionally forgiving, Raffa was psychotically vicious, ruling by fear while enjoying the suffering he imposed directly or ordered in detail by proxy, always demanding a video clip be provided for his personal library. Seldom opposed, Raffa had other flaws, the principal one being that he was over-confident in his own abilities and judgement, poor at taking advice, frequently demanding he be listened to in silence when he was pontificating.

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Franca rattled off a quick reply, keeping to English, intending to keep an advantage over him:

"Does Nonna know I am in Scotland? Can I come to see her? I miss you all so much. I am quite different now, you know."

After a noticeable delay, with improved English his reply came. She guessed he was using *Google Translate*.

"No, she thinks you went onwards to South Africa and caught an illness and died. That is what Papa told her, what he told us all. I could not believe it at first when you emailed, not until tonight."

"So, Raffa, if Sergio is weak, are you in charge of the family olive oil business now? Are you our Capo? Should I speak to you about my plans, or directly to him?"

After another long delay, Raffa replied:

"Papa wants to be consulted about big issues only. I am in Naples, he is in Ercolano. Anyway, he hates computers. His only interest is watching Napoli play on TV, drinking wine and sleeping. He has lost control of his bowels. It is pathetic."

"So, Raffa what should I do?"

"Franca, Franca, qual è il tuo problema? Posso trattare con te direttamente. Dopotutto, siamo una famiglia."

("Franca, Franca, what is your problem? I can deal with you directly. After all, we are family.")

"Raffa, I want to take over from Signora Vera Verdi. I know she is Angie Simpson and I know where she lives. In fact, I know everything about her. Her distribution model is outmoded. She is losing ground to the Serbs who have moved into Scotland big time. They are based in Perthshire and are supplying Dundee and Aberdeen and trying to take over her territory in Edinburgh."

"Look, Franca, back off. Angie has the situation under control. She sends me reports every month. Our business in Scotland is good, steady."

"Raffa, that's rubbish. She is losing ground to the Serbs, I assure you. I have my own set of clients, far better than hers and my bottom line is probably twice what she is doing. I'm serious Raffa, you need to put me in charge of the Grazioni operation in Scotland. I can take out the Serbs. I have the technology lined up."

To argue with him was a huge mistake.

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"No, Franca, lascia stare. Papà non si sarebbe mai mosso contro Angie e Maria Bolinchetti. Lascialo."

("No, Franca, leave it be. Papa would never move against Angie and Maria Bolinchetti. Leave it.")

"Raffa, who is Maria Bolinchetti?"

"Zia Maria? Senti, Franca, hai detto di sapere tutto di Angie Simpson e ora dici di non sapere di zia Maria? Questa conversazione è finita. Ho del lavoro da fare. Stai alla larga da Bridge of Weir o lo farò spazzarti via come se fossi uno scarafaggio. **Capisci!**"

("Zia Maria? Look, Franca, you said you know everything about Angie Simpson and now you say you don't know about Zia Maria? This conversation is over. I have work to do. Stay away from Bridge of Weir or I will wipe you out as if you are a cockroach. **Understand?**")

"**No, Raffa, you just don't realise how good I am!** I've got two university degrees and I have lots of money of my own. I own six flats and have three cars. I have a world-class distribution method, simple but secure and it only needs me, no one else. Angie's couriers are her weak link. We should discuss this in detail. I assume at your end your email link is also encrypted, yes? If not, we could use *WhatsApp* which is totally encrypted, totally secure. Raffa, we would make a great team, yes? What do you say?"

Franca waited for his email reply for fully five minutes then, still waiting, she used a new phone, untraceable, to ring the mobile number as listed on his *Dark Web* porn site but the call was first diverted then disconnected.

She rang the same number again with the same result.

Raffa had rejected her.

Like Sergio.

Like Vera Verdi aka Angie Simpson.

Franca's resentment spilled over and, as she usually did when unsure, she appealed to Frances Verratti who had been standing behind her, always just out of sight, watching the exchange on the screen.

"Just look at that. Raffa's living twenty-years behind the times, stuck in his rut, still the same pig-headed bully as always. The prick just does not understand the threat from the Serbs. What should we do?"

"Well, Franca-Julia, it is obvious, is it not? You have work to do. Deal with Vera Verdi as we discussed when we checked out that kit in the *Dark Web*. You can well afford it and you have the gaming skills in abundance to carry it through. Show Raffa we are the people

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with the guts to deal with the Serbs but take down Verdi first and make sure you get her list of clients. That list gives you a lever over Raffa. It's the only way to win him back, to get his attention. We can deal with the Serbs later."

Franca's mind flooded with a familiar sadness.

As the surge of loneliness eased, a feeling of foreboding followed:

Would Raffa tell Sergio of her approach?

Would they warn Angie Simpson, put her on a war footing?

Franca Vitelli took three Blues, switched off the lights, closed the blackout shutters and retreated to bed.

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Plan B

The next day, still wobbly after Raffa's rejection, Franca popped two *Greenies* and made a fresh cafetiere of strong, sweet black syrup coffee which she decanted to her thermal sipping flask while snipping small bites from a *Twix* bar, treat-morsels which she held on her tongue until they dissolved.

Boosted, Franca-Julia set about her task.

Armed with the name Maria Bolinchetti, Franca soon found the elderly diva living in *Bridge of Weir*, in a mansion called *Bellavista*, set in a vast garden. This grandiose edifice was only a few streets from Angie Simpson who was now living in a smaller property called *Courchevel*, a modernised stable block located within the grounds of her original home at *Rosemount*, the mansion now redeveloped as luxury flats.

As she trawled the history of Zia Maria which she easily discovered on the *Open Internet*, Franca-Julia found screeds of references to her singing career. In retirement, her record of legendary good works persisted online and from these *Facebook* postings it appeared Maria Bolinchetti was still well-remembered. From this record, it soon became evident that the Diva and the McKindless family were close friends.

Maria, childless by choice, was godmother to Edwin McKindless, their only son and heir. The charity work of these two families had once been centred on *Bellavista* which, Franca discovered on *Google Earth*, was directly adjacent to the McKindless home at *Ridgeway*, another impressive mansion also set in vast grounds. With her health failing, Maria Bolinchetti's charity work had petered out about a decade earlier.

Further delving showed that Edith McKindless (nee Simpson) was the owner of *Ridgeway*, an asset which formed the cornerstone of the Simpson Family Trust. However, further details of this trust were concealed within an impenetrable Scottish Limited Partnership (SLP).

Uncovering Zia Maria Bolinchetti's connection to the Grazioni family proved a challenge, requiring further payments to sources on the *Dark Web*. This trail led Franca, posing as Vittoria Vinni, to a pay-to-enter secure chat room (the entry cost remitted in *Bitcoin* to the 'doorkeeper' from her Martina Maroni Guernsey account). Once inside, using a voice changer and role playing as 'Marcus' with a slow, deep and gravelly bass voice, she tentatively joined a conversation being conducted in Neapolitan Italian, a dialect she knew but had seldom used during her exile in Scotland. Early into the meeting the Sicilian became spooked, sensing she was dealing with bitter rivals of the Grazioni clan, men on a

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fishing expedition, trying to obtain information from her rather than give the details she had hoped for. After around ten minutes or so she terminated the call.

Dead ended, she followed up on Edwin McKindless and was surprised to learn that Edith's son Edwin might be her own 'Edwin', the gay man she knew better as Neal Sadako, her duet partner when she sang online as Molly Parton. Franca-Molly's online friendship of convenience with Neal-Edwin had been ongoing for many years, perhaps five, she thought. A few keystrokes by Julia confirmed Franca's guess was correct and that Edwin McKindless was indeed the gay son of the McKindless family of *Ridgeway*. Although she felt she knew Neal-Edwin, until this coincidence was revealed, she realised that during those years he had been careful to keep his family situation a secret from her.

Popping another *Greenie*, Franca changed into her Molly Parton outfit and called Neal-Edwin on *Skype*. Over the next hour, praising him to boost his ego, she gently quizzed him about his parents. Once she had him warmed to this subject, he rambled on, happy to tell his tale. It was like being back with one of her park bench ladies, she thought.

With Franca-Molly jogging and nudging Edwin, he soon revealed his mother had never worked, devoting herself to gardening, tennis, golf, Church of Scotland overseas missions and good works in the local community. Ronald, long retired, had enjoyed a distinguished career as an orthopaedic surgeon, specialising in knee replacements and restorative surgery for car crash victims.

According to what she gleaned from Neal-Edwin, both his parents were very against drugs and although they knew he was using, they constantly nagged him about it and would not allow him to enter their home if they suspected he was high.

Looking for dirt, Franca-Julia checked her NHS archives and was disappointed to find that Ronald McKindless had seemingly enjoyed an exemplary, unblemished career, a paragon of virtue, insofar as she could tell. This made her suspicious. No one could be so pure, she thought. Perhaps with more research, she might uncover whatever dark secrets he was hiding.

The pair ended their online meeting by singing a few Neal Sadako-Molly Parton duets, agreeing to meet again online for another rehearsal, starting at midnight, which Franca thought of as 'her lonely hours' when the city outside her bastion at Kelvin Court was asleep.

High on *Greenies* and *Red Bull*, spinning ever wilder scenarios in her mind, Franca decided that the connection between Angie Simpson and Maria Bolinchetti which Raffa had mentioned, must mean Edwin's parents were also somehow part of Vera Verdi's drugs business. If so, surely Edwin must be involved too? Digging she discovered another coincidence, one which rang alarm bells. **Julia had been lax**. Neal-Edwin was also Kendal Calderwood, a Green Energy Consultant and Green Buildings Developer from Houston, a

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village a few miles from Bridge of Weir, living at the same address as Edwin. Kendal was a long-term client of *HVO/HPO*, regularly ordering sniffing cocaine, *Greenies*, *Blues* and *Sextasy* tabs from Martina's *Dark Web* site.

Franca's mind buzzed with drug-induced certainty:

Edwin was working for Angie as a courier but concealing his drug taking as required by the Grazioni protocols based on their culture of denying themselves use of their products!

Armed with this first pass information, Franca-Julia popped two further *Greenies*, drained a can of *Red Bull* then continued through the night with her online search, flipping into the *Dark Web* to check out snippets found on the *Open Internet*, building up a picture of Zia Maria Bolinchetti and her *McKindless* neighbours, sifting through a friendship which reached back over many decades, looking for a direct connection to Angie Simpson.

Over the days which followed, a new plan began to fester in Franca Vitelli's drug fuelled mind. By stealth, cunning and boldness she would use her relationship with Edwin to gain the confidence of his parents and then, through them, move in on Maria Bolinchetti. When she had a bigger, clearer picture, she would find a way to strip them of their wealth. All it required was careful planning. When she was ready, she would remove Angie and take over her client list, merge the most suitable ones with her own and discard the risky ones. In her grander scheme, she would liquidate the Bolinchetti and *McKindless* wealth and move the money offshore into her *Bitcoin* account in Liechtenstein. After all, all three had lived long and comfortable lives and at their age, were due to die soon.

If it required direct physical action to coerce or remove them, she already had several ideas to develop. Perhaps a drugs overdose would be the easiest way, or smoke inhalation from a smouldering bedroom fire from an electrical fault; or a trip, slip or fall down the sort of grand stairways their huge homes must have.

In her mind Franca reluctantly conceded that Frances was correct to insist the Serbs could wait. When the time was right, she would move against them, attack them in their lair in Perthshire and eliminate them entirely, make it look like a turf war, give the Police what they expected.

Only then, when she had demonstrated her power to Raffa, would she be able to negotiate with him from a position of strength.

From behind Franca, lips whispering gently in her ear, Frances-Julia spoke:

"Franca, this has gone on long enough. You are over-thinking the details. Sure, unforeseen issues are bound to arise. That happens with any plan. But you are bright and bold enough to face them. And remember, dear one, you are not alone in this. We will be with you all

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the way. But you must take the lead. It's entirely your call. Will you get it done and dusted before your next birthday?"

In the dimly lit cocoon of her Kelvin Court computer studio, her mind boosted by Greenies and a few lines of cocaine, it all seemed feasible, easily achieved.

"Yes, Frances-Julia, we will do it, and do it now! Carpe Diem!"

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Several months later, Franca-Julia-Frances would cross paths with another solitary woman still in recovery from a deep bout of mental illness and alcoholism caused by a failed marriage.

By accepting responsibility for her own actions and now almost back to her former self, Wendy Brand had become a self-employed dog walker with agreed access to Angie Simpson's cottage in Bridge of Weir.

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Wendy

At forty-one, happily divorced and settled to a single life, Wendy Brand was doing well. Her success was built on hard work and unrelenting commitment, based on three rounds of doggy walkies a day, seven days a week, with a pick-up and drop-off service for the beloved pooches of busy executives and the elderly or infirm.

This made for long days but, for the first time in her life she was happy and getting steadily richer. It was five years since her ex-husband Derek Graham had flown off to live with Brenda McCullough in her 'pad' near Braehead Shopping Centre, leaving Wendy to fend for herself in a rented council flat in Renfrew. In recent weeks she had reclaimed her maiden name as an act of confirmation in her growing self-confidence. One serious drawback of her situation was that she was unable to take occasional doggy boarders. The terms of the recently revised tenancy agreement did not permit pets in her tenement flat. This situation had arisen when a nearby neighbour had been served with an ASBO for running a puppy farm, disposing of dog excrement by throwing poo bags from her top floor flat into neighbours' gardens.

In the final two years before their separation, after her second miscarriage and the consequential hysterectomy, Wendy had changed from being a cleaner cum assistant in a dementia care home to become the grandly titled 'assistant manager' to the franchise holder of a perfume shop. This outlet was in Braehead Shopping Centre where Derek was Head of Security.

Brenda, a well-preserved gym-fit divorcee, a former British Airways purser in her late forties, had met Derek in her role as the manager of a travel firm located at the other end of the mall, near M&S.

Even as it was happening, Wendy knew why she had lost Derek. During nine years of their childless marriage, she had slowly but knowingly allowed herself to become a slob, a boxed-set addict, drinking up to two bottles of Prosecco each night with crisps and then eking out squares of her large-sized *Cadbury's* fruit and nut chocolate bar, holding them on her tongue until they melted away to a sliver. The result was predictable and inevitable; she steadily climbed from a neat size 12, expanding in lumps and bumps to a size 14 before ballooning to fill loose fit size 18 clothing. By contrast, Brenda was rake thin, like Derek, both keen joggers, now members of the same fancy gym.

In her newly discovered persona with long hard days speed-walking her charges, Wendy was slimmer, fitter and, she felt, much wiser. It had taken eighteen months to clear her

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debts and she was saving in three separate building society accounts towards her dream of a country cottage home with enough land to have kennels and take boarders.

Her accountant Phil Wilson was the younger brother of Margaret-Mary Dornan, her best friend from school days. Margaret-Mary, also a divorcee, worked at Braehead in the M&S Food Hall, in charge of stocking the chilled food shelves, a job she considered well below her ability as she had a Higher in Geography and Standard grades in Geography, English and Religious Studies. Margaret-Mary had been the brightest girl in Wendy's class and had planned to go to college before she fell pregnant aged sixteen.

To Wendy, it seemed that all the Wilson tribe had been clever. Margaret-Mary's eldest brother James was a lecturer in Psychology at St Andrews University and had written several books on serial killers. Wendy had always fancied James, but he was gay and happily married to a Polish computer guru called Vasily Burek, who owned a software company in Dundee which provided cloud computing services for several NHS Trusts, District Councils and other public sector bodies, including Police Scotland.

From the outset, Phil Wilson had encouraged Wendy to organise her clients into 'regulars', those who paid by monthly standing order, clients used to create a legitimate audit trail on a business turning a profit, taxable after a full range of legitimate deductions. In an off the books account, Phil encouraged her to create a separate income stream from her 'irregulars', those she organised to pay by cash, money she kept in a locking briefcase together with a notebook setting down dates and amounts with initials of the clients. The briefcase had been provided by Phil who had set the four-digit code.

For both regulars and irregulars alike, extras such as bathing and grooming or for longer days at weekends when a beloved pooch would be with her for all three outings, she held out for cash payments, not cheques. Since many of these clients were also part of the grey economy, used to dealing in cash to minimise tax due to HMRC, this suited them too.

At the end of each week, usually on Fridays, Wendy left her locked briefcase with Phil who returned it minus the cash on the following day. Inside the notebook she received a payment receipt for the money he had deposited in her offshore account, where it was invested in 'secure stocks and shares' growing steadily, free of tax.

Phil Wilson's separate (cash) fee for this additional service was 15%, which he emphasised repeatedly was less than she would have had to pay if this 'irregulars' cash had been processed through the formal books submitted to the Inland Revenue.

Although she barely understood his explanations, she had stuck rigidly to his rules. Year on year it was all working out well. Once a month, she would go online from her phone and check her nest egg in the bank in Douglas, Isle of Man, a place which to her seemed mysterious and mystical, a magical island in the sun inhabited by millionaires and billionaires.

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As part of his service, Phil called her most days, checking up on her and making sure she was still sober. At first, she had resented this monitoring but, over time, she knew it was a good arrangement and looked forward to telling him she was 'still good'. And she understood why he was so hard on her. From Margaret-Mary, Wendy knew in his twenties Phil had flirted with drugs and alcohol and had been at a low ebb before finding the Mormons where he was now a Bishop.

Although she had objected at first, Phil insisted she must always keep her mobile phone on, night and day, 24/7. Ostensibly this was to always make herself available to her clients, but Wendy knew it was because he liked to ring her, to check she was 'still good', calls he often made late into the evening, as she was heading for bed and sometimes early in the morning as she was eating a light breakfast.

Wendy, whose spelling and grammar were poor, was not a *Facebook* or *Twitter* user. This meant she was generally oblivious to the chatter swirling around her in the world of social media. Although Margaret-Mary said she was daft to miss out on the fun, it was a situation which suited Wendy, making her feel less anxious and more in control. When walking her dogs, but only when she felt in the mood, she listened to *Amazon Music* on her *iPhone* where she had set up her favourites on dozens of playlists.

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Old News

Late on Wednesday 13 May 2014, while her world was spinning towards a life-changing catastrophe about to unfold, Wendy was planning an early night. Ronnie (Veronica), her cousin, rang her mobile from Manchester to tell her of the further exposé about the broadcaster Stuart Hall having sex with children. At Ronnie's insistence, bullied, Wendy agreed she would watch *BBC News* later. This was a promise which she was unable to fulfil as she had given her aging TV to a charity shop as part of her plan to break her cycle of late-night *Netflix* binging.

This news from Ronnie made Wendy think about her gay cousin Alec Thom and his collection of life-size anatomically complete boy-dolls which adorned his house, objects he referred to as "my wee darlings". What did his parents and family make of this behaviour, she wondered? Wendy had always been wary of her superior Thom cousins who were from the posh side of the family.

Alec's parents had both been accountants with *IBM*. As a result, their four children had been brought up in the lap of luxury in Glasgow's Jordanhill area, attending the nearby fee-paying High School of Glasgow. Before university, each sibling in turn had enjoyed fantastic gap year holidays travelling in China, India, Australia and New Zealand.

Not for the first time Wendy wondered why Alec had given up his career in modern dance and choreography to join the Police. When asked, he had claimed:

"My knees are already too old for that caper. Anyway, I always fancied the uniform and the idea of using handcuffs."

To escape from unsettling thoughts of Stuart Hall and Alec Thom, Wendy prepared herself for another session of relaxation, hoping to blunt the edge of her craving for chocolate. She had resisted Phil's repeated offers to introduce her to the Mormons but had become a recent convert to *Mindfulness*.

Slipping under the duvet, she tried to pick a sleep theme to guide her to a restful night. A suitable topic would not come because during that day she had been obsessing on an unmarked *Fiat Doblo*, one she had seen several times over recent days, a flashy, upmarket version of her own van with chrome trim and darkened glass windows all round, not polar white like her own but more of an ivory colour, a special edition model, she thought.

With Phil's help, Wendy had recently splashed out on a nearly new second-hand white *Fiat Doblo* in good condition, an ex-rental vehicle he had sourced for her. She had added bright tangerine-orange decals advertising her services under the banner of *Glennifer*

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Sniffers, a name suggested by Alec Thom and endorsed by Phil. She had wanted *Wendy's Walkies* but they had both strongly advised her to avoid using her name in her business advertising, saying it was very downmarket approach which would put off her clients, most of whom were in Bridge of Weir.

Thinking back on the other *Fiat Doblo*, she realised it must be special as its roof was raised, making it taller and more impressive. That morning, it had been parked at a sort of make-shift lay-by beside a field gate in the narrow country lane she used to gain access to a stretch of rough ground by a derelict farm. These buildings were now a rabbit warren which the dogs loved. This little wilderness was a favourite place she used to walk her dogs, a spot normally avoided by other dog walking agencies because the access path was so narrow and rutted. This remoteness suited Wendy who did not want the barking hassle which meeting other dog packs always caused. Inching passed the other *Fiat* had been awkward. Wendy had been unnerved by a creepy sensation, believing she was being observed from behind its dark glass windows.

Now, under her duvet, her mind began to re-run the encounter. The purpose of its strange orb like bulb raised on a pole, sticking out from the roof puzzled her. Perhaps it was a *Google-Eye* van collecting images for *Street View* but then she realised the sphere did not have any lenses. She had felt there was something "wrong" about this van and had noted its registration number in her phone with the intention of calling the anonymous *Crimebusters* hotline. Later, when the dogs were free to run about, she changed her mind, remembering what Phil Wilson had said about keeping a low profile with the authorities. When she returned along the track, the other *Doblo* had gone, leaving the field gate open and revealing deep tracks in the mud, a sign it had used the field opening to make a turn. Wendy had stopped and closed the heavy gate, sliding the bar across to lock it.

At just after two o'clock in the morning, seconds after she had finally managed to get to sleep, Wendy's phone sprang to life, trilling an alert for an incoming text.

It was from Angie Simpson, one of her best paying irregulars from Bridge of Weir to say she was leaving early to drive across country to Fife as a stand-in for a tour guide who had taken unwell.

Wendy's face creased into a broad smile at the thought of Angie's sappy, lumbering and biddable Newfoundland, a loving, friendly BFG called Daisy.

Perhaps when she had her own cottage with a garden, she too would get a Newfie.

Lying back, stretching her arms out above her head, she pressed the keys carefully, tapping out a confirming text. Then, using her phone App diary/planner, she added Daisy to her list for her first round of pick-ups. Changing to her clock App, she re-set her

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phone alarm for an earlier start, plugged it in to charge, switched off the bedside light and slipped over, thinking of Daisy and her exuberant "kisses".

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Courchevel

Wendy absolutely loved the upmarket village of Bridge of Weir, especially in the early hours of the morning when it was like a film set, she fantasised. This was where most of her clients were located, living in the lap of luxury, where the litter free roads were wide and empty of parked cars. Every house seemed larger than its neighbours, grand old stone buildings set in well-tended gardens reached by winding and impressive driveways, all with two or three fancy cars parked outside, everything in perfect condition.

When her dog-breeding neighbours had finally been evicted by Renfrew Council, Wendy had decided to buy her own flat as a stepping-stone to somewhere better. Phil had helped her fill in the forms and set up the direct debit payments. Now, as the owner, she had recently redecorated with new carpets and furnishings. Although her life was much improved, Bridge of Weir was where she longed to be, away from the press of nosy neighbours and the all-pervasive noise and grubbiness of urban living. As her *Mindfulness* tapes said:

It's good to dream, goal setting is vital to achieving realisation.

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Wendy surfaced from her reverie, tugged to wakefulness by the rising volume of chimes from the alarm on her phone set on its stand on her bedside table. Blinking her eyes open, she focussed on the screen; just after five-thirty. Daisy was due her homeopathic tummy medication an hour before her breakfast and would also need a widdle walk before setting out in the van to collect the other dogs.

Wendy had her schedule in her head: first Daisy, then Flop the King Charles, then Victoria the Border Terrier, all to be uplifted before 7:30 am to free their owners for their working days ahead.

Angie Simpson's cottage stood in the grounds of a grand mansion which had been demolished five years previously, replaced by a tasteful blonde sandstone block of twenty-four three-bedroomed luxury retirement flats called *Rosemount Mansions*, a gated community behind the original high perimeter wall with a remotely operated security gate.

Using up-front money from Ercolano, Angie Simpson had been the mystery property developer, the money from the onward sale of these flats now safely laundered into the legitimate banking system, initially repatriated at a handsome profit to Sergio's Bolinchetti account in Milan then onward to the Grazioni account in a private bank in Zug,

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Switzerland. Her reward was *Courchevel*, built to her meticulous specification and now owned outright, the deeds in her name.

At last Angie was beginning to free herself from her sister-in-law Edith who had wielded power over her for decades through the Simpson Family Trust, the device set up originally by Hugh Morrison Simpson and his sister Edith Artusi Simpson when they inherited from their father, Ernesto Grazioni Simpson. Back then, in the late 1920s, the addition of the Simpson surname had been granted by a legal sleight-of-hand using a now defunct form of the modern deed poll. By this means, the Simpson family in Bridge of Weir had successfully concealed its connection to its Camorra roots.

Ernesto, morphed to become Ernest but known locally as Ernie, then aged only fifty-three, had then retired to the hospice/convent in Ercolano where he died a few months later from an inoperable stomach cancer. His wife, Agnes Edith Morrison, who had predeceased him by eight years, had been the primary source of the Simpson family wealth, money garnered from shipping contraband goods traded between Greenock and Mediterranean ports, principally Naples, Trieste and Istanbul. Prior to WW2 this fleet was registered in Liverpool.

Given special status by the British authorities during WW2, the Simpson family's small fleet of coastal traders, temporarily re-registered in neutral Sweden, had also carried British spies, saboteurs and other clandestine forces including resistance liaison operatives to Italy. Many of these men and several women were native Italian who, like Ernesto, had established new lives in Britain and were keen to see the overthrow of the Mussolini's fascist regime.

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A cheery wooden sign above the front door proclaimed the cottage to be '*Courchevel*'.

Angie had once told Wendy this was her favourite French ski resort. Maybe someday I might learn to ski, Wendy thought, knowing this was another unattainable romantic dream, unless some miracle happened. Very occasionally she tried a lucky dip on the Lottery but afterwards, when she lost, she vowed never to try again.

"Wendy, get real. Everyone knows the lottery is for losers", Alec had said.

Still, at least she was now fit enough to try skiing, an idea inconceivable a few years earlier. Speaking to her dogs, she had once said:

"I should book lessons at the snow centre place at Braehead Shopping Centre."

Courchevel had once been a stables block, its open plan ground floor organised around an island kitchen with a spacious dining and living area, all looking out onto a largish internal garden planted with a collection of fuchsias, Angie's favourite shrub. This area had once

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been the yard where the horses had been marshalled and harnessed. Off the corridor from the rear door adjacent to the utility room, there was an ultra-modern downstairs open plan walk-in toilet and shower room without screens, the runoff draining to a central outlet. Upstairs, converted from what had once been a hayloft and the living quarters for an ostler and his family, were two en suite bedrooms and a sizeable study/office.

To the rear, accessed by bi-fold doors, there was a compact south-facing rose garden and a patio with a heated spa tub, a suntrap with all-weather furniture including a hammock and a motorised parasol. To protect it from winds and provide complete privacy, the entire space was enclosed by a deep, four-metre-high double-depth beech hedge. Concealed within the hedge was an alarmed mesh fence of high tensile steel, making the garden area a mini fortress. Even though she thought it unlikely, verging on impossible, because of these additional high security provisions and its sophisticated security system, each time Wendy arrived at *Courchevel*, she always thought: *Drugs!*

During her first months of calling to collect Daisy, she could not envisage Angie Simpson being a drug dealer or user. In Wendy's naive world, drug addicts and dealers would never live in Bridge of Weir where so many people were lawyers, professors, surgeons and some even judges, like the tall, thin, stern lady called Ms Dermott, who owned Victoria, the Border Terrier.

However, as time passed, the thought of Angie Simpson being a drugs dealer kept nagging at her, leading her to think of her younger sister Evie Brand, still living in squalor in a housing association flat in Ferguslie Park. The sisters no longer met up as the once had, their contact now by text only. In recent months, Evie had claimed in her texts she was 'living clean', helped by the Mormons to break free of her addiction to crack cocaine and amphetamines. Together with Phil and his outreach team, they were also trying to save her partner Gordy who, according to Evie had once lived in Bridge of Weir before becoming an addict.

Compared with her other clients, Wendy found Angie Simpson to be reserved, sometimes dour and sometimes snappy but only very occasionally. Wendy had learned to bite her tongue with owners, everyone had problems. She already knew the smart-looking woman made her living as a tour guide, working for high-end companies with mega-rich clients. Since buying Daisy, Angie had set herself up as a freelance 'relief' tour guide, being picky, only accepting a request when the assignment on offer suited her, charging a higher rate, if she sensed the agency was desperate.

One day the Simpson woman let slip that she was aiming at retirement, although no timescale was mentioned.

Wendy began dreaming. knowing she would never be able to afford a posh place like *Courchevel*. However, she felt compelled to press Angie for an actual date:

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"Mrs Simpson, 'member ye said ye might be movin', dae you huv a date in mind?"

To put Wendy off track, Angie had confided an impromptu fiction:

"Mum and Dad run a busy and very profitable six-bed B&B on Skye. You can guess their age, eh? Well, they want me to join them, with a view to buying them out. But, well, you know what it's like, Wendy. Visiting occasionally for a few days is one thing but living there is quite out of the question. Who else but climbers, hill walkers and bird watchers would move to live on one of the coldest, wettest and windiest islands in the world?"

But the notion of owning *Courchevel* was powerfully alluring for a girl like Wendy Brand raised in Ferguslie Park, causing her to blurt out:

"Ye know, Mrs Simpson, Ah've been saving hard an Ah would gie anythin' for a place like this. Wid ye gie me first dibs, when your lookin' tae sell up, like? Look, Ah know itt-ahl be ootta ma range but hey, it's good tae dream, eh?"

"Sure, Wendy, when the time comes, you'll be first to know."

Later, recounting this conversation, she 'placed' an image of herself living at *Courchevel* on her *Mindfulness* wish list and thought of how it had all worked out for Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.

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An Early Start

An hour before Wendy's alarm sounded, Angie Simpson stood in her kitchen, bright sunshine streaming in through her patio doors, drinking a second coffee before loading the mug into her dishwasher and setting it to run on the quick wash programme. Lolling on the floor beside her was the love of her life, a five-year old Newfoundland called Daisy. Angie was dressed in her tour guide ensemble, an outfit chosen to impress but not outdo her clients, her case packed, tapping out a reminder text about Daisy's medication to Wendy Brand her dog-walker, the chatty woman who operated *Glennifer Sniffers*.

Semi-retired and freelance, Angie Simpson had taken an emergency call the previous evening from one of her former managers at a firm where she had once worked full-time to establish a safe profile for the tax authorities. Her job as a travel guide also served as a good cover for moving around to monitor her network of distribution couriers.

Since the influx of the Serbs, her circle of clients was now in slow decline and she was gradually consolidating, encouraging her older agents into retirement by paying them lump sum pensions from her own savings while maintaining the fiction that all was well for Raffa in Naples.

With the impending transfer of the money from the sale of *Courchevel* to her (very) private retirement portfolio of savings and investments, she used her irregular stints as a tour guide as a cover for her movements and as a convenient way to maintain her status with the UK tax authorities. In her dramatic retirement plan, it was essential to leave a legitimate trail of 'normal business activities' to make her exit seem like an entirely credible accident.

Without the protection of Sergio, the idea of working under Raffa with his twisted mind was not tenable. Let him deal with the Serbs after she sold out to them.

That will test your metal as the new Godfather of the Grazioni of Ercolano.

For an enhanced fee, she was about to head to St Andrews in Fife to take over a 'Visit Scotland in Luxury' bus tour comprising wealthy Americans and Scandinavians. She was due at their hotel at eight o'clock as the replacement for the original guide, a beefy Polish man called Marcin Adamic who presented himself as a fake Scotsman under the name of 'Mack' Adams.

During the negotiating call, Angie had learned Mack had been rushed to hospital, struck down by a massive stroke. This drama had occurred during Mack's set piece hammed up opener of 'An Address to a Haggis', delivered to his tour guests during a Brig o' Doon

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version billed as '*A Real Genuine Scottish Robbie Burns Supper*', a lavish production choreographed with hired-in extras dressed in kilts and plaids serving food and drinks, and a small group of singers leading a singalong medley of Scottish and Irish ballads, the words projected onto a big screen with a bouncing ball, karaoke style.

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Earlier, after her exchange of texts with Wendy, Angie had turned out the lights and snuggled under a duvet, floating on her waterbed, Daisy on the floor beside her, snoring quietly.

Caught in the half-world between sleep and wakefulness, the familiar video of her life began to run as it had been doing most nights in recent years.

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Exit Strategy

Settled emotionally after seven turbulent years of severe menopausal episodes, long past any romantic involvement with men, now she has Daisy, Angie is happy with her own company. A few months earlier, on her fifty-eighth birthday, she celebrated with a small box of six chocolate gingers and a single large glass of expensive Amarone, settling to watch a further re-run of the BBC version of 'Pride and Prejudice', Daisy asleep at her feet in front of a blazing log-burning stove.

To those who have known her over the last four decades, Mrs Angie Simpson is no longer the stunning beauty she had been in her prime. Tall, statuesque, slightly overweight with good hair, currently blonde again, cosmetically improved teeth and a strong face, she is still attractive. Behind her grey tinted spectacles, she has the careful watchful eyes of a woman who likes to be in charge. In her perfect world, she would have demanded total control over everything in her orbit. Older and wiser, she now realises this was always an unattainable goal and had learned to settle for the best she could arrange, a situation maintained by the application of energy, diligence and ruthlessness in equal measure.

To celebrate her former lover's seventy-second birthday, she had travelled to Ercolano to check for herself, confirming Sergio Graziano was in terminal decline with lung disease and bowel cancer, his mind slipping. 'Deliberate forgetting' is a technique Angie Simpson has used many times in her life and, despite her lingering affection for him, she is gradually erasing Sergio from her thoughts.

With this special link to the head of the Grazioni family business soon to be lost and with no desire to continue to serve under his son, Angie Simpson is well advanced with her own exit strategy. Unlike his more thoughtful and cautious father, she knows from personal observation that Raffa has a dangerous penchant for unnecessary and overtly cruel violence, a throwback to the last of the old Camorra-Mafia style of half a century earlier.

Her carefully planned move to a quiet hamlet near the ski resort of Morzine in France will at last free her from the constant pressure of worrying about the diminutive Franca Vitelli and her bizarre behaviour. Had it not been for her respect for Sergio, Angie would have eliminated Franca years ago, perhaps even at the time of her first misdemeanour shortly after she was exiled to Scotland. To Angie, Franca is a menace and too clever by far to be normal.

Two decades earlier, when she had agreed to resettle Franca as a teenager, Angie had not bargained for the trouble the deranged child-woman would cause. Nonetheless, down through the years Angie had kept her word. However, now that control had effectively

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passed to Raffa, in her view her long-ago promise to Sergio to look out for Franca Vitelli is already history.

Angie has been working on her plan to escape for several years, a key part of which is to sell her list of clients. This is a group of high-quality users she has grown to around five thousand over a period of almost four decades.

After a short online bidding war in the *Dark Web*, she had chosen the man calling himself 'Zander Marcus'.

This was merely her starting point in the negotiation process. Although Angie was wary of *Dark Web* sources, she hired an agent who revealed 'Zander Marcus' was one of several pseudonyms used by Zivko Marković, a thirty-nine-year-old Serbian headquartered in a large, modernised stone villa on the outskirts of Blairgowrie, in Perth.

Drone video clips from this investigator showed Zivko Marković and his minders coming and going in a variety of vehicles housed out of sight in a large Dutch barn. Biographical details provided showed he was the nephew of a man called Miro (Miroslav) Marković, whom Angie already knew from Sergio to be a nasty and psychotic individual who ran his Europe-wide drugs operation from Trieste.

A second *Dark Web* agency was commissioned to check out the Blairgowrie premises. This revealed a property with high ornate, wrought iron fences capable of being electrified to create a highly secure compound. Snippets from local newspapers based on fake news stories planted by Zivko's Edinburgh solicitor gave the impression the non-resident owner was a retired Uruguayan footballer who had once played for *Real Madrid* and *Juventus*. In retirement the owner had become a recluse, fearful he or his family might be kidnapped and subjected to extortion. This was a convenient fiction which had become accepted locally.

Having completed her due diligence she also realised that Marković might easily have tracked her down to Bridge of Weir. Since she was in this alone without the protection she might normally call on from Sergio or the Artusi organisation in Ayr, she decided to accept the Zander Marcus offer without quibbling further. After all it had been the highest bid by almost a million Euros and she did not want to spark Marković and his henchmen into a violent reaction.

As a sweetener, and proof that she intends to exit her drugs business, Angie has advised Zander Marcus that her information files will also contain the location and security system access codes for her remaining store of drugs with an estimated street value of around £850,000. This location, not yet revealed, is an unmarked warehouse unit at the Eurocentral Logistics Hub at Mossend, Bellshill, just off the M8.

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With all the elements of her exit strategy in place she set the date for the exchange of decryption codes with the Serbs as 1 July 2014, the day she planned to drive away from *Courchevel* with Daisy. Around two hours later, at a secure lockup in Carlisle, she intended to transfer three suitcases of her most precious essentials from her vintage *Maserati* to a camper van with French numberplates and drive off to catch a cross-channel ferry to start her new life, transiting the borders ahead in the name of Maria Angelica, using a set of matching documents purchased in the *Dark Web*.

The *Maserati* has been pre-sold in the *Dark Web* for an online payment to be paid to her Isle of Man account, the payment due on 5 July in return for an email giving the lock-up location and the access code for its alarm system. Under her plan, by this date she will be in Morzine.

Her secret pension fund, currently valued at £9.9 million is held in the form of 'gold bonds', a set-up used by many celebrities and criminals to hide their wealth from tax authorities and international policing agencies. These bonds, akin to Bitcoin, are encrypted certificates held in her 'electronic vault' at her Guernsey bank and backed by numbered gold ingots held in a physical Swiss vault.

A more visible part of her retirement wealth is a luxury chalet farmhouse property set up under her escape name of Linda White, an identity for which she holds a comprehensive set of documents confirming her residency status in France and licencing her as an online antiques dealer. For working capital and day-to-day expenses, Mademoiselle White has a Credit Suisse account with partitioned amounts in USD, Sterling, Yen and Euros amounting to 1.2 million Euro equivalent.

With *Courchevel* already sold online as a holiday home to a Danish Architect mad keen on golf, (entry date mid-July), Angie has agreed to sell her client list to the Serbs for Euro 6 million to be paid in *Bitcoin* tokens.

In an exchange of emails, she has discussed this process with an advisor from the Guernsey bank to discover a secure protocol already exists.

Both parties must exchange encrypted USB sticks.

She has promised the Serbs her stick will contain her entire client list with contact details. In a formal document, she has attested that this USB stick is the only record she has. This is untrue: Angie holds the original of her USB stick in her *Courchevel* lockbox. This stick is double encrypted and includes details of all her investments with their access codes. After Daisy, it is her most valuable possession.

On their part, the Serbs have attested their encrypted USB stick will contain their payment in *Bitcoin* tokens.

Without decryption codes, both USB sticks are worthless.

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The exchange of decryption codes will then take place online, brokered by a bank in Liechtenstein where both she and the Serbs must lodge good faith sureties of 6 million Euros, these amounts returnable (after fee deductions) on successful completion of the deal.

To underwrite her surety amount, Angie has used her gold bonds as her guarantee, a facility arranged bank to bank through her Guernsey account.

Both parties have agreed on 30 June 2014 as the date when the sureties must be in place to allow the decryption code exchange to occur at midnight on 1 July.

With the Serb payment in her Guernsey bank, Angie Simpson plans to depart immediately leaving the Serbs to dispose of her current team of five *Grazioni* couriers as they see fit. These shaven headed and tattooed footballer lookalikes, all in their early twenties, are thrusting placemen sent to her by Raffa since he took control, irritating and disrespectful men she has never fully trusted.

Whether Ronald can put a stop to Franca Vitelli's current madcap plan will no longer be her concern. The dim-witted Edith will be of no help, a woman who believes every word her son Edwin spouts. No doubt Ronald will look to Raffa and the Artusi clan in Ayr to sort it out. On their past record, the Artusi will make Franca and her Edwin vanish, probably by sending them to 'South Africa', hopefully before they defraud Marco Bolinchetti out of the remains of Maria Bolinchetti's fortune and her crumbling, dry rot infested *Bellavista*.

On the USB stick she will send to the Serbs' cut-out mailbox, she has added the outline of the issues, pointing them at Franca and Edwin McKindless as potential rivals.

How the Serbs used this personal data will no longer be her concern.

Perhaps Franca will run, use her wealth to hide. She might even be foolish enough to run back to 'her Raffa', a relationship which Sergio had wisely and consistently opposed, mainly because of Franca's psychiatric issues. In Angie's view, both Raffa and Franca require hospitalisation, an issue she knew she could never raise with Sergio.

Meanwhile, to keep up appearances, Angie knows she must maintain her cover as a tour guide until the right moment comes to disappear with Daisy. To cover her escape, she has planned a dramatic act which should provide her with a perfect cover albeit at the sacrifice of *Courchevel*.

Perhaps the Danish Architect will use the site to create his dream home.

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Flashbacks

Late in 2012, Franca and Edwin had met online, in the "*All Stars Karaoke Premier Room*", an expensive strictly adults only subscription website hosted in the *Open Internet*, frequented mainly by aspiring Japanese and Koreans honing their singing skills. For an additional entry fee of US\$500, the hosts organised an evening of song with a monthly prize of an all-expenses paid trip to Las Vegas to take in all the top shows and meet a selection of famous names backstage for a photoshoot.

Franca and Edwin's deeper, more personal friendship began when they won joint runners-up prizes of life-sized posters of themselves alongside the artist of their choice. These images were compiled by skilful photoshopping to create a believable 3-D effect. At the online awards ceremony the DJ hosting their presentation suggested they might like to compete in future rounds singing as a duet.

Chatting privately by email after the show, the pair agreed to share personal voice files which Franca-Julia blended using her sophisticated recording and tweaking software. Both parties were pleased and impressed with these early results and an informal agreement was struck.

Franca-Julia revealed herself to Edwin as Frances Verratti, a solicitor who worked as a specialised freelance consultant.

Using *FaceTime* while high on Ecstasy, they rehearsed live online, always hiding inside their costumes and make-up, Frances as Molly Parson (Dolly Parton) singing low soprano with a hint of grit, and Edwin as Neal Sadako (Neil Sedaka) trilling up from his sweet tenor voice into a falsetto as and when the song required.

Months passed during which they met online most nights to sing and chat, cautiously at first and later bolstered by their drug-taking, always 'imbibing' while off camera in the early stages. Later, when they were more comfortable with each other, they began sharing their drug preferences.

Week on week, the friendship between the two small, odd-looking outcasts slowly blossomed.

By dropping hints, Franca led Edwin to the realisation that they were both located in the Glasgow area. In what was a huge step for Franca, they agreed to meet in person, her first ever date, albeit with a man who was unmistakably gay.

For these early encounters, they met at the bohemian *Tinderbox* coffee house on Byres Road, Franca-Julia in the persona of Ms Frances Verratti, dressed as a businesswoman,

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wearing a selection of dark grey pinstripe trouser suits with white or grey shirts set off with a green or red cravat and low-heeled shoes of Italian leather, their colour chosen to match the cravat of the day. Her baldness was concealed by an unruly mop of curly chestnut hair, large grey tinted glasses and sensible, low-key make-up.

Franca at once decided what she liked best about Edwin, was his small stature and thin, wiry build, his small dark moustache, his neat goatee beard and his gentle, slightly effeminate nature and girlish laugh. She began to fantasise:

Perhaps they might have a dressing up party, two 'girls' sharing their secrets?

In these public encounters, Frances playing the role of a demure, shy but eager potential lover, encouraged Edwin to lead their conversations. She realised quickly that he too was a fantasist, making up incredible stories of his many successes in business, his stunning acumen, the money he was creaming from online scams and so on. With each live meeting, their personal bond grew stronger and, in her mind, Edwin morphed into a more malleable version of Raffa, a version she was confident she could control, master and manipulate to satisfy her innermost desire for recognition, praise and adulation while enjoying a modern day re-run of her mis-remembered *affare di passione* (affair of passion) with Raffa. Even more alluring, learned during their nightly online karaoke sessions, unlike her 'old' Raffa, Edwin as her new Raffa could sing well, another bonus, unlike Raffa who had ridiculed her early efforts to become a songster.

Their first live recording session was made at a studio near Glasgow's Tron Theatre, a venue rented by the day when they helped one another to dress up as Molly and Neal.

From the shadows, Franca-Julia helped Frances Verratti to master the AV setup, using the editing desk to produce a high-quality video album of their favourite songs. Compiled into their signature Parson/Sadako album, this was a submission which earned them a commendable fourth place at the "Nashville Digital Festival of Country Music".

For Franca, starved of togetherness for so many years during her exile in Scotland, her studio day experience with Edwin lodged itself deeply in her psyche as *her most perfect day ever*, never to be repeated for fear of spoiling this sacred memory with a lesser performance.

With this music video in the can, Edwin was keen to get Frances to agree to hawking it around London music agents with a view to launching a career as a duo. Afraid this publicity push might impact her growing drug empire, Franca-Julia was much more in favour of creating an anonymous *YouTube* channel as a cut-out to sell their music through *Amazon Music*, *iTunes*, *Spotify* and other streaming services.

Over many months of gentle bickering, the matter remained unresolved.

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At Edwin's pleading Franca finally accepted his invitation to meet at his home in Houston to consider these alternatives. It was late January 2014.

She discovered he was a confident chef.

Dressed without compromise as Dolly Parton, sipping from a flute of Prosecco, Franca-Frances-Genny balanced precariously on a bar stool in his high-tech kitchen while Edwin, dressed as a miniature Jamie Oliver and hamming the accent, gave her a TV cook style running commentary while he prepared an aromatic Cannabis Lasagne dish complemented with a crème brulle, its custard laced with finely ground *Ecstasy*.

As his guest, she brought sniffing cocaine, *Greenies*, *Blues* and a bottle of expensive Grappa, her contribution to their party night.

Hours later, after a lengthy karaoke session, Edwin became emotional and talkative, admitting his homosexuality and the underlying mental health problems which had been at the root of his drug taking habit. Like many whose parents could afford to pay for private medicine he had started with prescribed drugs for depression as a teenager. All too soon he had accelerated into drugs bought online, in the *Dark Web*. Listening to Edwin burble on, Franca realised he was entirely naive as an online shopper. Guiding him with her questions, he happily recited the website names of his suppliers. Franca held her breath, relieved he did not mention *High Purity Organics*.

Glad to have an empathetic ear, Edwin reloaded with three *Greenies* and a can of *Red Bull*. Boosted, he embarked on what she soon recognised was almost certainly a well-used script. During an hour-long ramble, Edwin McKindless went on to reveal his role as a lonely only child, a late addition to his respectable family, portraying himself as a precocious creative genius, a modern-day Mozart who as a child and young adult had been nurtured and supported by two doting older parents.

Recognising echoes of her own long-ago performances delivered to her lonely ladies at the Queen's Park boating pond, Franca suspected she was being fed a carefully rehearsed, pristine rendition of Edwin's life, a whitewashed version of a reality which he was unwilling to share.

Now on firmer ground, Edwin powered forwards to reveal synoptic profiles of his parents, information she had accepted as true, on first hearing.

His father Ronald McKindless was a renowned orthopaedic consultant, now retired. His career as a knee surgeon had spanned three decades when he had been the top 'go-to' man for footballers with career threatening injuries, well-known in the UK and Europe for his work as a miracle healer. His mother Edith had studied Domestic Science in Glasgow but had never used it to teach, spending her life doing good instead. The

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McKindless wealth, Edwin alleged, was from old shipowner money transporting sugar, tea and never to be mentioned in polite company, slaves.

Edwin then re-focussed on cooking, revealing Edith had an Italian relative in her past, a man called Artusi who had been a famous chef and food author. To Franca, half-listening while surreptitiously fact-checking his every assertion on her *iPhone*, located a website giving details of Pellegrino Artusi (1820 to 1911), the author of the 1891 cookbook "*La Scienza in Cucina e L'Arte di Mangiar Bene*", ("The Science of Cooking and the Art of Eating Well").

From previous online snooping exercises, Franca-Julia knew Edwin's bland and predictable life was that of a spoiled and much loved only child from a rich family, showered with gifts, who even now as a forty-two-year-old was drawing down regular monthly payments of £4,000 tax-paid from the Simpson Family Trust, as he had been from the age of twenty-one. Although he claimed to be an entrepreneurial businessman, Franca knew this was a fantasy decorated by an assortment of loss-making or moribund one-man businesses and hollowed-out companies without any real turnover.

Sipping Grappa, feeling superior, already on her own high thanks to a recent line of cocaine and two *Greenies*, Franca smiled indulgently at his assertions. Rather than putting her off, Edwin's ramblings made him seem more endearing, like a mischievous but loveable puppy.

In addition to his designer house, his three cars (a Porsche, a Lamborghini and a souped-up Mini Cooper - this one his *absolute* favourite - he boasted a speedboat berthed near Luss on Loch Lomond and a sea-going motor cruiser at Largs Marina, all the toys of a gadabout, playboy lifestyle. Meanwhile, to his parents and anyone willing to believe his spiel, he purported to be a silent partner of a successful property developer, a man who was also a business start-up initiator, a seed-corn investor, a mover and shaker, while in the background, under the radar, Edwin kept a low profile and lived by his wits while uncovering new opportunities to be exploited by him and his partner, Kendal Walsh.

Fact-checking on *Google*, Franca-Julia discovered this high-profile developer had no media profile and seemed to be yet another fictional creation in Edwin's fantasy world.

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Later still, in the low hours before dawn, as the effects of the *Greenies* wore off and he hit the Grappa, the other sadder side of his life spilled out, unstoppably. His unrequited homosexuality frustrated by erectile dysfunction, his bouts of depression, his addiction to amphetamines and Ecstasy and, in recent years, injected heroin.

While Edwin mumbled on and on, Franca learned that although he was more willing to live out in the open than her, he too was spending hours in drag chat rooms and adult karaoke

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sites, desperately seeking companionship, stimulation and novelty, a near echo of her own life.

When he began re-running his story again, this time more incoherently, she tuned out, planning her next moves for the hours ahead. His eyes drooped and he dropped off to sleep, sprawled on his sofa. Rising and tiptoeing across, she gave him a rough shake and called his name sharply, but he was gone, comatose.

Smiling, she made a slow circuit of every room, opening drawers, checking, finding his caches of drugs, a neat folder of various currencies (Sterling, Euros, USDs), a passport with stamps for many European countries and, intriguingly entry and exit stamps showing serial visits to Hong Kong, his staging post for visits to mainland China (Beijing, twice, Shanghai three times and many, many visits to Guangzhou which, on checking, she found was close to Hong Kong). The well-thumbed passport also showed regular visits to Russia, (Moscow, St Petersburg and once only to Vladivostok) together with most of the Baltic countries including multiple visits to Minsk in Belarus.

Franca Vitelli began to think that perhaps there was more to Edwin McKindless than she had first thought.

Was he a go between for someone more powerful? If so, who?

Franca-Julia found his old-fashioned PC desktop system and went to work, creating hidden folders, planting tokens, importing malware bots and widgets to make links to allow her access to his every keystroke remotely from Kelvin Court.

An hour later, already dressed to make her exit, intending to leave him to sleep it off and drive to Kelvin Court to find a friendly karaoke session online, she moved closer to check he was still under. Assuming the mantle of a caring sister, as she was tucking the duvet around him, to her surprise and horror, he sat upright, his body rigid, his eyes staring ahead, unfocused, blank.

Afraid, she stumbled back to stand nearer the door.

He stood up then sat down again.

The duvet slipped to the floor.

His eyelids blinked rapidly then closed.

His hands gripped his knees as he rocked backwards and forwards.

His voice was monotone, expressionless:

"No, no, NO! No, listen, it's not like that. Not at all. D'you want to know what really pisses me off big time? It's being under the thumb of Angie. I really hate it that she has a hold over me and my family. She is my mother's relative, some sort of cousin, but not a

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direct blood relative, no, just by marriage. No, she's not an Artusi or even a Bolinchetti. She's just an upstart, an incomer, not true family like me. I get it from Mummy who is true Camorra although she denies it. She's an Artusi which is where I get my kitchen skills from, in the blood. Her brother Alfredo is the true leader, always behind the scenes, in deep cover, pulling all the strings from his spider's nest in Ayr. Their front is that they do commercial property. But it is not what it seems. Oh no, not what it seems at all.

"All the earlier stuff about Mummy's wealth coming from old money, shipping lines and all that guff, well, it is probably baloney. Every time I try to get to the root of it, I get slapped down. Daddy gets angry and this makes Mummy cry. If Angie gets a whiff of this, she is onto me in a shot. D'you know what? Bitch of Hell, she has even punched me and kicked me. But in that clever way so that it doesn't show. One time she broke both my pinkies. Daddy put them in splints and gave me painkillers. I tried to get him to get me out of the business but he says he's powerless.

"Even he's scared of Angie. Everyone in the business is scared of her. I think she's a psychopath. In the beginning, when she started using me, when I was cured of my mental illness, when I was only twenty or maybe twenty-one, I thought it was about drugs locally. But now I know better. I can't prove it but I'm sure Greenock is their main world hub now, not Naples. Sleepy old Greenock. Even Mummy doesn't know the whole story. I'm not sure Daddy does either. Angie keeps everything to herself. We are all under oath never to reveal that Angie is the Scottish representative of the Camorra, from a place called Ercolano, near Naples. It's a gangster organisation like the Mafia, who everyone knows is based in Sicily. I think Angie and Uncle Alfredo Artusi launder money for the Camorra. They send me to do their dirty courier work because everyone thinks I'm stupid.

"D'you know what Angie even said to my face:

"Edwin, everyone knows you're a Cretan but even a Cretan like you has his uses. Do **not** ever think of trying to escape or poor old Mummy and Daddy will suffer a terrible accident."

"Because of Angie, I've been forced to go to meet some terrible people. She sends me all over the world, posing as a tourist. They use me as a courier but not carrying drugs. I am always clean when I travel, on pain of torture and death. It's not drugs I carry, it is information, on those memory sticks things, encrypted. It must be about money, surely. Probably Swiss bank account details and passwords and maybe cryptocurrency information, to pay for drugs. You see, Angie Simpson is the Drugs Queen of Scotland, re-shipping all over the world from Greenock. Daddy hates it all. Basically, he is a decent man but he is trapped, just like me. He told me to stand back from Angie, never to get on her wrong side. Then there is Maria Bolinchetti, I call her Zia Maria, I always have but I'm not sure if we are blood relatives. All I know is she's some sort of agent for the

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Camorra but Daddy says her time of power has passed, that she is more like a silent partner nowadays because she is ancient, deaf as a doorpost and on the edge of dementia. Mummy agrees, says Zia Maria is out of the business now and Angie is in charge. Did I say that Zia Maria lives directly opposite Mummy and Daddy? Do you know about Bellavista and Ridgeway? No? Well, they are huge houses built over a hundred years ago. I went to see Uncle Alfredo with my proposal for redeveloping them. My plan was much better than Rosemount Mansions. But guess what? He would not even let me into his office. The next day Angie came here to punish me, put me in my place. That's when she beat me up for the second time. Oh God in Heaven, can anyone save me from this nightmare?"

Edwin's head slumped forwards and his mouth opened. He gagged as if trying to vomit but nothing came up. Then he was off again, rocking backwards and forwards with his eyes closed, talking in the same robotic voice:

"Honestly, none of you have any idea what these people are like, no idea. It's all down to Angie and Uncle Alfredo and a man in Naples called Sergio and his son Raffa. They pull the strings. Mummy says Raffa is crazy, unhinged. But I know Angie is unhinged too. D'you know, one time, not long after I had this place built, she brought this guy here, to my house. It was the middle of the night. I was in my pyjamas. It was horrendous. She just barged in, checked I was alone, made a phone call then her two heavies brought the guy in, in a body bag, into my garage. They had beaten him to a pulp. His face was so bad I hardly recognised him. I thought he was dead. Then they injected him. Some sort of stimulant, I suppose. Then they started to question him again. Then I realised who the guy was. Andy MacElhose was real smart, went to St Andrews, became a lawyer, lived in Newton Mearns, never married but not gay, not that I know anyway. When he was a student, I used to play squash with him, when he lived at home at his parents' place in Bridge of Weir. I hadn't seen Andy for ages, maybe fifteen years? But they wouldn't believe me though I told them over and over. I thought they were going to beat me up too, but they didn't lay a finger on me. Andy must have given them my name for some reason.

"The bigger guy, the one with the tattoos and the shaven head, he had a flick knife. He made me go around my lovely house with him. He found all my stashes of drugs and put them in a pillowcase to take to Angie. She told him to punish me. He waved his knife in my face. I thought he would stab me or slash me. He made me watch. He smashed every piece of furniture, slashed all my artwork, urinated on my Persian rugs then, unbelievably, he squatted on my waterbed and defecated on it, threatened to make me lick it off. He was an animal, a pure animal."

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"I vomited. He laughed and led me back down to the garage where the other guy, the small, old guy with the squint and the goatee beard and the long ponytail was still working on Andy."

"They made me watch while they tortured him, in my own garage. It was horrible. And all the time Raffa was watching on FaceTime, on Angie's iPad. They chopped off his fingers then his toes, one by one, cropping them with bolt cutters. I thought he was dead then, with the blood loss. Then he screamed when they started roasting his testicles and penis with my chef's blowtorch."

"Oh God in Heaven!"

"There was blood and vomit and excrement everywhere."

"I was screaming too until they injected me with something. No, not morphine. I was frozen to silence but still able to watch and listen. The whole thing was seared onto my brain. Andy was screaming the whole time until he died."

"I passed out, some sort of mental overload."

"When I came too, it was late in the evening. I was in my spare bedroom tied down to the bed, naked. The blackout blinds were down, the lights off. I lay there for a whole day, alone, in the dark, tied to my spare bed. I fell asleep but I could not escape what I had seen."

"Angie came back:

*"Edwin, let that be a warning to you. If it was not for your mother and your Uncle Alfredo, you would be swimming with the fishes like MacElhose. Never tell your parents what happened. If you do, Raffa will never forgive or forget. Next time it could you getting **la tostatura** (the roasting)."*

Edwin rose from the settee. His eyes opened. His crotch was very wet. He stared into the far distance, staggered forward, sank to his knees, keeled over, curled into a foetal position and returned to his comatose state.

Franca concluded what she had just witnessed was clearly true but revealed to her while Edwin was in some sort of catatonic state caused by a drug overload.

Franca checked his pulse: slow but steady. She draped the duvet over him, her mind racing, desperate to escape from Edwin's home in case it was under some sort of surveillance by Angie Simpson or Alfredo Artusi.

She crunched two Greenies then pulled away from the house, vowing never to visit it again.

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Boosted, driving through the first lights of dawn to Kelvin Court, Franca's mind was filled with the thought of Angie Simpson and how she might use her connection with Edwin to displace her from her throne and win back Raffa.

The *Dark Web* would have the answers, it always did.

As she arrived at Kelvin Court, the doubts began to creep into the corners of her mind:

Was she being conned or scammed?

Had this meeting been an entrapment?

Had it all been recorded on video?

Safe inside her flat she swung back to her previous view that Edwin was not in fact any sort of threat. Just a rather lonely gentle man who, like herself, took comfort in drugs, dressing up and singing.

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Imperative

By mid-April, marshalling herself by excluding unwanted distractions as she had done when studying in the months leading up to her Open University final exams, but now focussing on her plan for dominance over Angie Simpson, Franca Vitelli had once more become a full-blown recluse, self-absorbed, averse to direct contact with people, even online, but still checking daily for signs of activity from Edwin's PC in Houston.

Certain that Sergio Grazioni would soon be dead, Franca had already let go of reality, blurring, merging and unifying her personalities as she strengthened herself to make the power grab she had been planning during these weeks of seclusion, desperate to displace Vera Verdi and make herself worthy of Raffa's approbation and be called back to Naples to become his equal partner, her heritage restored.

Soon, when she had completed her plan, this would create a homecoming scenario which would allow her to travel to Ercolano, to inhabit the idyll of her false memories in a land where she had been whole and happy, a myth she had created over many years of fantasising, wallowing in mental illness and drug abuse.

When Edwin re-surfaced about a week after their dinner party, behaving as of old, as if nothing untoward had happened, Franca was relieved. His online activity was desultory, boring, but she could see he was back singing in his various online sites. Insofar as she could tell, there was no email or website contact between him and Angie Simpson.

Harping constantly in Franca's head was the imagined voice of the ever-negative Frances Verratti:

Does Angie Simpson know about his catatonic confessions?

Who else has heard them?

What about the Serbs, for example?

Has Edwin been discarded because of his drug-taking, replaced with a new globetrotting courier?

Can he be trusted?

Undeterred, Franca set about wooing him to her plan, still to be firmed up as she discovered more about her adversaries. Setting her grand scheme in motion, she reopened her daily dialogues with him, pleased he was keen to meet her in Skype, with and without video. Sharing intimacies, the couple continued online as before but much more

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intensely than in the past, Franca Vitelli dressed as Molly Parton, and Edwin McKindless as Neal Sadako, securely messaging many times a day in *WhatsApp* or partying and singing in *Skype*, Franca-Julia confident that by activating the malware on his PC that this channel of communication was also encrypted end-to-end and therefore ultra-secure.

Step by step, day after day, Franca-Frances worked on him, either gently or firmly as needed, guiding and coaching him for the role she envisaged for him as her Prince Consort when she disposed of Angie Simpson to become the new Drugs Queen of Scotland.

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In her parallel life, when not in touch with Edwin, she became frantic, worrying about the delivery of her weaponry, teetering near the edge again, back to the time when she was alone in Strathbungo, after she had been ejected from Skirving Street.

No longer adhering to any routine, she went for days without showering or bathing. Her sense of smell, damaged by her life-saving drug treatment at the Swiss clinic, had diminished gradually, caused by excessive use of *Greenies*. Eating only *Twix* bars and the occasional banana, drinking syrup-sweet black coffee with *Greenies* she was living on a near-constant high, seldom sleeping for more than an hour at a time, slumped over her keyboard.

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Franca-Frances's decision to act had been made weeks earlier prompted by Edwin's revelations.

Tracking Angie constantly, she followed her into the *Dark Web* auction room, posing as a minor player under a false name. It was here she learned Angie Simpson was about to sell out her *Grazioni* distribution network to the Serbs.

In her follow-up *Skype* call with Raffa, he had rejected her assertion that Angie was planning to betray him. Without clear evidence, Sergio, as Capo, would block any move against Angie. Although his father was failing in his physical health, he was still mentally strong, or so Raffa insisted. Franca had seen Raffa's refusal to act on her advice as an inherent weakness, a trait she had always known was in her cousin, a fault line in his personality. This resistance to her plan only spurred her to act independently, aware Raffa was drifting from her and that she needed a way to get him back on her side.

This decision once taken, placed her in a tunnel, blinding her to alternatives and leading to a chain of decisions which became her imperative, regardless of the risks which, fired up on *Greenies*, she discounted entirely.

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Drone Kill System

Prior to sealing her purchase, Franca-Julia-Frances had studied the sales information provided by the anonymous *Dark Web* vendor, consulting detailed specifications released for Online Viewing Only (OVO) after payment of USD 25,000 in *Bitcoin* equivalent, this deposit to be deducted from the total should she decide to proceed to purchase.

From Julia's notes, they gleaned:

The Drone Kill System (DKS) is a two-drone combination which comprises an all-weather Comms Drone codenamed SPC-237C and nicknamed "Peekaboo". Although unarmed, the Peekaboo drone is the brain of the drone pair. It is an evolution of a British design, adopted and enhanced by the USAF for use by Special Forces under the direction of the CIA to guide lethal strikes on sensitive targets.

The all-weather, all-climate design of the DKS enables the drones to operate with guaranteed results in extreme and hostile environments excepting very heavy rain or wind speeds above 100 kph (62 mph). With eighteen small rotors whirling at high-speed, sound emissions for both drones are bat-like, undetectable by the human ear making the DKS an ultra-secret and deniable weapon for 'detect-monitor-sight-kill-record' assassinations.

Both drones are powered by onboard nuclear power cells, miniaturised versions of the type used in satellites for deep space missions including the NASA Mars Voyager program, giving each drone a minimum endurance of two years cumulative flying time.

The titanium rotors have been ruggedised, based on experience over Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq and in the War on Drugs over South America.

The Kill Drone generates its own ammunition by forming pea-sized ice bullets from the surrounding atmospheric vapour. These ice spheres are then coated in toughen heat resistant and biodegradable plastic film shaped to guarantee accuracy. The film burns off when the bullet reaches its impact velocity. After impact, the ice bullets melt leaving no evidential traces.

The gear trains driving these high-speed rotors require either replacement or servicing every cumulative 120 hours (5 days) under standard operating conditions. Fitting replacement gear train packs is straightforward. The alternative servicing approach is a highly technical operation which requires a

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clean room environment and special training; this is not recommended unless such resources are available. A credit can be negotiated for used gear trains, provided they are returned in reasonable condition.

If compromised, both drones are programmed to soar at emergency speed to 10,000 metres then self-destruct, creating deniability.

In addition to providing day-night visual surveillance, the Peekaboo sensor array provides a multi-channel stream of raw intel beamed to an ultra-quick In-SITE Mark5 computer package for analysis and processing. This is an evolution of the original In-SITE system developed by GCHQ, a project funded jointly by MI6 and the CIA.

The control consol and its support equipment is compact and usually located in a small vehicle. Currently we have a control centre in stock which is housed in a Fiat Doblo van, fully adapted for use with this system. This is a single-user setup. For two or three person teams, larger vehicles are available at higher cost.

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After a short discussion, Franca-Julia-Frances agreed to proceed to the next stage.

It was a one-off deal secured for a non-returnable payment of US\$18,253,000, this amount settled in *Bitcoin*, paid upfront, to include twenty gear-train replacement packs.

This *Dark Web* online order had also contained a special handgun for personal protection.

A further non-standard part of the consignment was a batch of two thousand miniature-incendiary grenades which, when placed at the desired location could be armed and triggered remotely via the Kill Drone as directed from the *DKS Control Console*.

In addition, as an optional extra, these tiny explosive eggs could be detonated individually or in batches from a customised programmable satellite phone linked to a dedicated global satellite comms network, this allowing a global reach. This facilitated remote detonation of these small but powerful explosives planted hours, days, weeks, months or even years in advance.

At Frances Verratti's insistence and only after several rounds of terse negotiations with both parties using voice changers, Franca-Julia obtained a concession of a side deal: provided the *DKS* equipment package and *Fiat Doblo* were to be returned in good condition, a refund credit of up to \$8,000,000 maximum would be paid.

Franca-Julia's cut-out cover as the purchaser had been a firm called *R&D Services*, an anonymous Scottish Limited Partnership registered in Edinburgh, the due sum paid electronically from Theresa's anonymous bank in Gamprin, Liechtenstein sent to the

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recipient's equally anonymous bank in Zug, Switzerland under an agreed bank-to-bank protocol.

Jittery at paying out such a vast amount up front on trust, Franca was racked by uncertainty. This impelled them back to the *Dark Web* where further hours of probing by Julia revealed the vendor was a Swiss woman with close links to an Israeli arms dealer. However, no amount of further searching could reveal a physical location for this woman.

Attempting to curtail Franca-Julia's phrenetic and occasionally reckless online activity, Frances Verratti intervened:

"Dear ones, the die is cast. Calm down and be content to wait. I am confident we will receive the tools we need and that we will succeed."

Franca responded, with a nasty edge in her voice:

"Frances, you are putting us off, hovering over us like this, always moaning, telling us what might go wrong, where we have made mistakes. Go back to Newlands at once and leave us be. We'll be in touch if we need you, which I very much doubt."

Alone again, Franca-Julia continued to live online, vicariously skipping backwards and forwards between the Open and *Dark Web*, desperate for clues about Angie Simpson and the Serbs.

During these extended sessions online, using Franca as her physical interface, Julia-Laura flipped through the pages of her 'Bible', a thick A4 notebook stuffed with usernames and passwords used to conceal herself from others, revisiting dozens of favourite sites obsessively, checking, checking, checking, fearful Franca's mega-expensive purchase must have been intercepted by Customs or that she had been scammed by her *Dark Web* supplier.

As Frances had warned, this recklessness was a bad move, exposing them to those who monitored all versions of the *Internet* looking for terrorists and criminals.

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In due time, as Frances had predicted an email arrived from Switzerland giving the delivery time and date, asking for a postcode and address for the drop-off point.

Two hours before the consignment was due in Glasgow, Franca-Julia sent her reply email nominating a derelict warehousing unit in the sprawling Hillington Industrial Estate near the M8 motorway, close to Glasgow Airport. Well ahead of time, dressed as a small, overweight, bearded, dark-haired man in a business suit, Franca-Frances arrived at the premises by taxi to wind the shutter doors open manually.

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The *Fiat Doblo* was crated inside a lorry marked *Schweizer Logistik GmbH*, (the acronym GmbH being the Swiss and German approximate equivalent of a Scottish Limited Partnership). According to the customs declaration this crate contained sewer tunnel boring equipment.

On departure of the delivery lorry, using six of her miniature grenades, Franca dispersed them around the crate and unwanted packaging. With the roller shutters wound down and sitting outside in her new *Fiat Doblo*, before driving off through a downpour for Milngavie, she used the satellite phone provided to pre-set the timers for this first batch of 'egg bombs' to explode after a delay of thirty minutes.

Reported by passing motorists on the adjacent M8 motorway, initially there was confusion about the location of the intensely burning building. When the Fire and Rescue Services and Police Scotland eventually arrived at the soggy remains, they sifted through the debris until they were certain there were no victims. Despite the ferocity of the explosion, the incident was consigned to the record as another arson attack by teenage vandals.

Secure inside her premises at Crossveggate, (near Milngavie Railway Station), Franca-Frances meticulously checked her purchases against the copy order list provided before securing the premises. Satisfied, she caught a train to Anniesland Station.

Back in her 'nest' at Kelvin Court, Franca took a long hot bath, swallowed four Blues then slept for two days.

As might be expected, within an hour of this delivery, both *R&D Services* and *Schweizer Logistik GmbH* were immediately dissolved as legal entities.

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Glencoe

Rested, bubbling with confidence and boosted by a breakfast of syrup coffee, two *Twix* bars and two *Greenies* washed down with a large can of *Red Bull*, Franca-Julia-Frances set about her task at once, convinced she would succeed.

While based in Newlands and later at Kelvin Court, Franca-Julia had been flying increasingly sophisticated drones for years in aerial combats, one of many income streams from her online gaming activities. As a result of thousands of hours flying drones in these virtual environments, she felt confident she would master her new high-tech weaponry.

However, she knew that to become proficient when flying real drones, she needed a secure and isolated environment. Based on hours of research, she chose the remoteness of the mountains of the Glencoe area. After a long, slow and frightening drive, she turned off the A82 just beyond the Kingshouse Hotel into Glen Etive. Two miles along the narrow winding road, she found a parking spot among a cluster of huge boulders.

During the ensuing days she dedicated herself to her task, concealed, undisturbed and out of range of telephone and *Internet* communications.

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Within seconds of soaring upwards under autopilot, the silent drones were too small to be detected by occasional climbers and hillwalkers in the area. In paired mode, her drones flew at precisely the same height with the Kill Drone exactly fifty metres due North of the *DKS Master Drone* (also referred to in the manual as the '*Peekaboo*' drone).

Fortunately for Franca-Julia, the Artificial Intelligence Safety Algorithms (AISAs) built into her paired drones made it impossible to crash them. During her early flights, she employed the '*Come Home*' button which retrieved her drones, bringing them first to hover at one thousand metres directly above the *Fiat Doblo* before bringing the pair slowly downwards to a point precisely ten metres above and ten metres to the North of the van. After a short hover for '*terrain acquisition*', each drone in turn self-executed a '*soft landing*' under the guidance of its drone cameras and onboard software.

Alternatively, a single drone could be retrieved alone, leaving the other in POD mode (Parked On-Duty) under *GPS* control at three thousand metres, awaiting instructions.

When she was fully conversant with these automated take-offs and landings, she then mastered the technique of setting POD hovers at other locations and heights. Focussing

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on the features of the *Peekaboo* drone, she learned to manipulate its camera array, viewing the enhanced 3-D images sent directly to her wrap-around visor. Compared to even the very best gaming graphics she was highly impressed with the *Peekaboo* system quality, even from three thousand metres.

Next, Franca-Julia mastered the use of the *Peekaboo* directional microphone system, coupling it with the drone's camera array using the A-VLS (Audio-Visual Link System). In an experiment, zooming in on a trio of climbers on the mountainside below she found she could easily identify the facial features of each mountaineer while using the A-VLS to record video clips. Later, playing them back to herself many times over, she enjoyed this new form of sophisticated voyeurism which evoked memories of her hundreds of lonely hours behind the window drapes at Skirving Street, two decades earlier.

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Closeted hour after hour inside the *Fiat Doblo*, (the van was also her living space), sitting at the Control Console (a special purpose laptop) with one hand on the multi-function joystick and the other hovering blindly over the rows of Braille-like touchpad buttons, she gradually became proficient, eventually overcoming the quirks of fly-by-wire controls. Working ceaselessly from first light into the evening gloaming, she set herself the task of mastering the familiarisation routines recommended by the *DKS User Manual*. As she worked, she could feel her familiar gaming skills re-awakening, helping her to fly real drones, flying each in turn with the other parked and then in tandem.

With the muscle-memory of her fingers now finely attuned, Franca-Julia set her mind to master the *Peekaboo* TAKS (Target Acquisition and Kill System). When enabled, this aiming system fired the precision cannon mounted within the larger *Kill Drone* platform, an awesome weapon which fired bursts of ice bullets using UHPCA (Ultra-High-Pressure Compressed Air).

Her targets were local wildlife including Red Deer, Mountain Hare, Buzzard, Eagle, Ptarmigan and other ground-nesting birds including smaller species such as Skylarks and their chicks. During this period she executed over a hundred stationary targets while bagging around thirty running or flying targets, learning to master and trust the *Peekaboo* TAKS software.

There was a key difference between gaming and reality which Franca-Julia had not foreseen but which soon became second nature. With no gaming 'pause button', information feeds from both drones arrived remorselessly in real time, flooding her mind, making her at one with the powerful and undetectable *DKS System*, an irresistible real-time thrill which soon became addictive.

As she progressed, the *DKS Training Software* monitored her actions, returning higher scores at each session until her daytime flying was rated as 'Expert'. However, she found

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night-flying using infra-red images from the cameras to be unnerving. After two unsettling nights she admitted defeat.

Time was pressing. She must deal with Angie Simpson before she made the exchange with the Serbs.

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With little sleep, boosted by *Greenies* and strong coffee, she flew her two drones continuously each day from dawn to dusk, stopping only when heavy rain or high winds forced her to place them in POD mode high above the clouds as she waited for better weather.

Using a rented satellite channel, she used this downtime to contact Edwin, keeping him focussed on the tasks Franca-Frances had set him and to get feedback on his progress.

When the weather cleared, Franca-Julia resumed her task, hunched over the controls inside the *Fiat Doblo* van, her right hand caressing the multi-function joystick, wearing the visor helmet like a second skin. Now that she was fully qualified, this helmet gave her a split-screen view of the HD video streams from both drones and a single Dolby sound feed from the auto-focussed directional microphone array on the smaller *Peekaboo* drone.

In this familiar obsessive state, procrastinating, she persisted for almost three weeks until Frances Verratti spoke:

"My dearest Franca, as you well know, we are running out of time. You know you can now operate this drone system to a professional level. We simply must move on. Do not worry, dearest, even if there are hiccups and unforeseen challenges, we shall succeed. We are all with you in this enterprise. Go now and deal with Vera Verdi. Please."

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Intrusion

Three days later, recovered from her homecoming celebration binge, Franca-Julia set out early in the morning, traveling by train from Anniesland Station dressed as a schoolgirl, her destination Crossveggate. Here she changed into her stuffed overalls and became a small grumpy and dumpy old man wearing a wig with a long greasy ponytail, thick glasses and a scruffy false beard.

Back in a familiar routine, she was relaxed, in the groove, functioning well, competent, focussed.

The inward drugs shipment arrived as promised. She signed for it then closeted herself inside and spent the rest of the day packing and labelling the outgoing shipment for Dalkeith. It was too late to post the items and she locked up and caught the last train back to Kelvin Court, settled in her mind she was ready to act on Frances Verratti's instruction to make her move soon. Before she did so, she would send her packages from a random selection of Post Offices.

The following day with her outwards shipments in the system, she re-stocked her command centre vehicle with a supply of food and drugs for personal use, then re-set the sophisticated alarm system at Crossveggate.

At Kelvin Court, she loaded the *Fiat Doblo* with six well-stuffed suiters. These suiters contained a selection of ensembles she had prepared to enable her to change appearance when required to act out the various scenarios she had planned. She had also packed some back-up outfits should she need to abort and make an emergency escape.

After a final run through her checklists, following instructions from *Google Maps* on her phone, she drove off in the *Fiat* heading for a spot she had chosen as her POB (Primary Operating Base). This POB was hidden in a valley in the heart of the *Gleniffer Braes*, a quiet location about three miles from her target area in *Bridge of Weir*. The disadvantage of this location was that her phone would not function reliably because of the weak, almost non-existent mobile signal. This had forced Franca-Julia into renting an expensive satellite link to access the *Internet* from her personal laptop via a satellite dish.

Soon after arriving at her POB Franca-Julia was focussed, dedicated to flying the *Peekaboo* drone solo at a location fifteen hundred metres directly above *Courchevel*. This would turn out to be an 80-hour vigil watching the movements of *Angie Simpson*, logging her physical comings and goings.

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Linked to Franca's now full blown SzPD (Schizoid Personality Disorder), the Sicilian also suffered from Cynophobia (fear of dogs). From her surveillance she noted that almost without exception, each time Angie left *Courchevel* in her fancy vintage *Maserati*, she took her huge black dog with her.

In addition to this physical monitoring of *Courchevel*, Franca-Julia was now engaging in a continuous full-time electronic bombardment, attempting to invade Angie's laptop, a device used only very occasionally for emails and even more sporadically to access and search the *Internet*.

Spying on Angie's mobile phone traffic proved even more difficult. Only rarely could the *Peekaboo* software decipher mobile phone radio signals. Encrypted *WhatsApps* and *Skype* calls were seldom detected, never decrypted. Text messages were unreadable because these were transmitted in segmented data packages (tiny electronic bursts mixed with normal voice and data transmissions from other users). Targeting voice calls at source was frustratingly patchy, even with the power of the *Peekaboo* microphone array. Anything worthwhile required line-of-sight to the mobile phone and sufficient volume to generate a record. It seemed to Franca that Angie was aware of this and seldom used her mobile phone outdoors or with a window open.

It was Frances Verratti who demanded intrusive action:

*"Franca-Julia, you must enter the premises and plant some bugs. Preferably inside her laptop, if you can break into it, failing that, inside her Internet router. Remember, **carpe diem!** You have the technology. You must use it. That's what we bought it for, after all. If you fail to act now, we could miss out on the exchange with the Serbs."*

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In preparation for her forthcoming visit to *Courchevel*, Franca-Julia spent hours in the *Dark Web* researching alternatives before buying a hand-held device described as an 'Electronic Skeleton Key' (ESK), a multi-function decoder supplied by a dealer in Taiwan for \$US 15,000 equivalent paid in Bitcoin. This dealer was 'top-rated' by other *Dark Web* purchasers. However, when she opened her mystery package delivered to her rented mailbox, she thought she had been scammed. The *ESK* seemed to be a remote control for a Virgin TV box. However, the sticky label attached gave a link to a *Dark Web* demo video which showed how it could be used to defeat electronic locks and bypass passwords.

To test the *ESK*, Franca-Julia drove to *Crossveggate* after midnight where she used her *Electronic Skeleton Key* to defeat the alarm systems of three adjacent units near her own. The device worked faultlessly. Thankfully, it failed against her own superior alarm systems at *Milngavie* and *Kelvin Court*. Nor did it defeat the alarms on her *Fiat Doblo* or the special lock on her *Fiat Panda*, this vehicle now parked at *Kelvin Court* to create space for the *Fiat Doblo* at *Crossveggate*.

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Armed with her new ESK, sitting in the *Fiat Doblo* parked near *Courchevel*, Franca-Julia watched the drone images of Angie Simpson leaving and saw the outline of the black dog as a front passenger. It was just after midnight. The Sicilian at once recognised the pattern: Angie was off on a regular re-supply run to her team of couriers and likely to be absent for at least two hours, perhaps even five.

Ten minutes after Vera Verdi left, wearing dark purple latex gloves, a black face mask, a black beanie, a black jogging suit and black trainers, Franca-Julia approached the darkened premises at *Courchevel*. But as soon as she disarmed the outer gate to the courtyard, she was unnerved by the sudden glare of a security light. Suffering severe stomach cramps, she turned away, racing back through the dark streets to her *Fiat Doblo* where she sought relief on her Porta Potty.

Tears streaming, she asked:

"Frances, why did we not think about security lights? And she must have CCTV as well. We can never go back, can we?"

*"Franca-Julia, you **must** go back. It is the only way. You panicked, my Dear Ones. Remember, once you are inside Courchevel, find the CCTV recorder and apply a blast of high intensity microwave energy from our ESK to wipe the recording disk. Vera Verdi will think it is a fault caused by a spike in the electricity supply, which is, after all, a common occurrence."*

On her second visit, Franca-Julia lasted only twenty minutes, exploring by torchlight but could not find a laptop, mobile phone or tablet. She planted several tiny audio bugs but, in her anxiety, failed to enter their Bluetooth activation codes from the *Peekaboo* App on her *iPhone*.

On her third visit, this one made in daylight, entering minutes after Angie and her dog had driven off in her *Maserati*, Franca-Julia eventually found Angie's lockbox-safe concealed under a removable hatch below the dog's cage. Its electronic lock succumbed instantly to her ESK. As she searched, the *Peekaboo* was hovering above, in sentinel mode, scanning the roads below, programmed to send an alert to her *iPhone* App should Angie's *Maserati* return unexpectedly.

Removing the lockbox to the kitchen breakfast bar, Franca-Julia-Frances took a series of snaps using her *iPad* to be sure she would be able to re-pack the contents exactly as she had found them.

Over the next few hours, Franca skimmed her way through hundreds of handwritten business letters between Angie and Sergio, correspondence stretching back over many decades. Sergio's were originals, Angie's old-fashioned carbon copies, all in Italian using a simple code Franca-Julia could easily follow. The messages were mainly regarding drugs

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shipments, historical documents from before the era of email and *Internet* drop box cut-outs. As she went along, Julia took occasional snaps for reference, uploading them in batches to her *G-Drive* account. Although they seemed unimportant, perhaps they contained deeper coded language yet to be deciphered.

With each business letter there was usually a personal hand-written addendum from Sergio referring to their past and forthcoming meetings. Although undated, these scribbles seemed to refer to occurrences from decades earlier, a mixture of unguarded reminiscences and details of suggested arrangements to meet for secret 'honeymoons' at luxury hotels in Paris, Nice, Monaco and an occasionally a reference to the resort of *Courchevel* for *una altra settimana bianco*, (another skiing week).

Before re-packing the documents, Franca-Julia examined the lockbox further and discovered it had a shallow false bottom, created by a stout metal plate fixed to a concealed perimeter edge, held in place with tiny dots of Blu Tack.

Under the plate was a single 250MB USB memory stick.

Franca had absolutely no doubt this held Angie's Crown Jewels, her list of couriers and clients and details of her distribution network, the information Vera Verdi intended to sell to the Serbs.

On her next sneak-in visit, using her fastest and most powerful laptop, Franca had tried to unlock the USB stick without success. Using mirroring software, she attempted to copy the memory stick to her laptop hard drive. The files would not transfer.

Using her *ESK* Julia gained direct access to Angie's Wi-Fi router and logged in to gain access to her broadband service hoping to copy the contents of the USB stick up to her own *G-Drive* account. Once again, the files would not transfer.

Stalemate. To steal the drive would reveal her intrusion.

An alert from the *Peekaboo* drone signalled the *Maserati's* imminent return.

After a quick debate, Franca-Julia-Frances agreed to replace the USB stick, re-pack the lockbox and retreat to the *Fiat Doblo* parked about half a mile away in a quiet street.

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Back at Kelvin Court, Franca-Julia went to the *Dark Web* and after a hagggle, paid £43,000 equivalent in *Bitcoin* for a stolen copy of the current *GCHQ* decryption software. Hopefully on a future visit to *Courchevel* she might be able to access Vera Verdi's USB stick on site, without alerting its owner.

However, from *Dark Web* forums the Sicilian knew on conventional laptops such decrypts could take days, weeks and sometimes months while at *GCHQ* their analysts used ultra-

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fast, ultra-powerful computers. Being realistic, if she could somehow make a clone of the Vera Verdi USB stick to bring to Kelvin Court to run on her PC or even her ultra-fast desktop gaming console, decryption might still take several days.

An alternative would be to re-activate her phantom administrator account as Madeleine McKay to access the vast computing power of Strathclyde University. Julia quickly relegated this, fearing such a resource intensive activity would almost certainly be detected, probably leading to the involvement of Police Scotland, GCHQ and the Intelligence Services.

Frances Verratti eventually summed it up:

*"Franca-Julia, as you can clearly see, the only way ahead is to eliminate Angie before she makes the exchange with the Serbs. Then, with her out of the equation and as quickly as ever possible, we must enter Courchevel and retrieve her Crown Jewels USB stick and bring it here to Kelvin Court for decryption. And yes, our old friend Carpe Diem calls to us again - **Now, please, Dear Ones!**"*

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Action this Day

This imperative to act had its origins during the previous evening, the day before Marco Bolinchetti was due to arrive in Scotland.

The *Doblo* was parked in a tight layby at the entrance to a field in a narrow country lane on the outskirts of Bridge of Weir. The unmade track led to a disused farm. Both drones were up, parked. Franca-Julia was at the *DKS Drone Control Console* (DCC), monitoring the feeds from the *Peekaboo* surveillance drone high above *Courchevel*. Vera Verdi's *Maserati* was parked in the courtyard, confirmation that Angie Simpson was in residence. All the house lights were off, signifying the target was asleep.

Since the drone kit had arrived, Franca-Julia had been living mainly in the *Doblo*, using the Porta Potty provided, pushing herself to the limit, waiting for an opportunity to re-enter *Courchevel* and try again to access the contents of Angie's USB stick.

During her current vigil, Franca-Julia had been sustained by a diet of bananas, *Twix* bars, syrup coffee and a steady intake of *Greenies* to keep her sharp and focussed. As midnight approached bringing a clear, star-studded sky, she chewed on two *Blues*, hoping to slow herself down and nap for a few hours to recharge her energy banks. She had checked the *DKS* flight control was on automatic then snuggled inside a sleeping bag on a roll-up foam mattress with the console alarm set to sound in her earbuds at 04:35, a few minutes before the *May* sunrise brought the first glow to the eastern sky.

Unfortunately, she had failed to reset the *Peekaboo's* surveillance algorithm to auto-record.

The planted audio-bugs at *Courchevel* were now activated and functioning as intended. Thankfully, it was clear from what Franca-Julia had heard in her earbuds of Verdi's conversations with the dog and her occasional voice calls, that she was unaware she was being overheard.

Although slowed down by the *Blues*, the Sicilian's mind would not slip over into sleep but was prone to drifting under the quiet and hypnotic earbud reminder bleep issued every ten seconds from the *Peekaboo* drone to confirm the *Courchevel* target was in range and all systems were functioning.

When the alert came at 12:23 am, Franca was immediately roused to full wakefulness in a surge of anticipation, listening while Angie took the telephone call. From the jumbled, one-sided version filtered through the *DKS* software, it seemed Vera Verdi was talking in code while engaged in making the final arrangements with the Serbs.

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Without a back-up recording of the telephone conversation, Franca-Julia was forced to repeat from memory what she thought she had heard, her versions changing wildly with each repetition. However, at the core of this garbled story was an offer to take on an emergency duty as a tour guide in St Andrews.

After a frustrating ten minutes of debate, Frances Verratti announced her decision:

"No, ladies, this does not compute! Why on earth would Angie Simpson take on this tour guide work when she is on the brink of escaping to a new life? She must have been talking to the Serbs in some sort of pre-arranged code. It's all kicking off. We must implement our plan at once."

Franca's mind was swirling, reeling, reluctant to act, fearful she was about to be second guessed by Angie who might be setting a trap for her.

She made strong sweet coffee and gulped down another two Greenies. Living on a permanent high, she had lost track of how many she had swallowed in recent days, her mind soaring as the chemicals nullified the effect of the Blues and boosted her to certainty.

For the hundredth time she skimmed through her plan to convince Raffa:

Without a verifiable cast iron de-code of the USB stick there might be no smoking gun after all. And, even if she could crack it, Raffa was not a techie and may not trust her analysis and would be reluctant to act, unsure if she was making it up.

There was the added complication of Zia Maria whose dumb nephew Marco Bolinchetti was due to arrive later that morning and blunder into their scam, spoil it all. Surely this visit could not be a coincidence. He must have been sent as a foot soldier acting for Raffa, sent to curtail her investigation and preserve the link between Angie, Zia Maria and the McKindless duo, not forgetting the Artusi clan and their cosy "all-above-board" arrangement masterminded from Ayr.

What was Raffa up to? This was not his style. He had told her to stop interfering so maybe he had a grander plan for dealing with Angie or maybe he was behind the sale, deciding to give up on the Scottish operation and recall Angie to Naples or maybe he had authorised the Serbs to take Vera Verdi down for going behind his back.

As the effect of the Greenies wore off, Franca's mind began to tumble back to reality.

Too many variables.

Too many uncertainties.

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It was time to stop speculating and act.

Angie must be stopped before she sold out the Grazioni organisation and spoiled Franca's chance of redemption.

When the DKS console alarm sounded her wake-up call, and believing Angie was asleep, Franca took a comfort break. Over the last weeks she had seldom left the *Fiat Doblo*, preferring to use it as her base, avoiding Kelvin Court and Milngavie. The Porta Potty was close to overflowing. Stepping outside carrying it carefully, because of her impaired sense of smell, she did not notice the contrast in air quality. While the outside air was cool and fresh, inside the *Doblo* it was hot, ripe and fetid.

Seeking relief, she placed the potty in the gap between the van and the gate and immediately defecated, urgently emptying her bowels and bladder. Edging the gate slightly open, she entered the field holding the heavy potty on its carry handle. When clear of the gate, she tipped its contents into the base of the hedge before edging around the field, keeping tight to the margins, making her way to the watering trough located at the far corner of the field to rinse the potty clean. Thankfully, the herd of cows had settled for the night, chewing the cud, belching and mooing quietly to each other. The tiny Sicilian was very afraid of their large horns, baleful eyes and snorting inquisitiveness when they leaned over the gate and nudged against the *Fiat*, attracted by its sounds and smells.

Before re-entering the *Doblo*, using the powerful binoculars supplied as part of the *Drone Kill System* kit, she search the pre-dawn sky above *Courchevel*, eventually satisfying herself both drones were invisible.

During her time outside, Franca-Julia-Frances had missed Angie's departure for St Andrews. She was also unaware of the mobile-to-mobile exchange of texts between Angie and her dogwalker.

However, the *Peekaboo* surveillance routine came to her rescue.

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Direct Hit

At 04:58 the *Peekaboo* drone console started beeping rapidly, signalling that Angie Simpson was on the move. Franca was at the far side of the field rinsing out her Party Pot and did not hear.

The red warning light kept blipping but there was no auto-recording of the *Maserati's* departure in the *DKS System* archive.

Angie drove with the top down, taking advantage of the early morning traffic-free country roads, throwing the distinctive bronze coloured *Maserati* into bends, pushing the car's technology to its limit through the bright sunshine of a beautiful summer morning.

On her return to the *Doblo*, Frances scolded her:

"Franca-Julia find Vera Verdi at once! If she escapes now, we might never see her again."

"Frances, will you please shut up!"

"In fact, go back home to Newlands, we no longer need you."

With the VR helmet in place, Franca-Julia settled to her task, systematically scanning the nearby roads, working steadily outwards from *Courchevel*, automating the search pattern.

Acquisition!

The video-in-video feature from the Kill Drone provided a clear image of Angie's head.

Her long blonde hair held in a coda by a scarlet bandana, this iconic supermodel image superimposed on the road layout displayed in 3-D enhanced by the dual feed from the *Peekaboo* drone camera array.

The images streaming to Franca's helmet were crystal clear but now, with the target in the crosshair sight and on the point of pressing the 'Fire' stud on the joystick, the doubt surged up in her mind:

Would the drone's aiming system prove up to the task with the car moving at such high speed?

For Raffa, it must be made to look like an accident.

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The sports car accelerated onto the down ramp from the St James Interchange onto the M8.

Instinctively from her years of playing video games, Franca-Julia judged this to be the ideal spot.

She squeezed down on the stud firmly with her index finger until she felt it click into lock mode after which the system took charge.

The inset screen showed the blonde head explode in a puff of purple red and grey pulp.

The system immediately replayed the strike in slo-mo while displaying the flashing message:

'Direct Hit'.

This first execution was proof positive the Kill Drone System technology worked as promised.

In death Angie's body spasmed, causing her foot to crush down on the pedal. The car somersaulted the safety barrier into the path of a huge truck, disappearing under its wheels, emerging as a mangled heap of metal and plastic shattered into a thousand fragments.

Franca felt another surge of fulfilment heave up from the pit of her stomach, making her entire body shudder and her head spin as her nerve endings were bathed in a huge dopamine rush. For a few micro-seconds she was a Goddess, omnipotent, a feeling thousands of times better than sniffing cocaine.

It took several minutes until her mind settled to a steely resolve.

She waited for some comment from the others.

Nothing.

Even Frances was silent.

She, Franca Vitelli had done the great deed alone.

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Crouched over the control console many miles from the scene, Franca replayed the entire eleven-second video clip of the assassination in ultra slo-mo many dozens of times over until she was convinced that Angie was at last dead, revenge for the two decades during which Vera Verdi had tried everything to thwart her. And now the old Queen of Drugs was no more, gone forever.

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The *DKS System* worked! The money had been well spent. Not even the Serbs could resist her now. And the video clip was the stuff of Franca's dreams, like the winner's climax in a video game.

Inside Franca's head, Julia's voice sounded loud and clear:

"My darling, you do realise now there can be no going back, don't you?"

Franca smiled, then grinned. Plan B was working,

"Julia, later, when we have time and space, let's photoshop out the reg number and auction this clip on the Dark Web to a games company or a collector. Can you imagine the value of a real live kill as a climax? It could fetch a million, maybe more."

"Yes darling, maybe two million. Goody-goody for you."

Frances intervened:

*"Ladies, get me that USB stick, please. **Go!**"*

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Retrieval

Returning from her brief reverie, Franca-Julia drove to Angie's cottage and parked across the street, leaving the Doblo in guard duty mode (a routine which linked ten hidden cameras and motion vibration sensors to an App on her iPhone).

Beside the vehicle, she stopped and listened, scanning in all directions.

At this hour in the morning, there was no road traffic in Bridge of Weir. The sun was climbing into a cloudless sky. Hidden in the tall perimeter hedge of the cottage, blackbirds were leading the dawn chorus. A robin flitted across her path and a wren shouted a warning 'tic-tic' to alert his mate. Above, swallows twittered as they swooped and dived feeding on invisible insects. Higher still, also invisible, both drones watched and recorded the scene below.

Dressed in her intrusion gear, Franca hefted her rucksack onto her back and made her way to the front gate on foot. The Sicilian was no longer wearing the latex gloves which made her hands sticky with sweat; she had also ditched the face mask which made her feel claustrophobic.

Using the *Electronic Skeleton Key (ESK)* to open the outer gate, she made her way to the side door and entered the premises, her pistol by her side.

Inside and moving slowly, Franca let her eyes adjust to the dimmer conditions, edging towards the main living area.

The stupid dog bounded from nowhere towards her, knocking her to the ground. Falling, she cracked the point of her left elbow on the coffee table causing her to scream with pain. The Newfie paid the ultimate price for her enthusiasm with two bullets through her heart. As her life began to ebb slowly away, Daisy looked at her executioner with puzzled eyes, whined, then flopped onto the rug by the granite fireplace.

Working at high speed, Franca retrieved the lockbox, checking that it still contained the original USB memory stick. She then planted ten tiny grenades, arming them but choosing to wait, holding them in reserve, intending to detonate them later from the safety of the *Doblo*, secure in the knowledge that both Angie and her dog were dead.

For Raffa, this would be explained as an act of vengeance by the Serbs.

In appearance, these innocuous high-powered explosives could pass for scented wooden balls of the type used in potpourri. Despite their specification, they looked too small to be effective. To be sure, she activated and scattered two further handfuls, unaware

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that Angie had already seeded the premises with similar devices intending to simulate a massive gas explosion as part of her escape plan.

Back in the *Doblo* and seated at the *Drone Control Console*, Franca plugged Angie's memory stick into the USB port of the In-SITE Mark 5 computer and activated the *GCHQ* decryption algorithm.

The computer responded with a message:

"anticipated time to completion of this task is 63hours 39 minutes".

As Julia had predicted, this outcome was not unexpected as the major part of the Mark 5 computer system's processing power was dedicated to the operational requirements of the two drones.

Now the second move for Plan B had been initiated, it was time to head for *Bellavista* to check the situation there and make sure nature had taken its course, ensuring the other key piece had been removed from the chessboard.

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Slip or Trip?

On the previous afternoon, Franca-Julia had visited Maria Bolinchetti at *Bellavista*.

As on previous visits, Franca-Julia was dressed as Frances Verratti, the recent girlfriend and business associate of her godson Edwin McKindless. Despite a massive amount of pressure, Zia Maria had once again refused to sign the legal papers ahead of her nephew Marco's visit.

As usual, Edwin had been weak. He was also tipsy, his slurred words confusing Maria whose hearing aid was acting up, whistling, whining and buzzing. This impasse had been anticipated by Frances Verratti and by prior agreement Edwin had enticed the old crone away from the Music Room.

Left alone in the Music Room, Franca-Julia-Frances quickly forged the documents in a fair copy of Maria's hand then followed the other two onto the landing where Maria was gripping the banister, lowering her foot down onto the top tread, her other hand gripped in Edwin's hand for support.

It was an accident waiting to happen and too good a chance to miss. Without saying a word, Franca skipped lightly forward and pushed Maria firmly in the back then slipped back into the Music Room as the old crone hurtled forwards screaming and thudding her way to the bottom of the grand staircase.

It had taken only a few seconds to solve the seemingly intractable problem, quicker and more believable than the sleeping pills overdose plan Franca-Genny-Laura had devised. As the realisation firmed in her mind that she had killed the old crone so easily, a dopamine rush filled her brain, causing her hands and feet to tingle deliciously, bringing waves of relief up through her chest from her tummy and making her dizzy. As the mental tension of the previous hours of wrangling faded away, she felt calm, positive and supremely powerful.

Frances spoke for the others:

"Oh Franca, what a stroke of genius! Very well done indeed. But now you will have to deal with Angie before they discover Maria. You do understand, don't you?"

"Yes Frances! And there's no need to patronise or hector me. Julia and I can do this without your constant nagging. Go home to Newlands, why don't you. Just go away!"

Concealing her smile of satisfaction, Franca opened the Music Room door a second time as Edwin turned towards her, his face drained of blood.

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"Frances! Frances! Zia Maria tripped. Oh God, there was nothing I could do to stop her. She just stumbled away from me."

They ran down the stairs side by side. Inconveniently, the fall had not killed the aged Maria outright. On the edge of consciousness, the victim jerked and groaned then lay back, staring at the ceiling with unseeing eyes, muttering under her breath in a croaky whisper. Edwin ran off to fetch a glass of water.

Franca leaned closer:

"Polizia. Edwin, chiama la polizia. Quella puttana mi ha spinto. Portami la polizia."

("Police. Edwin, get the Police. That bitch pushed me. Get me the Police.")

Finally, the victim slipped over into silence.

After a wait of about an hour, the pulse at her neck remained strong. It seemed she might well survive and wreck their plan. After a fractious debate, it had been down to Franca-Frances to administer a fatal injection of morphine, temporarily removing the hearing aid bud then stabbing the syringe deep into the woman's ear, injecting a massive overdose directly into her brain causing instant death.

"Oh God, Frances, how could you do that? We should have waited longer. Oh God, what will Mummy say? Seeing her die like that was grotesque, like an animal being put down."

"Edwin, get a grip! It had to be done."

"Oh God, Frances, I didn't think it would be like this."

Weeping, Edwin had fled upstairs.

When she eventually found him hiding in the attic, he was comatose, having medicated with a handful of Blues and a bottle of Vodka, his current favourite recipe for escaping life's troubles.

Franca-Julia-Frances did not say the words out loud.

Sleep on, Edwin. One down, one to go. It's time to check on Angie and her Serb friends.

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Close Encounter

Wendy had been up early, showered, changed into a fresh outfit, breakfasted, heading away from Renfrew by 06:30, just ahead of her schedule.

As the *Glenniffer Sniffers* van rounded the corner into the street for *Courchevel*, Wendy saw the odd *Fiat Doblo* from the previous day. It was parked in the distance. As she drove nearer, the grey plastic dome descended, the roof hatch closed and the other vehicle accelerated away, turning the corner, out of sight.

Angie had provided Wendy with a radio dongle for the gate which gave access to the cottage driveway. The narrow, no frills opening in the high perimeter wall of the estate had been converted from the original tradesmen's entrance to the big house. For the first time ever the sliding gate was wide open.

Questions tumbled in Wendy's head:

Why is the gate open?

Is there a burglary in progress?

How could anyone get past Angie's security system?

Is the burglar still inside?

As a precaution, Wendy locked her van doors before edging her *Doblo* forward into the courtyard. Angie's fancy sports car was missing from its usual parking place, otherwise everything seemed normal. But she felt an aura, a feeling that something was odd, unreal.

With panic rising, Wendy completed a multi-point turn to ensure her van was facing back towards the open gate so she could drive away easily.

Remaining inside the van she tried a *WhatsApp* voice call but Angie did not pick up. She sent a text message to Angie's phone, explaining about the gate, saying she was worried. Five long minutes passed with no response. Panicking, Wendy tapped in '999' but did not press 'dial', certain Angie would be furious if Wendy involved the Police for what might be an innocent oversight.

Leaving her van door open, she moved from the courtyard to the side gate and entered the hidden garden. Everything seemed normal. She moved slowly along the gravel path to the rear door. From her large keychain bunch, she selected the odd fob which looked like a car key and pressed the button to release the long stainless steel key blade. She held the body of the fob key beside the door sensor pad which responded with its normal

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welcoming triple beep. Placing the key blade in the lock, she opened the door. Angie had told her this sensor pad recorded her visits to the alarm system and that the act of turning the key caused the lock to emit a silent radio signal to unset the internal perimeter alarm and allow Wendy access.

Wendy relaxed. Everything was happening as normal.

This entry and exit 'protocol', as Angie had called it, gave Wendy access only to part of the ground floor zone, the area where Daisy was allowed to move around. Wendy's key did not unlock the internal door leading upstairs to the loft conversion. Angie had sternly warned Wendy never to venture beyond Daisy's area as the other ground floor rooms were also alarmed. Daisy's collar had a proximity fob which meant when Wendy took the Newfie out for walkies, the absence of this fob would fully arm the entire premises.

Wendy was intrigued by this high-security arrangement. Although she had never spotted any hidden cameras, she was convinced she was being monitored by CCTV.

Once inside, surprised the exuberant Newfie had not already come lumbering towards her, Wendy sensed immediately there was something amiss. When she called out, there was no response. Checking the utility room, she saw Daisy was not in her cage. A whiff of rank body odour reminded her of Derek's gym kit of old. Her anxiety level increased, setting her scalp tingling, making her hands shake. Calling out to the dog, Wendy moved forwards along the short corridor and opened the door to the open plan area. The dog was curled into a foetal position behind a reclining chair.

"Aw Daisy, there you urr. Urr ye a sleepy girl the day?"

The dog lifted its head a little, emitting a tiny, kitten-like mew.

"Aw Daisy, is it yer tummy that's hurtin'? Ye'll soon be right as rain when ye take yer medicine."

Wendy, who had only a vague notion of canine health gained from the *Internet*, knelt beside her charge and put her ear to the dog's mouth, sensing shallow breathing. She pressed two fingers against Daisy's neck, hoping to find a pulse. The dog mewed again. This time the sound was diminished, barely audible.

Frantic, she rang Angie's mobile number on speed dial. The call rang out to the electronic voice of the phone message service where she described the situation at *Courchevel* then rang off.

Clearly the dog needed urgent help. She knew Angie used a fancy place in Jordanhill, near the Clyde Tunnel, a Veterinary Practice she had been told to take Daisy to for treatment when the Newfie had vomited a few months earlier. This Vet's number also rang through to an automated answering service which gave an emergency out of hours contact number

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for the Glasgow University Small Animal Hospital at the Garscube Estate, in Bearsden. Wendy rang this number and, while she was listening to the options, she noticed blood matting the hair on the dog's stomach. Wendy had never been good with blood and felt her stomach heave. She ran back to the utility room and brought up her breakfast of grape juice, muesli and mixed berries.

Recovered, she rang Angie's speed dial number again and this time the call was diverted to the landline answering machine on the *Courchevel* kitchen worktop where Angie's stern message voice asked the caller to leave a name, telephone number and reason for the call.

Unnerved by Angie's seeming nearby presence, Wendy rang the University number a second time but during the menu selection became confused and rang off. After another series of deep breaths but still jittery, Wendy re-dialled the animal hospital for a third time but this time her call was blocked. (The system, plagued by kids making nuisance calls, had captured her number from her two earlier attempts and had rejected her as yet another hoaxer.)

She then tried a Vet in nearby Houston, one used by another client and known locally to be very expensive. A pre-recorded message invited her to ring at 8.30 am when the surgery opened. Then came the realisation she would not be able to get Daisy into her *Doblo* as the dog weighed around sixty kilos. But would a Vet come to her, an unregistered dog walker and not the pet owner?

Wendy took a seat on the recliner beside the Newfie and tried to think what best to do. It was then she saw the normally locked door to the upstairs rooms was ajar. Standing beside it, she called out:

"Hello Angie, this is Wendy, urr ye up there?"

She waited and called again, louder. Behind her the dog yipped. Struggling to its feet it staggered towards her, convulsed, vomited then howled pathetically before keeling over to reveal a huge hole in its belly from which its entrails fell out, like a string of yellow sausages.

Screaming, Wendy ran from the gruesome scene. She drove her van out into the street and parked well away, near the corner, watching the open gate in her wing mirror, her doors again locked.

She tried Angie's mobile, left a message:

"Angie, Ah think yurr hoose huz been robbed enn whoever did it huz kilt Daisy. Ah'll gie ye two minutes tae call back. Efter that Ah'm gonnae call the polis."

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Seconds later, Wendy was outside her van again, leaning on the bonnet, throwing up or rather trying too but her stomach was empty, retching with a "dry boak", as her mother used to call it.

Then the thought occurred:

The robber might still be in the house, with his gun or knife.

At this terrifying possibility, Wendy drove off leaving the *Courchevel* alarm system unset. At the end of the street, around the corner where the other *Doblo* had turned, she pulled up out of sight of the cottage entrance, keeping the engine running while considering what to do.

The central thought pounding in her head was:

The break-in must be about drugs.

She made herself take more deep breaths, sipping water to clear the taste of vomit from her mouth. Thoughts chased each other:

There was no good way out of this.

She had been in the cottage and the police would find her DNA.

She had no choice but to call them and face the consequences.

They would connect her with her sister and brother-in-law and assume she was involved.

In the far distance, a white van passed through a road crossing.

Was the other Fiat Doblo part of this?

Fearing an encounter with it, Wendy did a three-point-turn and drove off in the opposite direction.

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Safely remote from the scene of the crime, on the point of dialling 999, she changed her mind and decided to call her cousin Alec Thom. He answered at the third ring.

"Our Wendy, bad time to call. Sorry. I really can't speak just now, I'm on the M8 helping out the traffic cops. A fancy *Maserati* sports car has jumped the barrier into the path of a massive tipper lorry. We're just scraping up the mortal remains of the woman driver into a body bag. The traffic here is going mental. I'll call you back as soon as I get a chance, OK?"

Wendy felt her stomach heave again.

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"Alec, is the caur a bronze-colart *Maserati Turismo* enn is the wuman a tall blonde in her fifties?"

"Aye, probably. To tell the truth, there's not that much of her left, and her head has been minced to pulp."

"Alec, your no gonnae believe this but she's Angie Simpson and Ah walk hurr dug, Daisy. Ye know, the wan Ah telt ye aboot, lives ett *Courchevel*, the dream cottage Ah really fancy. Alec, Ah wiz just in her hoose coz Ah wiz asked tae dae an early pick-up. Alec, yer no gonnae believe this eethur but sumdey has stabbed her dug. Or mibbay they shot it, Ah cannae tell whit cos it's jist a mess o' blood and guts. Ahn Ah think her hoose huz been robbed. Alec, look, afore ye ask, naw, Ah huvnae any proof but Ah think this huz to dae wi drugs cos Ah think Angie might huv been a drug dealer. Her place here in Bridge o' Weir is like Fort Knox, wi fancy alarms and hidden CCTV. Alec, what shed Ah dae? Ah dinnae wahnt tae get mahsel mixed up in this in case sumdey might come efter me tae."

"First up Wendy, are you still on the premises?"

"Naw, Alec, cos Ah think there might be sumdey still in the hoose cos thur's a funny sweaty smell, no' like the fancy perfumes Angie uses. Ah'm parked miles away, in mah van."

"Good. Don't go back, stay a clear distance from the scene, OK?"

"Ahw Alec, but whit shed Ah dae? They kilt the dug and noo they've kilt Angie as well. Ah dinnae want tae get mixed up in this, so Ah don't. This is no' fair, so it's no'. Ah mean, Ah'm jist hurr dog walker."

"Wendy, Wendy, calm the beans. You're off into fantasy land. Look, what we have here is a traffic incident, plain and simple. The way we see it is probably she committed suicide. Maybe she had cancer and decided to kill the dog first? That's the sort of thing we come across every day in the Police."

"But Alec, whit about the smell, it wuz rank? "

"Any number of reasons. Don't worry about it. Look, here's what to do. You call 101 and tell them you think there is a break-in in progress. Then leave it to them and try to forget what you saw. Don't give your name or better still, give a falsie, maybe that pal of yours who works in M&S?"

"Margaret-Mary? But she's in Corfu, on a wee early summer break afore it gets too hot."

"Ideal! That means she has a perfect alibi. Look, Wendy, I've really got to go, see ya!"

"Alec, wait. Naw, they'll get ma number and track me doon. Kin **you** no' tell them, ye know, like directly, keep me oot o' it? **Please?**"

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"OK our Wendy, you skedaddle and say nothing to anyone. You were never there, not today anyway. When I get a chance, I'll phone it into Area Control at Govan and say I've had an anonymous tip-off from one of my touts that there is a robbery in progress at a house in Bridge of Weir called *Courchevel*, right?"

"Yeah, *Courchevel*, efter the ski resort."

"Hey Wendy, maybe it'll be on the market soon, eh?"

"Naw Alec, Ah've changed mah mind aboot that place. Ahw God in Heaven, Ah still cannae believe it. Angie's deed and Daisy's deed. This huz tae be a drugs' hit and Ah dinnae wahnt tae be next up on thur hit list."

"But Wendy, your woman Angie, she bought it in a simple RTA. There were no guns involved. The *Maserati* was going too fast on the slip road and she smacked into the central barrier, flipped right over it. It's an open and shut case the traffic cops say. That's why we're clearing it up fast to get the traffic on the move again. No unnecessary forensics. You know what it's like here at the St James Interchange. Look, Wendy, just calm yourself and pretend nothing has happened. I've really, really got to go. Speak later."

Still in a daze, Wendy was surprised her phone indicated it was only 7:14 am. It felt as if this nightmare had been going on forever. As she had been training herself on the Mindfulness course, she did her best to 'actively forget' and 'let go the disappointment'. This meant she must accept she would not be paid for her early start. Worse still, she had lost a good client who always paid top dollar in cash and without a quibble. And the fanciful dream of owning *Courchevel* was gone forever.

Running on autopilot, she started the van and drove off to collect Flop and Victoria and start her day as she had originally planned it before Angie's late-night request.

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Loose Ends

On leaving *Courchevel*, Franca had been lucky to avoid another encounter with Wendy Brand, although she did spot her van.

Driving away, Franca decided the dog walking woman was a pest, always turning up at the wrong time. This thought tempted her to detonate the incendiary grenades but she resisted, knowing it would bring Police racing to investigate.

Parked nearby but out of sight of the cottage entrance, Franca disassembled the silencer and gun, cleaning it as per the instructions then reloading its magazine, checking the safety was engaged before easing the heavy weapon and its silencer into the largest of the internal pouches of her rucksack. In truth, she was afraid of this gun. When she had test fired it, the recoil had been frighteningly painful. She wished she had chosen a smaller, handier option. The *Kill Drone* was her preferred method, less personal, less messy, less scary and available to view in slo-mo afterwards.

Her rucksack was special, a sophisticated design approved by MI6 for use by their undercover agents, another *Dark Web* purchase. The zips were of a unique design which made them super silent in operation. The ultralight multi-layered and rip resistant material incorporated a mesh lining which acted as a Faraday cage to offer complete electromagnetic pulse protection for its contents. While inside *Courchevel*, Franca had placed the stolen memory stick inside a heavy aluminium phial before zipping it into a concealed pouch inside the rucksack. This phial, which looked like an extra fat cigar tube, was a device used by Mossad, yet another *Dark Web* purchase which provided additional electromagnetic protection.

Seated at the *Console*, Franca raised the comms dome again. A quick check showed that the two drones were safely 'parked' directly above *Courchevel*, hovering at one thousand metres above ground level with five hundred metres separation, invisible to the naked eye, held in place against the slight breeze by their synchronised GPS controllers.

Franca Vitelli was operating in a fog of tiredness, no longer able to remember when she had last slept properly. As a reward to herself for disposing of Vera Verdi and retrieving her rival's USB stick, she ate another banana, allowed herself another two *Greenies* slurped down with a full mug of strong black coffee.

Chemically boosted, she was now ready to proceed with the next phase of her plan and face up to the problem of Edwin. Buzzing on a high, Franca drove to *Bellavista* to settle

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the argument over how to present the corpse of Maria Bolinchetti prior to the arrival of her nephew from Turin.

In the *Doblo*, she changed into her business lawyer's trouser suit, becoming Frances Verratti, the person she called herself when meeting Edwin and his parents.

To complete the transformation, she used wet wipes to clean her face and hands before generously dousing herself with Lime, Basil and Mandarin Cologne from the Jo Malone business traveller's range.

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Franca-Frances parked in the service lane behind *Bellavista*, a location concealed from all surrounding vantage points. The gate from the lane gave access to the large and scruffy rear garden. She made her way up the path to the house. In her rucksack she felt the weight of her silenced pistol, still hoping it would not be required.

Maria Bolinchetti's corpse was as she had left it. Studying her victim, she decided the death looked 'natural' and would pass as an accidental death. Rigor mortis had set in and the Diva's bowels had released, filling the air with her stink; this was undetected by Franca who's sense of smell was almost non-existent.

When roused, Edwin was slow to come round. As planned, she fed him *Greenies* and *Red Bull*. Beside the corpse of his Zia Maria, Edwin became tearful and weepy, protesting the injected morphine would be detected during a post-mortem examination. With the brilliance of hindsight, he suggested they should have suffocated her instead.

Edwin did not seem to notice the stench from his aunt or Frances's excessive dousing of perfume, a sign that his intake of *Greenies* had taken its toll.

As she usually did when they argued, Franca-Frances switched to rapid Italian, lambasting him for his lack of resolve. Although Edwin was reasonably fluent, he could not cope with her speed and gave up, ignoring her arguments, which she hated. In the end she stomped off upstairs to the Music Room where she re-arranged the forged documents, setting them out in a logical sequence, ready for Marco's signature.

Muttering to himself Edwin followed her and looked over her shoulder:

"God, you've forged her signatures on these. When did you do that?"

Flagging, Franca took three *Greenies* from the front pouch of her rucksack which she washed down with a small can of *Red Bull*.

Edwin held out his hand.

He is like a lost puppy. Useless. Why did I ever involve him?

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Franca gave him a further two *Greenies* and a can of *Red Bull* but soon realised her error. Fired up, Edwin restarted his rant:

"Frances, when Angie finds out what you've done, she'll have you 'disappeared', sent to swim with the fishes off Ailsa Craig. Please God she never finds out about my part in this. I suggest you run now, while you still have time."

Franca-Frances tuned out, staring past him while desperately trying to recall how much she may have revealed of her plans, wondering if the time had come to dump him entirely. Although she had trailed the idea of buying the drones, she had kept the details of her purchase secret, unwilling to demo the DKS System to him until she had mastered it fully. Under the effect of the boosters, her mind was buzzing, racing, making details hard to pin down.

Partly to change the topic, partly to hit back but mainly because she was proud of what she had achieved with the drones, she decided to tell him about Angie's 'accident', cutting across him with a synoptic account:

"Edwin, listen up! I set it up with my two drones. I tracked her to the M8. I chose the exact spot, pressed the fire button. Her head just exploded and then the *Maserati* jumped the central reservation and was crushed by a huge tipper lorry. I raided her place to get the original USB stick. When I crack it later today, we'll have everything we need to take over her patch."

Her revelation stunned Edwin. Then he smiled his stupidest smile:

"Absolute bollocks! You would not dare! This is fantasy talk. The whole idea of taking someone out with a drone is madness. Frances, you must be losing it entirely. You're living in a world of video games."

"Really? You don't believe me? OK, Edwin McKindless aka Doubting Thomas, let's go to my new van. It's parked in the lane behind the house. Inside, at my mobile control console, I'll show you the video of Angie's head exploding and her car smash on the M8. Then, to prove I can do it again, you can watch while I locate the annoying woman from *Gleniffer Sniffers*, the one who walks Angie's stupid dog. You can watch while I take *her* out with my Kill Drone. Then maybe you'll see how powerful it makes me. The Serbs will have no chance. With the Kill Drone System, we are invincible and untraceable."

She could see he was struggling to take it in.

"Look, Edwin, when I've cracked her encryption code, we'll have her business. Then, when we have that information in our possession, we can show the Serbs a small sample, say five names and contact details, as a taster, offer to sell them Angie's list for £2 million in used notes. It has to be an amount high enough to be reasonable but not too high as to put them off. *Your* job will be as my decoy courier. I'll show you in advance where to park

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your car, at the point of exchange, where we will set our trap, miles from civilisation. When they arrive, you drive away like a bat out of hell and when they chase you, I'll shoot out their tyres with the Kill Drone and they'll be caught in my trap. When they attempt to leave their vehicle, I'll take them out, one by one. If they wait until its dark, so much the better because the Kill Drone also uses infra-red and is still one hundred percent accurate. They'll never escape alive. When they're wiped out, I'll go in with my pistol, check if they are lingering, finish them off if necessary, take the money and set up a handful of mini-grenades, retreat a few miles and then blow them to smithereens. It will all be recorded on video by the Kill Drone System. Then we'll drive to their estate near Blairgowrie and set up a siege, use the drones to prevent the rest of them from leaving. But I'm guessing when I email them a copy of my video of their dead leaders, they'll fold and give up. If not, I'll attack by taking out their electrical supply and disabling their LPG tanks. Did I say the drone weapons system is silent? It will be interesting to see how they fight an enemy they cannot see or hear. If they try to leave their compound, I'll take them out one and two at a time. My drones can last out for days, even weeks. They work at night, using infra-red. The Serbs will not even guess what's hitting them. Perhaps they'll think it's a Camorra hit squad. In the end I'll make sure they are wiped out. And I'll have it all on video to prove it, to show Raffa."

As she revealed her plan, Franca-Frances-Julia-Laura watched his eyes and saw that she had chosen the wrong approach.

The internal dialogue began:

Laura said:

"Franca, you have the wrong guy. He'll never drive our decoy vehicle. Look, his crotch is damp."

Frances added:

"Come to think of it, we don't need him. We don't need anyone. All we really need is a decoy vehicle. What about the Panda with a dummy person at the wheel. Or Edwin's beloved Mini? We'll send a signal from the Peekaboo or use a phone call or a walkie-talkie to flash our decoy's lights when we see their vehicle approach, draw them into the kill zone. After that, we proceed as planned. Are we agreed?"

Laura spoke for them all:

"Yes, Edwin is a waste of space, always has been."

Frances continued:

*"Good, time to end this charade. You know what you must do, don't you? **Now, please, Franca.**"*

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His eyes filled with fear but instead of 'flight', Edwin decided to 'fight', openly opposing her, something he had never done before.

"So, you really have killed Angie! How stupid was that? Oh God! This is a complete cock-up! It's crazy, madness. Raffa will never accept it was an accident. For God's sake, Franca, he'll put the Artusi clan onto it, to check it out. They have links everywhere, even at the highest levels in Police Scotland. And these drones, I told you when you first suggested this approach to back off. Don't you realise that Raffa is a part of the *Dark Web*, one of its main men. He'll find out about you and your drones. In fact, he probably already knows. Do you realise what you've done? He'll have you eliminated and not in a nice way. Me too, probably. Maybe even Mummy and Daddy as well, for insurance. All this is so unfair. You know I would never have agreed to killing Angie. When you said she was planning to sell out her business to the Serbs and take the money and run I knew that was bollocks as well. She would never have dared because Raffa would have caught her, taken her out. Raffa probably has a plan in place right now to deal with the Serbs his own way. When he finds out about Angie, you will be number one on his list. Or maybe in your fantasy you plan to kill Raffa too? Eh? Look, Franca, honestly, stop this crazy scheme and keep your head down. If we get lucky, maybe Raffa will think it was the Serbs who did for Angie or that it really was an accident. But if you carry on fighting the Serbs, then you'll have to do it alone because I'm out. I don't need this extra hassle. The way this is heading, the whole of Scotland will be crawling with hit men. It'll be just you and your drones against the Camorra."

Knowing he would soon be history, Franca-Frances changed tack:

"OK, Edwin, I get it, you want out, but not until we have Marco's signatures on those papers. That way you can have *Bellavista* and your precious development. I'll take on the Serbs alone. No worries."

Edwin became apologetic:

"Listen, Frances, you had no right to take decisions alone. We're supposed to be a team. And for the record, there is no way I would ever be a decoy for the Serb ambush. What if you were to miss? Or what if you don't get them all before they shoot at me? I would be easy meat, yeh! Don't think I don't get it. They get me first and then you clean up afterwards, leave a gun in my hand and set it up so the police think it was a straight shoot-out between them and me. For fuck's sake Frances Verratti, do you really think I am such an idiot? No, I'm out! In fact, I'll tell you straight, I'm going to call Raffa and explain Angie was nothing to do with me."

Taking deep breaths while she tried to control her rage, Franca decided it was worth one more attempt to get him back onside so they could stick to their original plan to get Marco Bolinchetti to agree to sign the papers. It was a long shot, but it would be easier

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with Edwin to back her up and then he could work with Marco to implement Edwin's *Bellavista* re-development plan while she dealt with the Serbs.

"No, Edwin, think about it. Remember, Maria is also family to Raffa, part of the old guard, part of Sergio's fiefdom but no longer so important. But you still don't get it, do you? Angie and Maria just *had* to go before Marco arrived. With Angie alive to back-up Maria our scam to get control of *Bellavista* for you was never going to work. Not unless Marco is some sort of a half-wit which I somehow doubt. Even if Maria had signed the papers for herself, we both agreed she had to go before she got talking to Marco. The clear logic was obvious. With Maria dead, Angie had to go as well. Surely you got that, without me having to spell it out. We needed both of them out of the way to be able to persuade Marco to our plan, get his signatures on the papers. If I had let Angie live, she would have come after us. She hates me, you know that. I simply *had* to strike first; you must see that. Anyway, I made it look like a traffic accident. It was brilliant. When you see the video in my new van, you'll agree we are still on track, provided you hold your nerve."

"No, Franca. **NO! NO! NO!** Count me out. The Police here in Scotland are not as stupid as you think. They will do autopsies on them. Zia Maria and Angie both. They'll crawl all over this house, Angie's place too. You've no idea how clever they are nowadays, computer generated reconstructions and so on. Everything will unravel. If only we had waited, had patience. But no, you had to keep pressing her to sign. It put her back up, as I told you it would. Zia Maria would probably have died inside a month anyway. And I'm sure we could have persuaded Marco, given time."

"Edwin, try to grow up. It had to be this way."

"No, no, **NO!** Frances, it's you who's spoiled it all. You had to make it happen your way. We agreed right at the start to keep my property developments business separate from your ambition to take over Vera Verdi's drugs business. That's what we agreed. I told you we had to keep Angie out of the *Bellavista* scam. Now you've killed her, we're blown."

"Look, accept that Angie's dead. She deserved to die. Get over it. We need to move on, get ready for Marco, he'll be here in a few hours, remember?"

"No, no, **NO**, Franca. You don't listen, do you. How many times do I have to tell you, eh? The Artusi informers will report back and provide all the Police reports which will be copied to Raffa. You know what he's like when he is crossed, much worse than Sergio. No, Franca, you of all people know what Raffa's like. He's vicious. In fact, he enjoys doling out pain. I never told you what happened when Robbie MacElhose stepped over the line on her Newton Mearns patch and tried to set up his own side operation. God, I still have nightmares over that. Torturing the poor guy in my garage with Raffa watching on *FaceTime*? Why? To send me a clear message, that's why! In the end MacElhose was talking drivel, making up stuff just to try to get Raffa to put him out of his pain. To tell

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you the truth, Frances, I think Raffa is unhinged. Now I think maybe you are crazy too? Does this illness run in the family? Is that what's happening? I can just imagine Raffa torturing both of us, probably side by side. It will last for hours. No, I'm out. If he corners me, I'll tell Raffa you did both killings and I'll say it was you who shoved Maria down the stairs then injected her when it didn't work out. I'll say I only found out later, when you boasted to me about how you killed both Angie and Zia Maria. I must hope he believes me. Look, sorry, Frances, but really this is all your own doing. You snared me into this, you really did."

Franca turned away, her throat dry, her head thumping.

Frances spoke, quietly but firmly:

That's it. He has to go! Too much hard work trying to re-orientate him. And once he starts blabbing to Mummy and Daddy, the whole scheme will unravel.

They were interrupted by loud weeping from below.

Edwin rushed across to the Music Room door and cracked it open. While he was distracted, Franca put the forged papers in her rucksack then moved behind him, leaning over his shoulder, listening to Edith's ramblings. She whispered in his ear:

"Edwin, it's your mother, talking to herself again. This is good. She has discovered the body. She'll call an ambulance. The whole thing will go like clockwork now. Quick, let's go, we don't want to be involved. In the *Doblo*, I'll show you Angie's memory stick. I didn't tell you earlier, but I have managed to crack her decrypt code. I have her list of clients. Names you would never believe, politicians, high court judges, top, top people. We can blackmail them, use them to protect us. No wonder the Serbs were so keen to trade. Quick, come now. Let's get out of here before your mother latches onto us."

But Edwin was not so easily persuaded. With the door closed, he started a re-run of his previous arguments, hissing at her in a low, angry voice. Franca-Genny remembered a movie of lovers quarrelling. Offering a wide, innocent smile, she leaned forward, placed a finger on his lips, then held him close, hugging him, pressing her head deep into his neck. Her sudden intimacy surprised them both.

Following the film script, she cooed:

"Edwin, shush, honey babe, please. For just a minute, will you?"

Bemused, he fell silent. Treating him as a child, she took his hand and they moved back to the door, cracked it open and listened again.

Edith was speaking on her mobile phone to the ambulance dispatcher:

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"Yes, it is about my friend, Maria Bolinchetti. *Pardon?* Yes, that the correct spelling. Poor dear, she's had a bad fall, down the stairs of her house. *Pardon?*..... Yes, she's dead, I think. We have been warning her for years and she has been unwell recently. *Pardon?*..... Yes, of course. Thank you. Yes, *Bellavista*, in *Glennifer Grange* which is in *Bridge of Weir*. *Pardon?*..... Yes, actually, hold on, I do have the *Just Say Three Words* App, my son Edwin put it on my mobile for me, let me get it working "

During this lull, Franca-Frances saw a way of solving her multiple problems. The best place for his execution would be the Cantina in the basement, next to the Boilerhouse. Maria had boasted this cellar had once been the "coal hole". Although the décor had not changed much, it now contained six temperature-controlled display cabinets for ordinary, daily use wines and dozens of dusty boxes of more expensive vintages awaiting their turn to be drunk on special occasions. Although Franca drank wine from time to time, with the loss of her sense of smell her taste buds had also been dulled. When drinking alone, her preferred tittle was a large tumbler of Gin mixed fifty-fifty with Rose's PLJ, heavily iced and taken with a few Blues to bring herself down and ease the path to sleep.

Now she had a clear plan, she eased him away from the door and closed it to get his full attention. Continuing her role as in the movie, she held his face in her hands and looked directly into his eyes, speaking in a quiet voice which she hoped he would accept as apologetic.

"Edwin, listen, what I said about killing Angie, well it's not true, she's not dead. It was just an idea I had. You know me, I was just testing it out on you, making it up, gaming if you like. I agree Edwin, you are right, one hundred percent correct. And before you say it, yes, you're always right. And yes, I agree it's far, far better just to wait and see what happens. Come to think of it, I'm sure I can find a way of leaking my copies of Angie's email exchanges with the Serbs, you know, send them anonymously to Alfredo Artusi in Ayr, leave it to him to blow the whistle on her and inform Raffa. That way we would be completely in the clear, mere bystanders, ready to take over Scotland for Raffa when he eliminates her. And don't worry about your Zia Maria. With your Mummy finding her and reporting it as a simple fall caused by the excitement of Marco arriving today, the authorities will be sure to think her death was accidental. Think about it. Why would they bother to do an autopsy on an old, frail woman of her age when it's obvious how she died? As you say, it might take a week or two but I'm sure we will eventually con Marco into signing. Then, when he's buried his precious Zia Maria, he will head off back to Turin and leave us to sort out the development to our advantage with us taking at least eighty percent with him getting twenty or less."

"Really? Franca, so you were just winding me up? Why do you always do that?"

"Come on, Edwin. Let's get out of here. Look, we'll sneak along the corridor to the servants' stairway and out through the back door and down to the *Doblo* in the back lane."

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As they passed the Cantina, she said:

"Hey, honey babe, let's grab a few bottles of vintage Grappa and some nice bottles of Barolo to celebrate with later, at your place. Eh? Fancy a Chinese take-away tonight, when all the fuss is over?"

"Chinese? But you said you hate Chinese food."

"Actually, I've got into prawn crackers and noodles and stuff quite recently and anyway, this is about **you**, honey babe. You adore Chinese cuisine, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. OK Frances, let's move, get clear before the ambulance arrives. Yeh, some Barolo. Let me see if we can find her very best vintage."

Edwin had always been gullible and persuadable when treated gently and allowed his own way. She urged him to take the lead, lagging slightly as she removed the gun and attached the silencer. As planned, he entered the Cantina ahead of her.

It was a classic 'friendly' killing as used by the Mafia and Camorra, an unexpected head shot from behind, the gun aimed upwards into the base of his skull while he was distracted by choosing. She had watched a *YouTube* program by a neuroscientist who had explained with this type of execution the victim suffered no pain because the massive disruption of the cranial material occurred faster than the neurons could transmit the resulting trauma.

Although this was her third execution, it was her first direct, hands-on killing, apart from the dog which did not really count. As with Daisy, Franca was surprised and pleased at the quietness of the actual weapon, just a slight "pop", much less than a Prosecco cork.

Seeing his head explode in real time caused her heart to race, her head to spin and her body to vibrate and tingle in an exhilarating way.

No more stupid arguments from you, you complete and utter twat!

In the lonely silence, all she could hear was the sound of blood thudding in her own head and the nearby whoomph as the gas-fired central heating plant clicked into action.

As she lowered the gun, the surge of power which followed felt amazing, much more enjoyable than the video camera image of Angie's head exploding or Maria's eyelids fluttering as she was carried gently away by the morphine.

Franca glanced over her shoulder and listened hard for Edith, but the sound of her voice did not carry. Edith had always been dutiful and dim in equal measure and so very, very annoyingly inquisitive.

Franca stared at the pistol.

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Frances spoke, firmly:

"No Franca, not yet. Her turn will come in due course. Leave her be for the moment but do get within earshot and we'll see what she says to the ambulance team."

Brain matter had splattered the wine cabinets and a mist of tiny droplets of blood had filled the room, settling on the Sicilian's face, hands, wig and clothing creating a pinkish tinge, an outcome she did not seem to notice. Continuing its trajectory, the bullet had buried itself in a wine carton and an expensive dark red trickled out and spread across the floor, mixing with the blood oozing from the remnant of his skull.

The irony struck: at least Edwin McKindless, self-styled "Master of Wine", with a fake certificate bought from *e-Bay*, would be happy in repose among these Amaronone and Valpolicella, the special reserve wines which his Zia Maria had called, "*la mia Reale Vini*" (my Royal Wines); "*il vero sangue del cuore pulsante dell'Italia*" (the true blood of Italy's beating heart).

Retracing her steps, Franca crouched out of sight on the gallery beside the door to the Music Room, listening as Edith attempted to contact her son and husband, first leaving garbled voice messages then dictating to herself as she tapped backup text messages to each of them.

Waiting for the ambulance, Edith began one of her rambling conversations, directed firstly to the corpse before wandering off into familiar old tales from her past:

"Oh Maria, you are such a silly woman. Did we not tell you over and over that this house was too much for you? Edwin is such a kind boy, he really is. And that girl Frances Verratti, don't they make such a nice couple? If only you had got a stair lift or an elevator this would never have happened. Oh, dear, I hope there was no pain. I can't stand the idea of pain, of dying in agony. Do you know, one time when I was a wee girl, I fell over the handlebars of my trike and".

Feeling woozy as the adrenalin dissipated, Franca hid in a walk-in cupboard, leaving the door ajar. Her body felt heavy, leaden. To fend off sleep, she took two Greenies washed down with a small can of *Red Bull*. The cupboard was deep and shelved on both sides, filled with a jumble of household items. Rooting, she fashioned a make-shift bed using old cushions, then lay down, curled into a ball to make herself comfortable and await the arrival of the ambulance.

In her mind, the Sicilian was sure the paramedics would treat the scene as a fall. As a backstop, there was the alternative of deploying a batch of her remote-controlled incendiary devices from her store in the *Doblo*. She would place these at key spots and at the gas inlet beside the boiler. Then, when the time was right, she could create a

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firestorm which would destroy *Bellavista*, perhaps detonating *Courchevel* in tandem to create maximum chaos.

This would remove the issue of how to deal with Edwin's body. If she got lucky, this 'boiler explosion' might also solve the problem of Marco.

Despite her boosters, she drifted down into a shallow sleep, her exhausted body twitching and itching from her days of living like a nomad in the *Fiat*.

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Death by Misadventure

The sound of new voices brought Franca back sharply to full alert. Creeping forward on her hands and knees back to the Music Room door, she eavesdropped on the conversation between Edith and the ambulance crew.

"So, she is dead, as I thought. Poor Maria, it was almost bound to happen. To be totally honest with you, it really is her own fault. You have no idea how stubborn Maria Bolinchetti was. My husband Ronnie and I have been advising her for years to get a stair lift, you know, one of those seats to sit on or a single person elevator but our dear, dear Maria would not countenance it, silly woman. Do you know . . ."

It was clear from their responses the ambulance crew considered the death as accidental. Their next priority was to get away from the lugubrious Edith, deliver the corpse to the morgue and get back 'on call' for the living, those they could help.

"Right then Mrs McKindless, thank you for all you've done for your friend. We'll take charge now. Would you like to wait outside, please, while we prepare her for removal? Thank you."

"Yes, of course. I understand. Did I say my husband was a Consultant Surgeon? Mr Ronald McKindless, he's retired now, of course. Perhaps you know him? But silly me, how could you, it was such a long time ago. But he's still fit and active. In fact, he's playing golf as we speak which is why I could not raise him on his mobile telephone otherwise he would be here too. Do you realise he has always been forced to switch it off, even though he is a medical doctor? Quite shocking actually, but those are the Club rules and Ronnie is a stickler for rules. Oh, in the excitement I forgot to say we are expecting Maria's nephew to arrive any minute. I wonder how he will react to the terrible news about his aunt. I do hope he speaks reasonable English, my Italian has more or less lapsed although I was fluent at one time. But I find if one speaks clearly and slowly, most educated Italians have a reasonable grasp of English, properly spoken. His name is Marco Bolinchetti, Marco is from Turin, in Italy. Doctor Marco Bolinchetti even though he is actually a Dentist, not a proper Doctor like Ronnie, but it seems Italian Dentists insist on being called 'Doctor', so Ronnie says. Our dear Maria was so excited he was coming to visit her at last. Marco is her next of kin, of course, now that his father has been lost to us."

"*Excuse me*, Mrs McKindless but we have to . . ."

"Oh, yes, of course. Yes, yes, I'll wait outside for him, head him off, break the news to him of her dreadful fall, shall I?"

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"Yes, thank you. You've done all you can for your friend and we have all your details on the system. I expect someone will be in touch with you in due course, to take a statement."

"Someone from the hospital?"

"No, someone from the Police."

"The Police? Why the Police? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, of course not. No need to be concerned. It's just a formality, since you were the person who found her. Clearly from her condition, Ms Bolinchetti has been dead for many, many hours. I assume they will eventually classify this as a Death by Misadventure."

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Gordy

In the wake of the *Maserati* incident, the traffic on the M8 was still at a halt in both directions.

Six miles from Bridge of Weir, in the downtrodden council housing scheme called Ferguslie Park, the bedside alarm sounded from along the corridor. The man listened as his partner roused herself, cursing softly as she made her way across the corridor to shower.

For the last three days Gordy had been on a mini bender, shooting up on poor quality H. He was now on his last cook-up, the last few grains from his stash.

Glancing furtively along the corridor, knowing he would be safe for a few minutes more, he drew the small pool of viscous liquid into the syringe, smacked the vein on his upper arm and injected to get the H into his system before Evie came through to rage at him. Removing the strap and pulling down the sleeve on his hoodie top, he stowed his gear in a plastic shopping bag which he hid under a pile of his wife's holiday brochures. He knew she had a cache of money saved to take her and her sister to Benidorm, but he had yet to find it.

The anticipated high did not come. To compensate he swallowed a handful of *Greenies*, washing them down with the dregs of his last tin of supermarket high-strength lager before crushing it and tossing it across the room where it landed out of sight behind the settee.

Since Evie got the job cleaning crappy f***** offices, she had managed to stay clean, a situation which made her jumpy, going mental at him, punching and kicking him for no reason. Muttering under his breath ahead of the soaring high to come from the *Greenies*, he complained through closed eyes:

"Fuck you Evie Brand and fuck Archie Macklin, the parsimonious bastard, fuckin know it all!"

Archie Macklin had once been a junkie like everyone else in Ferguslie Park until he had been snagged by the Mormons. Ten years on, he ran a drain cleaning franchise, power-jetting excrement from drains stupidly blocked with disposable nappies and sanitary towels.

Gordy, (Gordon Tennant) had fallen a long way from his childhood in Bridge of Weir. His decline began when he had taken his first drugs, aged thirteen. It had started by smoking

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hash then moved on to coke and pills then to heroin, slithering gradually at first then careening down into chaos, all ancient history with no way back.

Aged nineteen, he was sent to prison for eighteen months for habitual breaking and entry. His parents took their opportunity. They struck a deal with a conglomerate based in the Borders, selling up their largest farm and herd of four hundred pedigree Highland Cows, a business which had been in the Tennant family for three generations. Then, in an act of desperation to be free of any ties to Scotland, they sold out their remaining four farms to their sitting tenants.

Cashed up, they moved their entire family including their four older children with spouses, three grandchildren and surviving grandparents on both sides, taking them to live on a rambling winery in the Marlborough district a few hundred miles north of Christchurch, New Zealand. Their plan, which they had been discussing for years, was to buy an established vineyard and build a new life as wine producers and shippers.

The chemical mix of Greenies and high strength alcohol coursed through Gordy's body, swelling his ego and dulling his inhibitions. He lay back and opened his legs wide, unzipped and slipped his hands down inside his boxers and began to rub and tug.

"Fuck you Archie Macklin, you wee shite. Ha-ha, right on, Gordy. Good one. Archie's in the right business, a wee shite, shovelling shite for a pack of big shites. Aye, fucking brilliant, Gordy my son, you should start writing poetry."

He popped another two Greenies in the hope it might help him to resurrect his manhood but when nothing happened, he gave up and pulled up his zip.

"How the fuck can someone as thick as Archie Macklin actually have a fleet of seven vans and own a fancy house in Houston when he has absolutely no qualifications, eh? While I'm stuck working for the bastard and can't even get a nice cushy job in a call centre with my six Standard grades from Barlinnie?"

From along the corridor, Evie called out:

"Gordy, get aff yer arse and pit the kettle oan, will ye?"

"Right on it, honey bun!"

Patting his pockets for his ciggies, Gordy felt the key for the van he used to drive for Archie until he had "resigned". This was a euphemism. Archie had sacked him three times over recent months for being on the job and driving while under the influence.

Gordy my son, you need to get out of here before Evie starts in at you again.

Moving to the kitchen, he grabbed his last two-litre bottle of cheap cider from the high shelf behind the toilet rolls, shrugged into his grubby parka, pulled the hood up over his

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tattooed shaven head and slipped out quietly into the bright early sun, heading for the compound where the drain-cleaning vans were parked overnight.

I'll go through the Clyde Tunnel to Auchenhowie and see if I can spot any of the Rangers guys at training, hole up in the bushes and watch them from behind the fence on that path beside the wee river.

For Gordy, chewing Greenies washed down with cider, the next period was timeless.

Travelling at seventy in a fifty zone he saw the traffic ahead was tailed back from the St James Interchange, blocking his path onto the M8. Enraged, invincible, unstoppable, he swerved left onto the hard shoulder and put his foot down.

His brain overloaded and he blanked out for a few seconds, scraping along a line of stationary vehicles.

Several occupants called 101 to alert the police. A few others called 999 to be roundly admonished for wasting police time.

Gordy Tennant was in a computer drag-racing game, a fantasy ride, weaving in and out of lanes, playing dodgems, shunting and smashing into other vehicles to force them out of his path until he made it onto the M8. When he saw the Police vehicles with their flashing lights, he did a U-turn onto a slip road and smashed his way through a mini roundabout, causing chaos, acting out the part of Matt Damon in *The Bourne Identity*.

The earlier trickle of 101 and 999 calls became a flood. Others, mainly women stuck safely in the queueing traffic, posted the incident to their *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *WhatsApp* accounts, snapping the antics of the white van when they got a sighting as it came flying past going the wrong way, last seen heading away from the M8 towards Bridge of Weir.

Over the next hour, as the Police and Ambulance Service searched amongst the chaos caused by Gordy Tennant's spree, they discovered two people had died and three had sustained major injuries, one almost certainly fatal, the other two likely to survive.

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Edith

When the taxi from Prestwick swung from *Gleniffer Grange* into the narrow driveway of *Bellavista*, its path was blocked by an ambulance, its blue lights shuddering.

Rita Minto backed out onto the road to let the emergency vehicle exit. As it passed, she waved to the driver, a girl she did not recognise. Re-entering, she started up the long steep driveway, her rear wheels spinning in the deep gravel. The garden was unkempt, scruffy, neglected. Standing at the grand front door of the three-story red sandstone villa was an elderly lady dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Marco is that yer auntie?", asked Rita.

Marco reverted to his slow and careful proper English.

"No, I do not think so. Zia Maria is a larger person, quite overweight from what I've been told."

"So, ye've never met yer Zia Maria afore then?"

"No, there was a deep family feud but Nonna Isabella would not tell us what it was about. Mamma and I went through Nonna's things after she died but there was nothing written we could find. Nonna was poorly educated which may have been what Zia Maria objected to when her brother, my grandfather and namesake Nonno Marco Bolinchetti, fell in love with her. My father told me he thought Zia Maria was jealous of Nonna Isabella's good looks. I have photographs of Nonna as a young woman and she was an exceptional beauty. But Mamma thought it was more because Nonna Isabella had a sweet mezzo-soprano voice, pure, pitch perfect, a natural gift, untutored. I remember her sitting at a grand piano, playing without music, singing song after song, like an angel. With better Italian and proper English, perhaps she could have been an opera singer too, if she had wanted to be one. Anyway, that is the family legend."

As the taxi drew to a halt, the tiny woman tucked her hankie into her sleeve and skipped lightly down the long flight of steps to greet them, throwing out her arms theatrically. Marco got out of the car and Rita, mindful she had not yet been paid, hauled his kit bag from the boot and placed it by his side, standing back slightly to watch the scene unfold, her imagination already spinning a tale to explain the departing ambulance.

The woman's fresh, wrinkle-free face was framed by a neatly permed cap of purple-grey curls. Her eyes peered through tinted lenses in Harry Potter style frames of bright red. Her long, large ears were made more obvious by the wispy clear plastic tubes which

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connected her in-ear speaker buds to the body of the actual hearing aids partially concealed behind her ears and hair.

She looks like a character from a Miss Marple's episode, thought Rita.

Throwing up her arms while teetering forwards on her tiptoes, she launched herself at Marco, pulling his head forward to kiss him on both cheeks and, finally, dramatically, on his lips.

Beaming a welcoming smile while peering intently into his eyes, she fumbled then found and gripped his wrists, holding them to her chest:

"Ah, you must be Marco, come to us at last. I'm Edith McKindless. I live across the way at *Ridgeway*."

Extending an arm to its fullest extent, she pointed emphatically:

"Look, *over there!*"

Marco and Rita turned to see an even grander house on a matching hilltop on the other side of the wide, treelined roadway.

With a sob and a catch in her throat Edith added:

"Oh, dearie me, Marco, I'm so, so sorry to have to give you bad news. Sadly, your dear Zia Maria has met with a tragic accident. As you probably know, she has been increasingly frail over these last few months but when you agreed to come to visit, she picked up and seemed quite a bit better."

The small, slim woman held a tiny, embroidered handkerchief to her face and dabbed her eyes, before resuming in her rapid, clipped voice, reminding Rita of a schoolteacher she had once had for History, a former RAF officer, a man who had spoken like a BBC announcer.

"I promise you I've been keeping a special eye on her over these last months. I have a key for the back door and went over as usual after breakfast to check on her, help her get ready for your arrival. I found her at the bottom of the stairs, no pulse, cold as a grave. I telephoned right away for an ambulance. I was at my wits' end. They took absolutely ages to come leaving me entirely alone here with your aunt who was clearly already dead. It was all quite ghoulish, actually. When they eventually arrived, they said they had to detour because there is some sort of problem on the motorway, a crazy man running amok in a stolen van, knocking people down and bashing into cars. A terrorist, they said. Dreadful. Can you imagine? And we are right on the doorstep of it all, only a few minutes away."

She looked up into Marco's face, wrinkling her nose, reminding Rita of a rabbit.

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When he did not reply, Edith continued:

"It was so, so creepy, sitting there on the stairs beside her, waiting, knowing there was nothing I could do. My mind was playing tricks or maybe it was my hearing aids playing up again because I thought I could hear voices upstairs, arguing about something, but I suppose it was just the central heating creaking, I think, or maybe a radio or something like that. Did I say I am getting almost as deaf as Ronnie? Oh, dear, it is so, so odd the way the mind works in the presence of the dead? Strange, so very strange, is it not? I mean, there was nothing I could do, was there? I did first aid, years ago, in the Guides, as a wee girl. If only Ronnie had been here, he would have known what to do. He was an orthopaedic surgeon until he retired. Did I say he is Chair of the local health board committee? Anyway, I'm sorry to say but it was Maria's own fault, it really was. Ronnie and I have been at her for years to get a stairlift. We have, honestly. But Maria refused point blank every time, said it would be an eyesore, which I secretly agreed with but, well, we've proved our point, have we not?"

Once more she looked to Marco for confirmation. This time her nose twitched twice then she arched her eyebrows and blinked like a rapid-fire camera shutter before continuing.

"Your dear Aunt Maria is such a . . . No, no, **no!** Your dear, dear, Aunt Maria **was** such a very stubborn woman, as you know. That dreadful feud business with your grandmother. Oh yes, Maria Bolinchetti was a silly, silly woman, missing out on all those years spent alone when she could have been enjoying your mother as a child and then to see you, her wonderful grandson growing up. Such precious times she denied herself, I told her you know. Honestly, I did, over and over. But no, no, **no** she kept it up, no matter how often your dear father visited and tried to make up with her, coming nearly every month like that, year after year until he fell ill. Such a lovely, lovely man. Quite charming, reserved, not talkative like Maria and not nearly as tall as you. Indeed, Marco, you are one of the tallest men I have ever met but with the same handsome features, the same sad eyes, like your father. And now he is dead too and you are a poor, poor orphan. And dear, dear Maria did not get to see you after all."

Misunderstanding his confusion to be sadness, Edith moved on before he could tell her his father was not physically dead, just lost to the world around him:

"But what *will* you do with this place? I know it looks sound and strong but *Bellavista* is already beyond recovery, Edwin says. Did Maria explain? Have you decided?"

"Sorry, *Bellavista? Me?*"

Rita watched as the reality dawned on Marco that the house would become his, according to Edith who cantered on down her track, broadcasting relentlessly in her steady, clipped voice.

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"I am so awfully sorry to add to your woes, Marco. Our son Edwin says you can smell it the moment you step through the door. Sadly, I have almost no sense of smell, never have had. Ronnie admits even he can't smell it. But Edwin is *very* definite about it, says it takes a trained nose and that *Bellavista* is riddled with rot of *every* kind. He told Maria she should let him facilitate a sale for her to his development company and he will knock it down and make a block of luxury retirement flats, with proper lifts and efficient heating. As part of the deal, Edwin promised her the penthouse with the best views, with free rental for life. Did I say Edwin is a property developer? He owns *McKindless Enterprises*, which is merely a holding company, whatever that might mean. Actually, although he was never academic, our son makes up for lack of qualifications with drive and energy. It seems he has a host of companies doing all sorts of clever things like recycling oil from restaurants and fish and chip shops to make it into green fuel for cars. He lives in Houston, the next village along in a new villa, all glass and steel. Edwin says its one hundred percent green. It uses zero energy, apparently. 'New modernism', he calls it. It's happening all over, nowadays, new houses that look like spaceships from Mars. I do not hold back, I can tell you. At every opportunity I tell him: "*Edwin, to my mind they are ghastly buildings!*" Yes, honestly, I tell him this every time it comes up, although Ronnie scolds me, reminding me that Edwin needs building up. You see, as a teenager, Edwin had problems and had to have treatment but thank goodness he *is* over all that now and quite stable provided he keeps taking his medications. As Ronnie and I keep reminding ourselves, Edwin is no longer a child. But here in *Bridge of Weir*, all of us older residents are still holding out against this 'New Modernism'. Ronnie says that our planners will simply not allow a glass and steel monstrosity to replace *Bellavista*. If only Edwin would agree to do what they did with *Rosemount*, making it into *Rosemount Mansions*, a very tasteful development. Oh Marco, do say you will make Edwin do the right thing. Please, please, don't let Edwin and Frances bully you, stand up to them, for Maria's sake as well as for me. *Will* you do the right thing, Marco? *Will you?*"

Staring up at the building, talking quietly, as if to himself:

"I suppose so. I really had no idea my aunt was so rich."

"Good, so we are *all* on the same side! As Edwin says, "*Mother, progress is unstoppable. We all must accept it and live in the real world*". They gang up against me, you know. Ronnie is on Edwin's side in this. He says Maria could easily stay with us during construction and then move into a nice modern, comfortable home. And now she's dead, your aunt has missed out on that too. We have a granny flat she could have had, where Mummy lived very happily for nearly five years until *her* accident, poor dear. Honestly, I will never, ever, understand what possessed Mummy to try to clean her windows, sitting out on the window threshold like a common skivvy, and at her age and in the middle of the night when we were fast asleep. As Ronnie says, when one is gaga, such behaviour

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might seem normal. But I suppose it will happen with *Ridgeway* too, when we are long gone. As Edwin says, "Who among the common man needs such big houses anymore?" Apparently, young families want smaller gardens and open plan dining and home cinemas and sauna rooms and spa rooms and places called 'dens'. Do you know, they laughed at me when I ask if these dens are to home exotic pets?"

Marco, who seemed to have stopped listening, merely shrugged his shoulders but Edith had not waited for an answer:

"Marco, did I say Edwin says you must proceed at once so as not to miss out on the green energy grant-in-aid scheme and tax breaks currently on offer. As he says, you would simply *not* want to feed those grasping tax people anything more than their absolute due, would you? He asked me to text him as soon as you arrived, which of course I did when I saw your taxi. I simply cannot understand why he has not replied. What in heaven's name is he up to? He knows full well you are expected."

At this point Edith looked up at *Bellavista* and then across at *Ridgeway*, then dabbed her eyes again and resumed her narrative:

"Edwin says houses like *Bellavista* and *Ridgeway* are of a bygone age. Ronnie agrees and even admits that folk like us, you know, people with, eh, shall we say, people with **sufficient** resources, are squandering our wealth trying to keep them in good order. I suppose that's why *Bellavista* got invaded by rot, because Maria did not keep it up. As Edwin says, "Really, mother, absolutely no one wants a tennis court nowadays, not with our weather. An indoor swimming pool perhaps or maybe a snooker room or a squash court but an outdoor tennis court, no way!" Of course, Ronnie and I still play tennis. The court is behind the house, and cannot be seen from the road, which nowadays would seem ostentatious, of course. Edwin calls us dinosaurs. He never took to tennis, or golf, despite dozens of lessons but he did become quite proficient at squash until his injury. Did I say he has roped Ronnie into his business as an advisor and to help with the planners and the other doubters? You see, Edwin has grand plans for a new retirement village complete with a country club complex, which is all the rage in England, he says. If only they can get the golf club committee to see sense and come on board with him, it would transform their finances and add so much to the life of the community here. It would be just around the corner, over there, an old run-down farm he has an option on. Of course, there are some who say the farm is part of the Green Belt, but Edwin says a few of the planners and councillors are amenable and, as there is nothing written down, the matter is negotiable. Actually, to tell you the whole truth, Ronnie wants to support Edwin one hundred percent but he is uncomfortable about these proposals as he is also Chair of the Community Council which means he must be seen to be impartial. Of course, as a past captain of the golf club, he has some sway there although the current committee are still to be convinced. It is all such a mess, so uncertain. But, as Ronnie always says, we simply

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must support Edwin, family must always come first. Do **you** agree, Marco? Family must come first, always, no matter what?"

Rita watched while Edith paused again, watching Marco who had turned his head to stare across towards the distant farm. A story of intrigue and double-dealing was bubbling in her brain. She would set it in a fictional town somewhere in England but use the characters she was learning about. Surreptitiously, she fished out her phone and turned on the voice recording app to gather background and as a reminder for later when she would sketch it out in her notebook before committing to her laptop.

Edith was off again:

"So, Marco, the upshot is, in the end, we managed to get Maria to agree in principle, but only because of the smell, although she **insisted** that she could not smell it. But Edwin says that she is **inured** to it after all these years of living entirely indoors. Did I say she was agoraphobic? Anyway, the point is, when you said you would come to visit her, she completely changed her attitude and, to smooth the path for you, she agreed she would sign all the papers but on condition you agree to countersign them. Edwin and his business associate Frances Verratti have it all arranged, to make it easy for you. Edwin will bring all the details, explain it all, when he comes. But where on **Earth** can he be?"

"Anyway, sitting in there, waiting for the ambulance people I began to wonder if Maria somehow knew her end was nigh, a premonition? Did I say she vested you with Power of Attorney? She told me she had arranged this years ago, through the Artusi people in Ayr, but I suppose they will have already been in touch with you on that front. As you must know, you are her only family so everything she owns will be yours. We use the Artusi people too, they a very efficient, very diligent.

"Now Marco, I hope you agree to do the right thing. Edwin said it would be a tragedy if you do not endorse Maria's wishes after all the work Edwin has put in *gratis*, to help her. Will **you** sign, Marco? **Will you?**"

To avoid Edith's intense probing eyes, he turned away to look at the red sandstone building towering above him.

Rita had been watching her fare's eyes and body language as he stood silently under the pounding of Edith's relentless and wandering soliloquy and judged that the flow of information was coming too rapidly for the tall Italian to process. She had already concluded the spritely old lady was probably genuine, not putting on an act, just another privileged fuddy-duddy do-gooder from a bygone age.

She is so completely wrapped up in herself and her son Edwin she probably doesn't even clock I am here.

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Edith paused again, waiting for Marco to reply, her nose twitching and her eyes blinking. Checking her watch, she moved on, speaking even more quickly, Rita noticed, but her diction was still clear and clipped.

"Ah, just **look** at the time! Now Marco, you are going to think awfully badly of me, but I simply must leave you and your girlfriend to sort things out for yourself. You see, I am on duty at the church lunch club in five minutes and they **so** depend on me. Yes, yes, I know I do *not* look my age but I assure you I am indeed eighty-seven which makes me their senior woman in charge of the work party. Now, these are your aunt's keys for *Bellavista* and my key for the back door. Edwin should be here any moment. He will have his friend Frances with him. Such a sweet girl and so helpful. Did I say that Frances has coached your aunt on the legal implications free and gratis? Frances Verratti, such a lovely lilting name, don't you agree? 'Verratti' means trustworthy, Edwin told us, but you probably know that. Italian is so musical, is it not? Let me share our secret, Frances is also Edwin's special friend. Oh, we are so, so pleased he has found someone suitable at last. And they do make a very sweet couple. In fact, both being smaller people, they are ideal for each other. Even Ronnie agrees on **that!** I ask Edwin every other day, "*Why don't you two get married?*" but he just smiles and says, "*No, Mummy, I'm not the marrying kind*". Anyway, **Doctor** Marco Bolinchetti, all that is required now is your signature on these documents to make the deal legal. And of course, as you will soon discover, you are to inherit everything. How wonderful for you, is it not?"

Edith glanced at her watch again and frowned:

"Oh, dear, listen to me going on and on as if my dear, dear Maria had never existed. It seems so unreal. Yesterday we were all waiting for you to arrive like our Prince Charming to help Maria to sort everything out and then suddenly she is whisked away to her version of heaven with all those popes and saints in long robes and great long beards. Oh, dear, please, Marco, I meant no offence. Ronnie used to be of your faith but when Edwin had his problem, he gave up the church and resigned from the Board of Governors at the College. He says he is an agnostic, which is all quite fine with me as I am a Methodist and do not have strong views, not nowadays. So, dear Marco, your Zia Maria, well, only yesterday she seemed so well and happy and now, well, she is dead, isn't she?"

Rita watched Marco's face and wondered if she saw the edge of a smile on his lips as he nodded. Then his mask of inscrutability returned:

"Yes, a tragedy. And yes, if the house is so badly defective, well, I suppose, yes, we should proceed as planned but only if the price is reasonable. . . ."

"So, you **do** agree! Oh, Edwin will be so, so pleased. In fact, I'll text Edwin and Ronnie, shall I? Let them know you are ready to sign? But **where** is Edwin? He should be here. He knows you are due. Perhaps Frances knows what's holding him up. I'll try her too, ask her

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to pop along and help you sort everything? Oh, goodness, Marco, *do look at the time!* I simply *must* fly. But do not fear, I will pop back later and bring a platter of food from the lunch club for you and your girlfriend. There is always far, far too much food. People are so, so generous, are they not? *Bye-Bye-eee!*"

Avoiding the sweeping curve of the red whin chip driveway, Edith McKindless trotted across the lawn by the shortest route to the entrance, her neat, trim frame clad in an expensive cashmere cardigan and neat linen trousers in a darker purple, her head down, peering, tapping one-fingered on the keypad of her mobile phone, her face inches from the screen.

Marco moved back from the steps, walked onto the grass, staring up at the ornate façade, shaking his head, a puzzled smile on his face.

Rita switched off her voice recorder, deciding she would give him a few minutes before raising the issue of her fare. As she turned to check her meter, the quietness was shattered by the sounding of a horn.

The screech of braking mixed with a high-pitched scream ended with a loud bang.

A few seconds later an engine re-started and revved hard.

Tyres screeched as a vehicle accelerated away.

The calm of a beautiful summer morning returned with Blackbirds singing against each other, oblivious of the carnage on the roadway outside *Bellavista*.

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Inside Job

From behind the Music Room window drape, Franca watched the ambulance crew drive away with Maria Bolinchetti's corpse.

The taxi arrived. Edith embraced and kissed the man. He was much taller and more attractive than Franca had envisaged, his physical presence matching his adoptive aunt's gushing descriptions of his many other virtues and achievements.

Genny spoke:

*Look at **HIM!***

Tall, dark, handsome, perfect, aloof, smug, smirking.

Preening.

My God, doesn't he really love himself?

Franca-Julia had already decided to dislike him.

Unable to hear their conversation and afraid to risk easing the sash window open in case she was spotted, Franca looped her rucksack onto her shoulders and raced downstairs. Standing just inside the main front door, peering through the mortise keyhole, she watched and listened.

In her head, Frances sounded a warning:

*"Dear One, if Marco enters the house, he might find Edwin. That would scupper us. You must get those miniature bombs in place so you can detonate Bellavista **before** he gets a chance to explore. I'm sure you can forge Marco's signature with ease. He did send his Zia Maria a postcard confirming his arrival details, didn't he? I'm sure you have it with her other papers, the ones you must destroy. Fetch those explosive eggs from the Doblo. **NOW**, please."*

Unable to resist the developing scene, Franca defied this imperative and continued to watch and listen.

The McKindless woman was in full flight. As she droned on, the Sicilian's boredom changed to irritation. When Franca-Julia saw the taxi driver take out her phone, fiddle with it then hold it by her side while pointing it at Edith, she realised the woman was recording Edith's ramblings.

Questions swirled.

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Why is she making a video of Edith?

What is this about?

Is this the real Marco or an imposter sent by the Serbs?

Or am I watching a pair of undercover Police officers in a sting operation?

Fear surged. It was hard to breathe. Her face was hot. Her throat was dry.

The familiar ache in her bladder began to build.

Franca wanted desperately to run away but her entire body felt heavy, leaden.

To help her think more clearly, she swallowed two *Greenies* and washed them down with a full, large-sized can of *Red Bull*. The pain in her bladder subsided and almost at once, a new plan bubbled up, frothing, thrilling, frightening. Adding details, the new solution coalesced into its final form and Franca-Frances's mind settled to steely resolve.

However, this new approach could not take account of what was happening a few miles away. On the M8 motorway, the bizarre behaviour of a driver in a stolen van was filling police airwaves with a cacophony of contradictory and confusing chatter, bringing the presence of a police helicopter unnervingly close to Bridge of Weir, its chop-chop approach sounding in the far distance, as it hovered at five hundred metres above the St James Interchange.

Frances whispered:

"Franca, go for it! Franca, do it! Franca, now!"

Quietly locking the front door, leaving the key in place and snibbing the Yale, she eased the extra bolts and security bar into place then raced through the house to exit by the back door. Stepping carefully on the balls of her feet, she moved directly across the sloping lawn to the pass door in the perimeter wall then out into the lane to the hidden *Doblo* where she stuffed four packs of ten grenades into her rucksack. Back in the house, moving swiftly, she laid them out as planned arming each in turn to be detonated from the *Peekaboo* drone when the moment was exactly right.

To complete the plan, she locked the mortise of the rear door, again leaving the key in place, bolted the door top and bottom then dropped the slider on the Yale lock as an extra precaution. Skipping along the corridors she entered the *Cantina* and circled Edwin's corpse, making sure not to get blood or gunge on her high-heeled boots. From the pocket of his leather bomber jacket, she retrieved his bunch of keys. Using unopened wine boxes, she formed a rudimentary stairway to reach the high window which had replaced the small double doors where in the distant past coal had been shovelled onto a chute into the cellar. The top-hinged window was small but by pushing her rucksack ahead

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of her, she was able to ease her way out, letting the window fall closed behind her, her mind already planning how she would take control of the situation using the drones.

Free of *Bellavista* for the final time, and still unaware of what had happened to Edith, she walked smartly along the service lane to the Doblo. Elated, her mind was fizzing. Seated at the control console, she downed a large mug of black syrup coffee from the Thermos. It seemed to lack sweetness and she added three heaped sugars, eating two Twix then a banana.

The caffeine and sugar rush combined with her earlier Greenies, causing her nervous system to overload and making her desperate to pee. Her discomfort spiked into real pain but when she sat on the Porta Potty there was no flow of urine.

The pain was excruciating, like a twisting knife.

This had happened before.

She knew the remedy: swallowed two Blues and sipped a full litre of fizzy water.

After a few minutes, she tried again but she was still dry. Taking a further two Blues, she closed her eyelids and waited.

The vicious stabs brought sobs and tears.

Time passed.

The stabs of pain changed to a pulsing throb as her bladder spasm eased.

Pungent urine began to dribble into the Porta Potty.

Slowly the flow increased. The pain lessened and faded.

Hunched over, her head resting on her knees, she was engulfed in a cold, grey cloud. As she drifted away from the shore, she could hear voices calling to her. Looking up she saw the man being lowered to her from the helicopter. The man was holding a machine pistol, pointing it at her. He had Ronnie McKindless's face.

She ducked under the waves and the helicopter swerved away.

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When her hands stopped shaking and her vision cleared, Franca settled behind the *DKS Control Console*, ready to implement the next phase of her new plan.

In the distance, the helicopter was barely audible, fading.

At *Bellavista* much had happened during her temporary outage, causing a new situation which would compound her problems, further forcing her hand.

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A ringside view

Parked in the lane behind *Bellavista*, Franca watched the surveillance video record from the *Peekaboo* drone which had been set to operate autonomously. After a high-speed overview, she isolated the section where Edith McKindless had stepped off the pavement into the path of a white van, her head down while tapping on her phone. The tiny woman was thrown forward in a low arc, landing on the road directly in front of the still speeding vehicle which thumped over her.

The van braked heavily and its engine stalled. After a short pause, the engine restarted, the van reversed exposing Edith's mutilated body. Clear of the now visible corpse, the van stopped. After another pause, it jerked forwards a few yards then the engine stalled for a second time. Restarted, picking up speed again, rear wheels swerving wildly, the van almost missed the victim but its inner rear wheel ran over the remains of Edith's already damaged head, squashing it flat.

Continuing to accelerate, the van reached the bend at the far end of *Glenniffer Grange* where it skidded around the sharp left-hand bend and headed off out of the village, now hidden by high hedges.

Changing camera on the *Peekaboo* drone, Franca switched to an alternative video recording and searched for the van. Re-joining the timeline, she reconnected with the target vehicle. Travelling at eighty mph, the white van cut a right-hand corner and ran headlong into the front bucket of an enormous tractor riding high on huge wheels. In this bucket were drums of red diesel and liquid fertiliser. The high-speed impact caused an instant fire followed half a minute later by a huge fireball explosion which engulfed the cab of the tractor, initially asphyxiating then incinerating its driver.

The video did not capture Gordon Tennant's escape.

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Limping, dragging his left leg, fighting the pain from a splintered femur, Gordy Tennant escaped from the scene, hidden from the drone camera by thick, dark billowing fumes. Had he remembered to clunk/click, this injury might have been avoided or lessened.

Fighting the stabbing pain Gordy was sobering up. Desperate to avoid another stint inside, he was heading for a place where he had played as a boy, a deep cave hidden in a thick copse of trees about two miles away in the hills, high above the old McDowell farm now derelict, a farm his father had once owned. Gordy did not make it beyond the entrance to the overgrown cave. Weakened by internal bleeding, he fell forward onto his face and

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suffocated in the soft mud. A few weeks later his scrawny corpse would be found by an elderly lady birdwatcher counting Tree Sparrows as part of an RSPB survey.

Gordy Tennant's connection to Edith's hit and run was never proved as the traces of his DNA in the stolen van were destroyed by the blaze.

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Believing both drivers had been consumed by the inferno which followed the impact, Franca re-ran the tapes in slo-mo, reading the logo on the van as it raced from the scene outside *Bellavista*, worrying this apparent accident might have been set up by the Serbs. Using her *iPhone*, she checked 'Ferguslie Drain Blasters' on *Google*. On social media she learned this stolen white van was the focus of an ongoing Police operation in connection with an incident on the M8.

Although Franca-Julia did not have any clients in Ferguslie Park, she knew it was notorious for its poverty and rates of alcohol and drug addiction.

Did Vera Verdi have clients in Ferguslie Park?

Was Edith's death a first strike by the Serbs?

Did they already know Angie was dead?

Were they after Edwin and through him, after her too?

Or was this Raffa making his first moves to clean up after Angie and Maria's deaths?

Was this being organised and coordinated remotely from Ayr by the Artusi clan?

The sound of a helicopter approaching made her realise Police would soon be swarming around Bridge of Weir, both for Edith's death and for the van/tractor explosion.

Moving to the driver's seat, she put on dark wraparound sunglasses and set off for her favoured spot at the narrow track leading to the derelict farm intending to park at the turn-in beside the gate into the field of Highland cows.

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Ronald

Driven by her paramedic training, Rita ran towards the roadway, dreading what she would find. Marco followed, moving more slowly to favour his injured knee. By the time they reached the scene, a speeding vehicle could be heard screeching around the corner, already out of view. All that was visible beyond the end of Glenniffer Grange were rolling fields filled with sheep and cattle.

The crumpled remains of Edith McKindless lay in the gutter, her small, elegant frame diminished to a soiled bundle of rags, her head a soggy pulp of blood and brains, her mobile phone shattered into a thousand pieces.

"Don't look at her son, she's a gonnar. No son, turn yer heed away. No! Don't try tae touch her Marco, there's nuthin' we can do fer hur. Nuthin'."

From many hours of Rita's PST therapy and endless discussions with her husband who had witnessed hundreds of traffic deaths, Rita knew the value of concealing the remains from loved ones and neighbours.

Left near the corpse while Rita raced back up to her taxi parked outside *Bellavista*, Marco could not resist looking at the mangled remains of the tiny woman he had been in conversation with just minutes before. This was his first violent death. It left him stunned, frozen, his throat dry, his forehead sweaty, his tummy queasy.

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As she ran to fetch the 'space blanket' from her car, Rita's mind swung back two decades: the thud; the gentle squashy bump as the ambulance crushed the child and her bicycle; the aftermath, kneeling in the teeming rain in a poorly lit street, cradling the lost child, weeping and praying for her to survive while knowing she was already dead.

The six-year-old Dinah's tiny, thin face had haunted Rita's dreams for years and still did from time to time.

Months later, at the Fatal Accident Inquiry, there was naked hatred in the eyes of Sandra and Desmond Foley, the child's drug-taking parents. When the verdict on Dinah's death was classified as 'Death by Misadventure', the twenty-two-year-old father had screamed across the room at Rita, "Ah'll get ye, yah fuckin' bastard, if it's the last fuckin' thing Ah ever dae!"

Before the year was out, both of Dinah's parents were dead of Heroin overdoses, deemed to be a twin suicide. This was information Rita learned in therapy, news imparted in the

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hope it might bring her release, solace. The strategy did not work; learning of the parents' deaths only added to her guilt.

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Returning to the roadway with a silver foil space blanket, Rita covered the corpse. Ingrained from her ambulance training, she checked her phone: 11:53 am.

From a distance came the sound of an explosion. Looking, they saw dark smoke rising, drifting slowly then fading away as it dispersed into the still air of a perfect early summer sky.

Rita remembered Edith's words about the ambulance delay caused by an incident at the M8:

"a crazy man running amok in a stolen van, knocking people down and bashing into cars. A terrorist."

Rita's story-telling mind engaged listing bullet points to be expanded and woven into a lurid tale:

A stolen van.

Anarchy on the M8.

The sudden death of a Dival!

Edith's hit-and-run death.

Now a massive explosion.

Had the helicopter crashed? Or had it been shot down?

Surely these incidents must be linked.

As with Dinah, were drugs involved, again?

On the roadway outside *Bellavista*, at the scene of the crime, a family of jackdaws, attracted by the bright sun glinting on the aluminium foil, flew down to investigate. Tears flowing freely, Rita shooed them away. The street was deserted, its silence disturbed only by the squabbling of these noisy little birds now joined by a family of magpies, attracted by the calls of their crow cousins. A distant blackbird warbled his love song to his mate on her nest, reminding Rita of Billy, helping her cope, helping her overcome, enabling her to reboot her life and move ahead after the child's death.

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While Rita was making a 999 call on her mobile, a black Range Rover came into view, driven slowly. As it approached, the security gate to *Ridgeway* rolled back. The car swung

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through then accelerated smartly up the wide, red tarmac driveway. Guessing the white-haired driver was Ronald McKindless, Marco hobbled across and just made it through the security gate as it closed. He followed the car to the garage, arriving by the vehicle as it waited while the automated garage door swung slowly up and over.

Marco knocked on the window which buzzed down.

The tiny slim man with a neat white-grey military style moustache looked up quizzically at Marco:

"Yes, can I help you?" Smiling, the man added. "Ah, gotcha! You must be Marco, Maria's nephew. Yes?"

"Yes, Marco Bolinchetti. Are you the husband of Edith McKindless, please?"

"I am that very man. Guilty as charged!"

"Mr McKindless, your wife has been involved in a dreadful accident. We are waiting for an ambulance. I am sorry to say, it is bad, very bad."

"No, no, no-no, sir, you are mistaken. It's your dear aunt, Maria Bolinchetti who's had an accident, not my Edith. On Tuesdays at lunchtime Edith is at the church lunch club, without fail."

"Mr McKindless, I met your wife at my aunt's house when I arrived about twenty minutes ago. She explained what happened to Zia Maria, then she ran off to go to her club but was knocked down while crossing the road to your house. Your wife is..."

"**Rubbish!** Absolute rubbish! Edith is at her lunch club. Let me phone her there."

Ronald McKindless held up his hand and Marco stood back as the man used voice control to make a call from his car. After a short wait, the call connected:

"Miss Sarah Nicholson speaking."

"Sarah my dear, I know it's a busy time for you but I do need to speak to Edith. It's urgent, please."

From the car speakers, the reply came loud and clear.

"*Ronnie, Edith's not here. Seems she's running late. Do you know why?*"

"What do you mean she is running late. She left me a voice message about an hour ago to tell me Maria Bolinchetti is dead, poor old soul, and that an ambulance was on its way. Edith simply *must* have arrived with you by now, surely?"

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"No, Ronnie, she's most definitely not here. Someone did phone us about ten minutes ago and I thought it might be her, but the call was cut off before whoever it was could say anything."

"What? Oh my God, Sarah, surely no, it can't be. No, no, no-no. This is all wrong, it must be a mix-up. Look, leave this with me, I'll ring you back when I get it sorted out."

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Keziah

Sergeant Keziah Goldau had been heading for *Silverburn* shopping centre to investigate a suspected scam involving skimming the till at a busy eatery. Diverted to investigate the hit-and-run in Bridge of Weir, it dawned on Kez she must have been well down the list of available officers on Govan Area Control's duty roster. Checking in the vanity mirror, her guilty bloodshot eyes revealed the ravages of another night on the booze. Speaking to herself:

"Maybe even bottom of the list, Kez. Let's face it, you are not the flavour of the month, are you? No, not by a long, long way."

Born and brought up in the notorious Balornock housing estate to the north of Glasgow, this genteel village south of the river was not a place Kez had visited before. She resorted to the *Google Map* app on her phone.

While on her original journey to *Silverburn* she had caught snatches on *Radio Clyde* of the chaos on the M8 motorway caused by a hijacked van said to have been taken at knifepoint. A later report corrected this, advising it had been stolen from a compound at a local business. Sightings of the driver said he was a shaven-headed, tattooed male wearing a Manchester United football shirt and a dark hoodie top. This maniac had made his escape from police chase cars by driving the wrong way up an 'on' ramp, colliding with other vehicles at random, causing mayhem before slewing off in the direction of Ferguslie Park where the van had been stolen.

The police helicopter from Glasgow had been scrambled but by the time it arrived over the M8 at the St James Interchange, the van had gone to ground. Then came a report of another collision, this time with a tractor, resulting in an intense fireball which had destroyed both vehicles and possibly both drivers. When this crash location was intimated, Kez thought the van involved might have been the vehicle from the Bridge of Weir hit-and-run, but it was not her place to suggest this to Control. In any case, two police cars from the M8 incident had been sent to the tractor blaze to support the Ambulance and Fire and Rescue Services. Later still, a further *Radio Clyde* report advised the van driver was missing, escaped into thin air, it seemed. Vans with police dogs were being sent by Govan Area Control to set up a manhunt.

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Nearing the entrance to *Bellavista*, Kez saw mini cones and blue and white tape to preserve the scene. On traffic control duty, standing guard beside a Police car, was a tall, slim policewoman, a fresh face Kez did not recognise.

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Goldau parked her unmarked police vehicle well short of the entrance then removed her sports bag containing a nearly full bottle of Vodka, transferring it from the passenger foot well, placing it in the boot. She tucked it underneath the suiter which contained her fresh change of clothes to be worn for her attendance at the Senior Officers' PIP (Promotion Interview Panel), a meeting she was scheduled to attend at 4:00 pm at Govan, as a makeweight, window dressing.

Approaching the scene of the incident, Kez recognised PC Alec Thom. They had met recently on a remedial cum refresher course at Tulliallan Police College entitled: "How to conduct an interview." This was a punishment she had been obliged to endure as a condition of her censure for the balls-up with the Lynch case, her second 'misdemeanour of note' in five months. From the start, it was immediately obvious to her that the others on the course knew about her, or at least one of the versions of what had happened.

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The reality of the night when she had been assigned as one of a team to tail Peter Lynch was still a mystery to her. Sitting in the unmarked vehicle as lead surveillance officer, Kez had tried to stay awake, fending off the bitter cold with strong coffee laced with Vodka. Roused by angry thumps on her car window after an outage of around three hours she had been slow to come round.

At Govan she had been breathalysed.

The best she could learn from the grapevine was that the notorious criminal mastermind from Newton Mearns had skipped and was now living in Serbia where, her touts told her, he was protected from ex-tradition by his drug running Serb associates whose minions were still operating all over Scotland.

Why Thom or the other five had been made to attend this Tulliallan refresher course had been kept as a secret from her. Kez was used to being ranked as an outsider and guessed it was partly her age and well-worn appearance that made them silent in her company. Or, more probably, her reputation. From snatches of their whispers, she guessed they were first-time offenders or perhaps merely incompetent, still in their early years in Police Scotland, probably considered as "redeemable" while her own best hope was to accept being side-lined without being demoted and try to make it through the exit door with her pension still intact.

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Seeing Alec Thom again, Kez thought:

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Was I sent on that rookies' course as warning to them, as an example of what happens if you let things slide?

Resisting the urge to light up a smoke, she popped two extra-strong mints into her mouth, drew back her shoulders and walked smartly forwards to take command.

When challenged as she ducked under the tape, DS Goldau learned PC Harriet Duffin was a probationer, still in her first year. In the absence of any designated formal back-up, Kez decided to deputise Thom to act as her assistant. Alec was bottle-blonded, gym-fit and salon-tanned and although openly gay, he was only slightly camp.

"Right, Alec, get out your notebook, turn on your body cam and let us see if we can make sense of any of this. Let us hope we can get forensics in and out quickly enough to avoid a media scrum. Let us hope we can get the remains away before our friends from the fourth estate start inventing stories to fill column inches and airtime. And let us hope this good spell holds up, eh? I heard them say on the radio there is a thunderstorm rolling in. With this cold hanging on me, the last thing I need is another bloody soaking."

"It looks pretty well open and shut, Ma'am, does it not? A straight hit-and-run, *surely?* It must've been that M8 maniac in the white van, *surely?* The manhunt team are on to him. It's not down to us, is it? We're just the clean-up squad, like dotting the eyes, *surely.*"

Goldau suppressed a smile, remembering that Alec's nickname was 'Shirley', a moniker about which he still seemed to be oblivious, even after three years in the force. Perversely, Kez was unaware her own nickname was "Lettuce" or, sometimes, "Lettuce Hope".

"Let us do it by the book, eh, Alec? Get on to Control and ask for a forensics team to be prioritised and get them to make sure they check out these skid marks and debris. And chase them on the medic. We know of course that she's well dead but we still need the paperwork. And get Harriet to keep the traffic flowing and to watch out for the media hounds. As soon as they get wind of this, they're sure to be sniffing around, asking for instant answers. OK?"

"Yes, Ma'am, forensics, medic for the formality and brief Harriet about the media hounds. At the double."

"Good man, Alec. So, let us put our best feet forward, but only one at a time, eh? I'll start with the taxi driver. I sort of know her. Her man is Billy Minto from Traffic. Billy and I went through basic training together at Tulliallan a million years ago. Aye, and watch yer step, Alec, her daughter is Mari Minto."

Alec, hamming it up, eyes big with fake shock-horror said:

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"Chief Super Duper Minto? AKA 'Minto the Shredder' from Serious Crime? Oh, God, I don't think I could stand it if she gets involved. I think I'll resign and go into the dog walking business. My second cousin has started-up on her own and though she doesn't even have two Standard Grades to rub together, she's raking in the spondoolucks. D'you know, there's big, big money in it, especially round here where no one would be seen dead walking their own pooches. Wendy tells me she has twenty regulars and another twenty occasionals. Actually, this is her patch, she owns 'Gleniffer Sniffers'. Great name, eh? That was my idea, neat, eh?"

"OK, Alec, enough o' yer fantasies. Let us get on to it without delay, eh? And let us hope Mari sticks to chasing her drug dealers, trying to make a name for herself. Let us hope they see sense and legalise the whole bloody lot of it sooner than later, go down the Dutch and Danish route, eh? It would cut our workload in half. Oh, and I didn't say that, right?"

There was no point in telling Thom of her own connection with the new rising star of Police Scotland. The less gossip you gave the likes of 'Shirley' the better.

The pair looked across at Rita who was leaning against her cab, engrossed in her phone. Thom said, "She's a cracking looking woman, eh? How can she be old enough to be The Shredder's mother? Is it true she was the ambulance driver who ran over a wee girl on a shout which turned out to be a hoax call?"

"Look, Alec, that was nearly twenty years ago. Let us leave sleeping dogs to lie, eh? It happened in the early hours of New Year's Day, in Ferguslie Park. The question was, "why was a six-year-old out riding her bike on the road at that time of night?" Anyway, all in the past. Rita was exonerated but she retired from the ambulance service with stress, pensioned off, lucky her. She was flaky for years but she's re-trained as a sports physio, so Billy told me last time I saw him. And she has gained some minor fame as a writer, mainly weird and wonderful crime stories laced with romantic intrigue. She writes under her maiden name Margarita Di Lucca. Her grandfather was Italian and had an ice cream shop in Greenock, I heard. Oh, and that's her brother's taxi, she only drives it when he's on holiday."

As DS Goldau approached, Rita looked up. Out of habit from her paramedic years, she glanced down again to check the time: 12:56. Attracted by the chop-chop of the helicopter passing overhead, the two women watched as it swooped down out of view before re-appearing as an almost silent speck in the distance, hovering.

"Hello Rita, do you remember me? I'm Kez Goldau. You're Billy Minto's wife? We met at a youth team charity football match, right?"

"Yeah, Ah mind ye fine. Yer daughter's Zarina, plays as a false number ten for Glasgow Ladies?"

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"Yeah, but she's just moved to Arsenal LFC. Look Rita, what happened here? Give me the gist. I need to get this lot sorted and put to bed, soon as. You see, I'm due at Govan Office on a PIP at four o'clock. And, before you ask, no, not my big opportunity, not at my age. No, this Promotion Interview Panel is for your daughter who is up for ACC. For my sins, I'm the diversity rep on the panel. Strange how being mixed race and of Jewish origin has made me popular, my fifteen minutes of fame, at last, eh?"

Kez saw Rita appraising her slovenly appearance, the greys in her hair, the dark rings round her eyes, seeing the suspicion forming in her frown.

"So, Rita, you heard about Lynch, I suppose. But don't worry, Mari knows I've signed the pledge and that henceforth I promise to do it all by the book, straight as a die. My only ambition is to keep my nose clean and escape with my pension intact. Only two years to go. Billy will be the same, eh?"

The minute she said this, Kez wanted to take it back. No doubt this loose talk would be eventually retailed from mother to daughter and, well. . .

"**My Mari?** She didnae say she was up for another promo. Bloody typical. Anyway, Kez, here's whit happened, so far as I know it."

"Rita, are you okay if I get this on my phone, for the record?"

"Sure, why not? So, well, here goes. At 10:08 I picked up that tall guy Marco frae Prestwick. . ."

"Hold it, Rita. Thanks. Let's start again."

Using the recording App on her mobile phone and trying to watch her grammar, hoping the slight slurring from her bingeing last night would not be noticeable, Kez intoned:

"This is DS Keziah Goldau taking a witness statement from Mrs Rita Minto, a taxi driver who is a prime witness at what appears to be a hit and run death. The time is. . ."

Kez handed her phone to Rita and in parallel, using her swift but scrawly shorthand, running almost on autopilot, knowing she had Rita's statement in full on her phone, she noted the salient facts in her notebook, jotting down only the highlights.

As she listened, she thought about what Shirley Thom had said about dog-walking. Kez had always liked dogs although as a single unmarried mother, she had never had the time to own one. Kez liked walking and thought in retirement it could be a good way of getting fit, shedding a few stones, getting back down to a size twelve again. And she would stick to a rigid diet and join *Slimming World* again but this time she would do it by the book.

In her statement, Rita had told how she had been a fly on the wall to the ramblings of Edith McKindless, providing only an outline of what had transpired, without details,

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sufficient only to indicate that Marco was to inherit the house and that it may need to be demolished due to dry and wet rot problems. And Keziah noticed how Rita's English was different, much posher when speaking to the microphone.

As Rita had not actually seen the 'hit and run' incident, this meant Kez did not have a 'smoking gun' witness.

Kez glanced up and held her breath as Rita stepped closer to return the mobile phone, saw her sniffing, the quizzical look in the woman's eyes making Kez feel guilty about the Vodka bottle in her boot, her 'life raft' if things got too hard to take. When Rita looked down to check her own phone, Kez thumbed another two mints from the packet in her handbag with practiced ease and popped them into her mouth.

"Kez, look, dinnae write this down, OK? But I think this jist might have been an 'execution', you know, a Mafia type hit, paid for by someone keen tae silence Edith McKindless. You know what they say, maist murders are done by family members. Look at that house, will you? It must be worth millions tae a developer. So, a wee word to the wise, eh? Maybe you should give Maria's nephew a wee 'nudge', if you get ma meaning, see what he says because there's very definitely something peculiar about our Marco. And then there is Edith's son, Edwin, the property developer no less. So, where is he? The phantom was supposed to arrive any time with his girlfriend, Frances Verratti. And remember, this Verratti is supposed tae be Marco's Zia Maria's solicitor. And, conveniently for Marco and for Edwin, Maria Bolinchetti is dead, so no more of her objections to Edwin's grand development. You know what they say, Kez, 'follow the money'? Well, this all stinks to me. Think about it. Two old ladies who oppose the development are dead within a few hours of each other. Oh, Ah wid agree that on the face o' it, Marco seems too good tae be true. Butter wouldnae melt, sort a thing. But that's jist it, he's jist too calm, too cool, calculating, sort of emotionless. You know what, Kez, I think maybe Marco was *expecting* Edith's hit-and-run tae happen. And the so called 'accident' that killed Maria. Was that really an accident? Ah mean, what if Marco was jist pretending to come from Prestwick? What if he came here on a different flight, maybe yesterday and *shoved* his auld auntie Maria doon the stairs? Then he went back to Prestwick tae use his taxi driver as his alibi, eh? Jist his bad luck he got me, eh?"

As Rita had been whispering her fantasy theories, Kez had remembered Billy telling her about Rita's story-writing hobby business. But the problem with Rita was she would probably repeat all this guff to her daughter, Mari Minto.

Kez decided:

My best option is to humour her.

"Oh, well, yeah. Look, eh, Rita, thanks for pointing all that out. Yeah, Rita, I mean I do see what you're saying could add up but let us see how it pans out. Let us not dive in and

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over complicate it unnecessarily. Let us use police resources wisely. Let us do everything by the book, OK?"

"OK Kez, it's your shout, of course it is, but as the senior officer on the scene, it might be best to have a wee dig at him while he's fresh. Maybe he's no' that cool inside, as it were. Try a wee nudge and see how he reacts, eh? It's the sorta thing my Mari does a' the time, eh? And a word to the wise, don't leave it tae Shirley Thom tae chat him up, eh, know whit a mean?"

Armed with Rita's information, Kez decided to move on to Marco Bolinchetti to get his version of the hit-and-run even though it seemed unlikely he would be able to add much. After that, she would call in to Control, explain about the PIP and leave Thom and Duffin to carry out a door to door to try to find someone who had eyeballed what had happened. Perhaps someone might have a phone video clip of the vehicle making its getaway? Maybe someone walking their dog or out for a jog? If the rogue white van from the motorway chase was the cause of death, the process was already out of her hands anyway. Best just to stick to procedure and see what turned up.

When she moved into the grounds of *Bellavista* in search of Marco Bolinchetti, Rita tagged along, explaining she was yet to be paid her fare of £58. Kez had been hoping to get rid of Rita and escape what was beginning to feel like the woman's 'supervision'. To avoid the deep gravel, they walked across the grass on what was now becoming a faintly defined trodden path. As they were nearing the steps of *Bellavista*, Marco was sitting on his kit bag, tapping on his phone.

Touching her arm to halt her, Rita said, "Kez, purely aff the record, Ah think ye should try tae find out more about that yin Edwin McKindless. It might be jist another of my daft notions, but Ah think the mysteriously missing Edwin might be at the root of this. Ah was looking him up on *Google* back there and although there's a lot of big talk on his many websites, there are no' any projects actually completed so far, no' that Ah can discover. Even his mother was a bit leary about him and his talk of turning this place into luxury flats. Ah mean, look at it for yerself. Although this garden's gone wild, the rest of the place looks all right to me. There are still plenty toffs with money who would love a nice big place like this. Maybe even a few footballers, eh?"

"Mmm, yes, thanks Rita. Yes, yes, I'll keep what you said in mind. But this Zia Maria Bolinchetti woman, she's really nothing to do with the hit-and-run of Edith McKindless, is she? So, apart from getting her nephew's statement to corroborate what you've just told me, his aunt's demise will be dealt with by the Procurator Fiscal, based on her autopsy report. At least that's what I would have thought."

"No, Kez honey, trust me, there's more tae this than meets the eye. But it's your call, I suppose. OK with you if I try to get paid and then skedaddle, eh? You won't want me

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listening in while you grill him, will you? So maybe you should get your sidekick to hear what he says, eh. Just in case you need corroboration. Ah mean, taping him on yer phone disnae count, does it? Anyway, he might object and then where wid ye be? I mean, the first interview is always crucial, isn't it?"

Keziah, desperate for a drink, snapped:

"Let us stay real here, Rita, it's not an *interview*, it's a *statement*, only a statement. I mean, how could he know anything about the hit-and-run? You said he'd only just arrived. And he didn't know Edith McKindless from Adam, did he? Unless of course you are in it with him, eh? I mean, he is quite a looker, isn't he?"

"Excuse me! Whit did ye jist say?"

"Oh God! **SORRY** Rita! Sorry, sorry, sorry. Look, I was just joking."

Kez saw the flash of antagonism in Rita's eyes.

"Aye, well, but nae mare o' that rubbish Kez, OK?"

"Sorry, Rita, it was meant to be funny, honest. Let us scrub it from the record, eh? Look, go on, get your fare and then you can leave. If I need more, I'll be in touch, right?"

Even as she said these words, Kez Goldau was beginning to doubt herself. If Rita had already told her daughter about her suspicions, maybe she would be wrong-footed again and mired in another disciplinary saga.

"Yeah, of course, it's entirely your call, Kez. As Ah've already sayed, think about it, the nephew who inherits this pile said he had "*never even met his rich aunt*" and, after travelling all this way, "*didn't even get to see her*". His Zia Maria was leaving as a corpse in an ambulance when we arrived, remember? So, she hasn't seen him either, eh? So, is that guy up there even her real nephew? All very convenient for Marco the inheritor and perhaps the mysterious Edwin the developer, eh? Think about it, Kez, Edith McKindless, the woman who finds her friend dead at the foot of the stairs is now also dead. What will a Procurator Fiscal make of that? Separate accidents? Really? Who stands to gain most, eh? And so convenient for that man there. Look at him smiling away to himself. Probably counting his dosh, eh? No sign of sadness for the loss of his dear departed, eh? But of course, as I said, Kez, it's your call entirely. Maybe it's like our Mari says, and I've jist been watchin' too many Miss Marple's reruns on the tele, eh?"

As Kez and Rita approached, Marco rose to his feet and stretched his arms above his head, rolled his shoulders and yawned. He had been up from five o'clock and was feeling hungry and thirsty. His mind refocussed on the here and now:

Would there be food in the refrigerator inside Bellavista?

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Had the dead woman given him the wrong keys?

And even if he could get them to work, would the Police allow him to enter?

Keziah introduced herself and nodded to Rita who piped up:

"Now, Marco, sorry tae butt into yer grief son, but ye owe me fifty-eight quid, please."

"May I pay in Euros?" He opened his wallet and thumbed out two fifty Euro notes from a thick wad.

"No thanks, Ah'd really prefer pounds, as agreed. Keeps ma life simple. Tell you what, Marco, ye sayed yer aunt would pay, right? Is there any chance she might hae the money in her purse or in a bedside drawer?"

"Maybe, but I cannot get into the house. These keys do not work."

"What? What about yon ither wee Yale? Yon wee wan for the back door? Have you tried it?"

"Not yet."

"OK, what if we try the back door, would that be OK with you DS Goldau?"

Kez could see what Rita was doing and knew she must not let her take the lead.

"Eh, to be honest, I'm not sure. Given that your aunt died in unexplained circumstances, I think we should preserve the house intact until the forensics people have a check first?"

"Excuse me Sergeant Goldau, do you think my aunt's fall was *not* an accident?"

"Well, I'm not sure one way or the other. As you know our main witness, Mrs Edith McKindless is tragically dead now too. Which means we will have to track down the paramedics who attended the incident in order to get their statements. Then there is the mystery of the keys which Mrs McKindless gave you and the fact they are not now working although she said she used them to lock up. Let us hope that the other key works on the back door, eh? If it does, then we will avoid the complication of the additional paperwork for a 'forced entry'."

"Excuse me Sergeant, but if yon Yale opens it, maybe we kin let Marco in tae huv a wee quick rummage end find his auntie's purse tae pay me. Efter aw, whit *wiz hurs* is his noo coz he's her sole heir, right? Then Ah'd be able tae skedaddle, OK?"

Adopting a firmer tone Kez said:

"Mrs Minto, perhaps you would kindly wait in your taxi until we complete the forensics for both deaths just in case I need further information. Would that be possible, please?"

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Smiling smugly, hands on hips, Rita said in her posher, more formal voice:

"Right, gotcha, sure Sergeant Goldau, Ma'am, no worries. I'm well off my patch anyway so, sure, I'll wait for a bit. You're the Boss, right?"

Kez set her face to neutral while thinking:

Cheeky bitch!

Convinced Rita would report everything back to Mari Minto, with the risk that further consequences would follow, Kez closed her eyes and tried to stop the phrases tumbling in her mind from the Tulliallan course:

"established protocols"

"play it by the book"

"take personal responsibility"

"avoid profligate squandering of scarce resources"

Feeling hot and sweaty, with her head thumping, her fingers began to tremble, a familiar combination which signalled another panic attack. The thought loomed of her Vodka bottle snuggled in the car boot nearby. She knew it might as well have been a million miles away. If she sought relief, Rita would clock it and report back to The Shredder.

Turning away, she led Bolinchetti to the top of the steps to get his version of events. Almost certain that Rita's bizarre notion of intrigue was baloney, Kez decided that, depending on what she learned from the nephew, only then would she follow through on her own suggestion to ask for Govan Area Control to track the ambulance crew and have someone check out their accounts. Depending on what they said, Control could decide to send a second forensic squad to examine the internals of *Bellavista*. That way, it would be out of her hands.

Beside the front door, watching the attractive figure of Rita Minto as she headed down through the grass, Kez's pendulum of uncertainty swung again and she called out after the retreating figure of her antagonist:

"Mrs Minto, would you ask PC Thom to come up, please, I need to have him here while I interview Mr Bolinchetti."

Whirling around, coming to attention while offering a mock salute, Rita shouted her reply:

"Yes, Ma'am, you got it!"

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Crosscheck

While Rita waited for Thom to arrive to act as her corroborator, she asked Marco for permission to take a snapshot of the airline luggage tag on his kit bag using her phone. He seemed quite relaxed about this and offered his boarding pass and passport as identification. These she gladly snapped with her phone with the intention of crosschecking later. He also offered a business card giving details in Italian on one side and in English on the other. From this she saw he was a doctor of dentistry specialising in cosmetic treatments. This made Keziah feel uncomfortable; her teeth had never been great and since the menopause they had turned a darker yellow, probably due to too much strong black coffee and lack of brushing.

Her phone rang. She looked towards the entrance and to the street beyond. It was Alec Thom, who was also waving, pointing to the TV crews which had arrived, two Transit vans and a saloon with competing groups unloading and setting up cameras and other equipment. Kez felt her stomach spasm and wondered what would happen if they zoomed in on her with Bolinchetti. The police grapevine had recently reported that some of these people had become expert lip readers and with their long lenses they would be able to watch them.

She used her radio to order Thom to stay at the main entrance and make sure the press did not enter the grounds and to request Rita to come back up to the house, to act as her witness. The best place for the interview would be inside the house or, at worst, out of sight at the rear.

"Dr Bolinchetti, would you please try those keys again, just to be sure they don't work?"

"Here Sergeant, why don't you try for yourself?"

Jogging across the lawn, Rita arrived.

Turning towards her while covering her mouth with her hand, Kez said:

"Bloody press, eh? Thanks, Rita, you are very kind."

After a few minutes trying, the front door remained unopened. Kez sighed, concluding the Gods were once again aligned against her. Her eyes were aching, her ears buzzing, a sign of another blinding migraine building.

Rita said:

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"No joy then? Why no' try the back door. It's the way Mrs McKindless went in so her key should work, right?"

"Yes, that makes sense."

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Southern Exposure

The trio stood on a weed-infested patio at the rear of the house, with a clear view to the south and the grand panorama from which *Bellavista* had been named.

In Maria Bolinchetti's heyday this large, paved area had been a place of jollity, used to entertain her well-heeled guests. Now there were only a few rotted wooden chairs and a large rusty wrought iron table remaining as testament to this glorious past. Gone were the days when the garden with its lawns and hundreds of rhododendrons and azaleas had been pristine, cared for by a dedicated team of visiting gardeners.

From the patio, the ground sloped quite steeply downwards. Rita estimated the lower area was approximately the size of three football pitches, forming the backdrop to what had been an impressive outdoor performance space. The roof structure of the stage had collapsed, its flooring and walls rotted with sections missing. Uncut, the once closely mown grass had been invaded by perennial weeds. Some rhododendron bushes were sprawling sideways, others becoming trees, making the garden sad and scruffy.

Standing to one side, Rita made a slow careful video sweep with her phone, taking in details to be used later in her story of intrigue and double-dealing, thinking:

This is what Edwin McKindless is after, a huge prime site ripe for development.

This is what has sparked these deaths.

From the left-hand edge of the patio directly in front of Rita, a curved flight of steps led down to a driveway of red-coloured tarmac, its surface now potholed and infested by weeds. The driveway curved gently to the left then followed just inside the line of the high red sandstone wall which enclosed the rear of the property on all three sides. At the foot of the slope, this driveway turned right along the inside of the wall to the centre of the garden where it ended at a wider parking and loading area adjacent to a tradesman's entrance. Beyond the lane was an established forest of densely planted pine trees which extended in both directions.

This tradesman's entrance comprised double gates, secured by a heavy chain and padlock. The original ornate wrought ironwork had been plated by flat sheet iron, presumably to increase privacy, cladding which gave the gates a sad, industrial appearance. This sheeting, originally painted red to match the wall, was buckled, holed in parts by rust, giving the impression it had not been opened for many years. To the side of the main gates there was a pedestrian pass door of solid wood, flaking red paint revealing the

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original green below. In the far right-hand corner stood a forlorn and neglected greenhouse and a cluster of sheds, presumably for gardening tools and equipment.

From the rear lane, the access roadway from *Bellavista* followed an undulating path, glimpsed over the wall in parts before becoming fully visible where it joined *Gleniffer Grange* at a point directly opposite a similar service roadway leading to the rear of *Ridgeway*.

Rita smiled:

Perhaps Edith McKindless used these private lanes to walk from Ridgeway to Bellavista surreptitiously, hidden from nosy neighbours. And maybe this is how Edwin or Marco, or maybe both, came and went to do the deed, using a copy of Edith's rear door key.

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Before Kez realised what was happening, Marco tried the key in the lock of the rear door and although it fitted and turned the spindle a fraction, the lock held firm, held by the snib.

Catching a glance from Rita who was shaking her head, Kez said:

"No dinnae, Dr Bolinchetti, if yer agreeable, let us remain outside, please. As Ah said earlier, we may need tae get a forensics squad in tae check oot the scene o' yer auntie's accident."

Hearing herself slip into her native voice, Kez resolved to take her time and make sure she spoke "properly". At least she was not slurring her words, so far as she could tell.

"Yes, of course, as you wish, but please, call me Marco."

"Thank you but let us stick to *Doctor Bolinchetti*. Please, would you be willing to allow me to record your statement on my mobile phone, while I take notes? We are rather under pressure at the moment, as perhaps you can imagine."

"Of course Sergeant, as you wish."

Kez started the recording by stating the basic details before passing her phone to Bolinchetti.

The man accepted the phone, peered at it with what seemed to Kez to be a mixture of distaste and suspicion, held the device closer to his mouth, took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders, spread his legs slightly wider, swivelled his hips and visibly relaxed, reminding Rita of her Pilates teacher.

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Kez prompted: "In your own time, please tell me your version of events, starting when you engaged Mrs Minto to drive you here."

Rita noted the time at 13.37. Moving slowly, she shuffled further to the left, moving closer to the corner of the building, out of the Italian's peripheral vision but where Kez could see her face. In the mayhem to follow, this repositioning would save her life.

In a deep baritone with lilting, precise and careful English, as if reading from a script, Dr Marco Bolinchetti gave a concise, dispassionate facts only statement with mirrored almost exactly what Kez had heard previously from Rita, the same story Franca had overheard from behind the front door. He offered no opinions and, as Kez had expected, confirmed that although he had heard the tyres screeching and Edith's scream, he had not seen the hit-and-run incident, nor had he seen the vehicle involved. As he spoke, he held her gaze, convincing Kez he was speaking the truth.

Hunched over the DKS Console in the Fiat Doblo, Franca continued to monitor their conversation using her Peekaboo drone. She had not slept properly for weeks and the strain was taking a toll. Her head was fuzzy, her eyelids were tired, her arms and legs leaden. She thought of taking a few more Greenies and a Red Bull but her stomach was queasy. Holding off this decision, closing her eyes, listening to the soothing voice of Doctor Bolinchetti, she was 'floating'. Fortunately for Vitelli, the autofocus camera and high-tech microphone framing the patio were set to 'record' and nothing which transpired would be lost to her.

Beyond and behind the Italian's shoulder, Kez saw Rita nodding approval.

His task completed, Bolinchetti handed the phone to Kez who noted his statement had taken under two minutes. She turned off the App and popped her phone into her shoulder bag. Her migraine was taking hold, causing her eyes to defocus; she was aching for a top-up of Vodka and a couple of paracetamol tabs.

After a short pause, Bolinchetti's face changed from the previous slightly smug, self-absorbed smile Kez had seen when he was sitting on the front steps earlier, playing with his phone. Now there was a slight frown around his eyes as he added in a more animated and, she thought, almost conspiratorial voice.

"Look, although it is probably not relevant, when we spoke on the phone Zia Maria was, well, her voice, I am certain she was stressed, incredibly stressed. As a dentist, you become sensitive to this aspect of human behaviour. Routinely and especially in such situations I employ a form of medical hypnotism, talking to my patients, usually by reciting poetry or nursery rhymes to relax them before giving pain-killing injections."

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Sensing what he was about to tell her could be important but wishing to keep it casual so as not to discourage him, Kez continued to add to her notebook, wishing she had her phone running to catch the new urgency in his voice.

Kez responded, "Could you give an example, something she said which might give us a clue to her circumstances? For example, do you think this stress was because she was being pressurised by Edwin McKindless?"

For the first time, the Italian showed a flicker of emotion, perhaps even slight anger.

Kez thought:

Aha, he realises he has said too much.

The police officer in her nudged him again, as she had been trained to do.

"Doctor Bolinchetti, I do understand completely, it's always difficult talking to someone on the phone if you've never met. I know how hard that can be, but let us hear what your thoughts are, every little clue of this kind can be vital. Please, do get it off your chest. We are here to help you. "

"Look, this is family business, private, so it will be off the record, yes? It would be just for your information, so that you understand why I am here at all? I am certain it has nothing to do with the poor lady who was killed on the road outside. I ask, please, that you do not write this down. Is that agreed?"

Flashing a glance, she saw Rita nodding vigorously, a smile playing around her eyes, her mobile phone by her side but pointing towards Marco, her lips mouthing, "I HAVE THIS COVERED".

Kez lowered her hands by her sides, keeping her notebook and pen at the ready:

"Naturally Doctor Bolinchetti, I will respect your request for privacy. That's a given, but if what you say seems relevant to my investigation, I must be allowed to record what you have said. Do you understand?"

DS Keziah Goldau felt his eyes scanning her, making her conscious that she was overweight, with grey streaks returned to her once auburn hair, partially restored by a sachet of colourant rinsed-in once a week, over her washbasin. Under his gaze she felt frumpy in her crumpled trouser suit with hints of food and coffee stains on its lapels. She was almost glad when his sad, soft eyes returned and locked onto hers, unblinking:

"Yes, I will trust you Signora, as you must trust me to tell you the truth, to help me clear my conscience."

She felt his soft, gentle eyes were looking into her soul. There was a flutter in her tummy. Her nipples began to tingle. Kez had not had proper sex for over six years. Was his name

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Darren or Desmond? A randy, rookie cop twenty years her junior, a jump job in the back of a surveillance van. He had come almost at once, splashing onto her thighs without entering, leaving her to finish herself off while he lay back, lighting up a cigarette.

Well, Doctor Marco Bolinchetti, you really are a magnificent specimen.

Are you trying to hypnotise me?

Her nipples were pressing hard against the roughness of the stitching inside her cheap bra. Her knickers were damp, her clit throbbing, leaping with desire.

She caught the leer in his eyes and the trace of a small smile on his lips.

He knows what he's doing. He's done this before.

She closed her eyes and let it happen.

After a pause, the tall man continued in his steady baritone lilt with a slightly quicker cadence.

She jerked wide awake with an audible snort, her mind buzzing with anxiety.

What if I had fallen asleep while he was talking?

"When Zia Maria first phoned my father's house about three weeks ago, I answered. Papa and I live together now. I am his designated *accompagnatore personale*, his personal carer. I have rented out my own apartment in Turin and moved into his apartment in Milan. I think at first Zia Maria thought she had been speaking to my father. She was whispering, rambling in a mixture of Italian, English and German, almost as if drunk or demented, talking about how dangerous their olive oil business had become."

Kez's mind leapt back into focus with thoughts of Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*:

"*Their olive oil business? Your father and aunt have an olive oil business?*"

"Well, it's a bit of a saga although, as I said earlier, it is probably irrelevant. Let me try to explain. Many years ago, long before I was born, my great-aunt and my grandfather jointly inherited an olive grove at a town called Ercolano, near Naples, from an uncle who had moved south, the black sheep of their family. My father went to inspect it twice a year but had no direct involvement. The olives were harvested by the commune with the other groves in the area and converted to low quality olive oil, the sort used for cooking in cheap restaurants, the sort of olive grove that should be rooted out and re-planted. My father hated going to Naples and tried for years to get Zia Maria to agree to sell out to the Grazioni family, the local padroni who control everything."

The first tugs of her migraine returned and started to build again but were being held at bay by the lilt of his voice as his words washed over her, rolling into each other, like

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mouth music. The sunshine on her back was strong and she was sweating up, but it felt nice, like lying on a beach. She felt the creeping desire to let go again. This had happened several times over the last year, once when she was driving at night, listening to music. She had read of sleep apnoea but had not dared to have it checked in case it affected her pension.

Pretending to make a jotting in her notebook, she checked her watch and wondered if she would make it to the PIP meeting on time. At least Rita would be able to confirm to her mother how the sequence of events had created her difficulty. Hopefully, the Italian would be quick.

In this she was disappointed, it would prove to be a long, long soliloquy.

"However, Zia Maria refused to sell. According to my father she had long held the romantic notion she might someday return to Italy to live in the countryside as a grand dame with her own idyllic villa set in an olive grove. Now that my father has lost his faculties, I am allowed to administer his affairs, and according to the records provided by my father's solicitor, the Ercolano olive oil business has been costing Papa around ten thousand Euros a year to run."

In her peripheral vision, Kez noticed Rita was tapping on her phone, her thumbs moving at lightning speed.

Kez's mobile pinged, signalling an incoming email from Rita Minto standing only a few metres from her. Shrugging her shoulders to Bolinchetti, Kez fumbled in her handbag, found Rita's text on her mobile.

"From Google, Grazioni are leading figures in the Camorra, the Naples version of the Mafia. I'm getting his every word on my mobile."

"During my telephone call with Zia Maria, which was a few weeks ago, I mentioned the problem. Rather reluctantly, my aunt eventually agreed I should visit Ercolano and report back. I went on the fast train to Naples then on the local train to see the olive grove. The grove is no longer in the countryside if it ever was. It is located directly adjacent to the railway line and overlooks the station. Unlike my aunt's notion of a peaceful country estate, our family's olive grove is entirely ringed by an unattractive urban sprawl, surrounded by a mixture of business parks and seedy restaurants. The whole area is scruffy. Although I am not any kind of expert on olive growing, it looked to me as if it had been abandoned many years ago."

"So, you think your father was right that they should sell it?"

"Yes. That's what I thought at first, then I kept thinking why, if it was costing Papa ten thousand a year, did he not force Zia Maria to sell. As I was leaving the olive grove, waiting for me at the gates was a man called Raffaele Grazioni representing his uncle,

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Sergio Grazioni. Raffa is a man about my own age, a qualified accountant as well as a lawyer, he told me. He explained he was soon to become the head of the Grazioni family. It transpired that my father's solicitor had pre-warned him I was coming. Raffa insisted I join him on a second tour of the perimeter fence and then, over lunch, he showed me his plans for the site. He has several options set out in a glitzy booklet illustrated with basic sketches and mock up photographs."

As Marco Bolinchetti continued, Kez looked past the Italian and saw Rita pointing at her phone and then at him, giving the thumbs up sign mouthing, "I WAS RIGHT!"

"I asked Grazioni for a copy but he refused, saying the matter was "still sensitive". It seems that in the south of Italy, the old ways still rule. Raffa said most of the local councillors are "*suscettibile e persuasivo*" which means "amenable and persuadable", willing to rezone the olive grove for social housing and to provide a new, larger multi-storey car park at the railway station, "for the public good"."

"So, not a site for luxury housing or a business park?", asked Kez.

"No, that was not one of the options being considered by *il sindacato locale* - the local counsellors. But despite this apparent impasse, Raffa Grazioni was confident he would get his development, perhaps with some concessions. Anyway, I had to explain to him Zia Maria's reluctance to give up her dream but I got the impression he already knew about this and he became impatient, aggressive, talking me down. Then he made me a cash offer of five million Euros. I was stunned. How could a parcel of land in a small scruffy town be worth so much? However, there was a condition. I had to deliver a legally binding contract signed by my aunt within four weeks or the deal was off. I knew I could sign as proxy for my father, but I was unsure if I would be able to get Zia Maria's signed agreement to sell. As part of this I would receive an additional negotiator's fee of 5% of the sale price."

Kez saw Rita waving and glanced over, saw her pointing at her mobile. Kez checked her own mobile. Rita's text message read:

"I was right all along. Edith was a Camorra Hit-and-Run job!"

Kez refocussed, catching up on Bolinchetti:

"Under pressure, I gave him my provisional agreement, and at his insistence, signed for my father knowing this was worthless to the man unless I had Maria Bolinchetti's notarised signature in place to make it legal. Later, back in Milan, I researched the likely value of the olive grove to discover Grazioni's offer was in the right bracket. Five million was only slightly over the highest estimate I got from my solicitor who advised in writing that it was a good deal and that I should go ahead. Only then did I follow up with a telephone call to Zia Maria to explain what had transpired. We agreed to meet and that is why I am here. She asked me to send the Grazioni papers to her to check over. I did

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explain to her that they are complicated, drafted in technical legal Italian, but she insisted, said she had a very competent solicitor with good Italian who would check them for her. So, I sent them to her by courier last week. A few days ago she telephoned and asked me to come, which is why I am here. My only hope is that she signed them and had them notarised before she died, otherwise, well, who knows, the deal may take years to get finalised and I suspect Grazioni might reduce his offer price. You must understand, although I am comfortable financially, my father and I are not rich. His share from the sale of the Ercolano olive grove would be most welcome. And I had no idea that Zia Maria was rich, if she is rich? Does she actually own *Bellavista*? If so, would I inherit it, as Mrs McKindless said? It all seems too good to be true."

Kez nudged again: "So, you think she was keen to sign because she needed money to keep this house going?"

"Do you mean she had many debts? Perhaps, but I should explain, before I arrived here in the taxi, I did not know anything about *Bellavista*. My father was very secretive about his relationship with his sister. It was almost as if he was ashamed of her, I thought. I could never understand why. My dear departed mother would not discuss her either."

Kez had been waiting with her killer question, itching to ask. "Dr Bolinchetti, do you have any idea why she said your family olive oil business was becoming dangerous?"

Kez lifted her notebook, ready to make notes. Behind the Italian, Rita waved, pointing to her mobile. Refusing to be distracted, Kez kept her eyes on the tall Italian, who was avoiding her, staring at a spot high above her head, a puzzled look on his face. Then he shook his head, shrugged his shoulders as his sad brown eyes returned to hers.

"No, not really. You see, when she first raised the business of the olive grove, I am sure she thought she was speaking to my father. When she said the word 'Camorra' I laughed aloud, rather rudely I suppose. It was at that point I think she realised it was me and not my father she was speaking to. I then explained his condition and she was silent for a while. Then, whispering, she launched into German, which I could not follow at her pace. My father spoke good German, his main clients were German, he owned an art gallery. Now she is dead, whatever she was telling me that afternoon will probably forever remain a mystery."

"Doctor Bolinchetti, you mentioned the Grazioni family are involved with the Camorra?"

"Ah, no, not really," he laughed, a deep and genuine chortle. "No, no, that sordid time in Italy's history is all in the past. I know that in many other countries the old Mafia and Camorra myths still do the rounds but our modern Italy is relatively clean, much more so than London or even Edinburgh with its record of hidden companies. I think you call them Scottish Limited Partnerships. I watched a BBC programme about them and was not surprised to discover they are used by Russian oligarchs and others to launder their ill-

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gotten gains into the legitimate global financial system. No, Italians have been superseded, displaced; the modern Mafia types are all Russians and Chinese."

"Dr Bolinchetti, may I ask how you can be so absolutely sure?"

"Well, although I am not a banking wizard or anything like that, I did check out the Grazioni family through a friend who works in one of those business verification agencies. And, as I understand it, this branch of the Grazioni family is now free of the Camorra. It seems they have paid the various fines levied by our government and are reformed, running legitimate businesses. So, what else was I to do? In the end, I decided to submit to Raffa's repeated requests, mainly for my own selfish reasons. I want to get rid of this olive oil grove in Ercolano and stop the ludicrous "commune charges" which are sucking my father dry. That was the main reason I agreed to make this trip, to try to help Zia Maria to decide, persuade her to sell the olive grove. Please understand, I was not looking forward to meeting her. My guess was she was suffering the sort of anxiety brought on by early dementia. After all, she was incredibly old, ninety-three, I think. I know I may sound hard-hearted, but you have to understand I most definitely did not want to become involved in caring for her. Caring for my father is very arduous. Look, I'll be honest, I had been putting it off, vacillating. Then Raffa called and said the local council were pressurising him and had threatened to start compulsory purchase moves to take over our family olive grove for a pittance, *per scorie*, for dross money, I think you call it. That's when I sent the Grazioni papers to her by courier service and three days later she phoned again and this time she sounded, well, normal, bossy even, a bit like Nonna Isabella used to be. Perhaps 'imperious' is the correct adjective? Anyway, I agreed to come but I had to make proper arrangements for the care of my father. He is increasingly frail with emphysema which means he is housebound. His arterial dementia makes him fearful of strangers and well, he is on a knife edge. It may sound horrible but I thought if I waited, well, perhaps. . ."

Bolinchetti stopped talking.

With her writer's mind running full tilt Rita thought:

And once again, the suspect realises that he has said way too much. He will try to back pedal now.

When his silence continued, she paused the recording App on her phone and, as she did so, her factual assessment of the Italian man sounded in her head:

No, here is a genuine man, a kind man and clever. A man trying to cope alone and needing someone to share his concerns with, a man trying to justify himself to us and to himself. Perhaps if Mari could somehow meet him, they might hit it off?

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Kez stopped writing in her notebook. Looking up, she was caught by his steady gaze. She began to feel 'floaty', outside the scene, watching from above. Closing her eyes, she began to drift away. Somewhere in the distance a Blackbird was singing, making her think of *The Beatles'* song.

When Bolinchetti's voice began again, Kez opened her eyes, looked up, saw his eyes peering at her questioningly then immediately down to her notebook. Using her coded, mongrel shorthand she began transcribing, throwing a quick glance over his shoulder to see Rita nodding while pointing at her phone as if to confirm she was again recording as back-up.

"Allora, after an online search, checking with Trip Advisor and forums of those with parents in a similar situation, I found a small private care facility near Lago Como. It took a day for Papa to settle and then I flew here at once. As I explained earlier, I was not sure what to expect of Zia Maria, she was not exactly pleasant to speak to on the telephone. Maybe it is a horrible thing to say but when I heard she was dead, I was relieved. Then I thought, perhaps it was the excitement of my visit which caused her demise, caused her to stumble? As Mrs McKindless told us, my aunt was very anxious, keyed up. Do you think that was what it could have been? Anyway, if this house is riddled with rot and there are many debts, its residual value might be needed to clear them. If I am the inheritor, would I incur her debts? Who knows, there may be nothing to inherit."

Like Rita, as Kez had listened to his earnest explanation and watched his sad brown eyes, she became convinced he was telling the truth. She glanced to Rita, who raised her eyebrows, grimaced, shrugged her shoulders and nodded her head.

"Thank you, Dr Bolinchetti. As you said, your aunt was elderly and frail and, well, who can know what was running in her mind? However, given the circumstances of her death, and from what you have told us, I expect there will be an autopsy after which it will be for the Police Surgeon to decide if further action is required. But, just to be clear, you say you had never met your aunt, Miss Zia Maria Bolinchetti?"

In the Fiat Doblo, Franca Vitelli was wide awake, double tasking, scrolling through what she had missed during her respite outage while listening live to the drone feed.

"No, I did not meet her. Never. We spoke only on the telephone, a house phone. She said she did not have a mobile, no iPad or tablet, no FaceTime or WhatsApp. Because of the feud, Papa only started visiting Zia Maria after Nonna Isabella died. And he always came here alone. He did not tell me how rich Zia Maria was or that she lived in such a large house. I realise now he may have come to ask for money or hope for a gift. His art gallery business was always in crisis. Just before she died, my mother told me had it not been for her income from the university and her private work teaching English to businessmen, we would have starved. My father was a proud man, vain about his appearance, always

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boasting. My mother said this came from his father and she thought Zia Maria would be the same kind of person. The only thing I know about her is she was an opera singer, long before I was born. Mother told me this, so I know it must be true. Until his deterioration, my father used to come here to see her a few times every year until about five years ago when he went into decline and could not travel. It was a struggle, but my mother managed to persuade him to sell his art gallery to Signora Brunner, a young widow from our village. Sylvia had been my father's assistant and knew all his clients. She had good ideas for an internet-based business. Actually, she is originally from Bolzano in the German part of Italy and has good German and since my father's main clients were German, it has worked out well for her."

Kez prompted again, checking:

"And your father never mentioned your aunt had this grand house, *Bellavista*?"

"No, but I did find an old-style black and white postcard of a house called *Bellavista* in my father's personal papers. From memory, I cannot be sure if it was this house or just a house he would have liked to own, had he been rich enough. Earlier, when Mrs McKindless said I am to inherit, not my father, I was surprised. She said there are papers to sign and that I should contact her son, Edwin. You may remember, I spoke briefly to his father Ronald about it, but, well, the poor man was in shock when he realised his wife had been killed. To be honest, I can hardly comprehend what has happened. Even though I saw her dead, it still seems impossible because a few minutes earlier, she seemed so alive, so vibrant."

During his long explanation, Kez had sensed his eyes searching out hers but apart from a few glances up to check, she had kept her gaze on her notebook although, under the spell of his voice, she had found it difficult to make notes.

Is he trying to hypnotise me to make me accept his explanation? Has he already succeeded?

Does he know more than he is telling? And yet he does sound genuine, honest. Why else would he be so open?

When I was 'floaty', it was nice. Maybe if he had been my dentist, I would have better teeth?

Kez had always avoided attending dentists because of needles, which she hated. But the idea of hypnotherapy had appealed, and she had bought into ten subsidised sessions as part of a smoking cessation plan. It had worked for almost a year but when her weight had started to soar, she had reverted.

Could hypnotherapy work with my drinking, with chocolates?

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Kez's phone vibrated, signalling a text, she fished out her phone. It was from Rita:

"Are you OK? You look as if you're asleep on your feet? And why did he say he had a guilty conscience? Ask him what he feels guilty about!"

Kez glanced at Rita, gave a very small nod of thanks then asked:

"Dr Bolinchetti, you said you wanted to clear your conscience. Is there something else you wish to share with us?"

"Yes, there is. Look, it may be nothing and, well, I do not want to malign anyone, especially someone I do not know but Mrs McKindless mentioned that Zia Maria's lawyer was a woman called Frances Verratti. Verratti is not a very common name in the north of Italy, it is more southern, I think. Anyway, my father's solicitor is Matteo Vitelli, which is also a southern name, originally from Sicilia. I'm sorry to say this but, well, I have never been totally comfortable with Signore Vitelli. My mother was wary of him too. Although he seems competent, he is very domineering, very directing, dismissive of me, not a pleasant man. Why my father put up with him, I cannot understand. I have my own solicitor, Giovanni Artusi. He says Matteo is a sound man, that I can trust him implicitly, but I still have doubts."

"Perhaps you could ring Mr Vitelli and ask him if he is related to this Frances Verratti?"

"No, no. I'd rather not."

"Why?"

"We do not get along. He will no longer take my calls. I must write to him but mostly he ignores my questions. He is a devious man. To tell you the whole truth, I suspect he was fleecing my father over the payments to the commune for the olive grove but without access to Vitelli's records, I cannot prove it and so we are at an impasse. Let me say simply, we are *not* on friendly terms. With Giovanni's help, I plan to disengage with him completely as soon as I have managed to dispose of the olive grove in Ercolano. If I am to inherit *Bellavista*, Matteo Verratti will not be involved, at least I hope not."

Kez kept nudging:

"So, you think this woman Frances Verratti might be in league with this man Matteo Vitelli and that together they might fleece you again, over *Bellavista* and its contents?"

"What you say is possible, I suppose, but no, I do not think so. But Matteo does have a younger brother who lives in Naples who is also a lawyer. His name is Gabrielle Vitelli. Gabrielle works exclusively for Raffa Grazioni. I met them together when I visited the olive oil grove. He was the one who presented the 'offer to buy', the document which I was hoping to get Zia Maria to sign. I was suspicious of the whole setup but, as I said, I checked out the Grazioni family and they have 'clean hands' so, I have nothing but my

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unease, especially when I learned that Zia Maria has an Italian lawyer with a southern name."

While listening, Rita was tapping on her phone, searching in Turin and in Naples for legal advisors named Vitelli. This drew a blank. As a further strand, she tapped in Frances Verratti and again drew a blank. She tried Frances Vitelli and came up with a link to a website for *Franca Vitelli and Associates, International Business and Law Advisers*. There was a head and shoulders picture of a stunning woman in her late twenties, who looked like a young Sophia Loren. The website was one page only, giving no office location, no telephone number or email address, just a contact form asking interested parties to enter their key details and outline the nature of their enquiry with a promise of a quick response. Rita stepped over the line and entered Marco's details but giving her own mobile number as the contact. Then, after sending up a prayer, she pressed "SUBMIT" and checked the time: 14.32.

Rita thought of alerting Kez then realised her request to this Franca Vitelli website might never be answered. As a backup, she decided instead to forward a synopsis of the situation to her son-in-law Kenny Dawson, an IT guru who worked from home by hiring himself at consultant day rates to larger outfits. In her email, she asked him to try to find out more about the mysterious Franca Vitelli website and to try to discover if it was linked to Frances Verratti, emphasising the matter was *mega urgent*, that the situation was real and not a fantasy enquiry for another of her short stories. She knew that Kenny would be collecting his kids from school and resigned herself to wait. Kenny was 'deliberate' by nature, not a fast reactor. Rita also knew he considered her to be 'not fully grounded', as she had overheard him say on several occasions when talking about her.

Rita sighed; depending on what else he might have on his plate, knowing her request might sit in his inbox for hours or even days or that he might never respond. However, to be fair, if Kenny got his teeth into an issue, he was dogged and usually successful.

Kez was caught in a dilemma. The whole notion of foul play had come from Rita's vivid imagination, but Bolinchetti's story did lend some credence to the idea there may have been something sinister about his aunt's death. However, a request for additional resources to check this line of enquiry risked a further reprimand if she drew a blank.

Mindful of her pension, DS Kez Goldau decided she would play safe and do nothing except submit her findings to Control asap but without adding comment or suggestion. If it transpired the white van which had been rampaging on the M8 was the vehicle which had killed the McKindless woman and if drugs were involved, the SIO would almost certainly be Chief Superintendent Mari Minto. Kez saw this as her way out. When she and Rita were clear of the Italian, she would get Rita to send her the voice files of the Bolinchetti interview. When she was sure she had them on her own phone, only then would she advise

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Rita to delete them from her phone to avoid possible prosecution for unauthorised recording of a Police interview. The voice files would be their secret. She would explain to Rita she would submit a factual but neutral account of the Bolinchetti interview, typed in her own style, then wipe Rita's files from her own phone. A perfect solution. Kez would undertake to submit her report to Control within a few hours and hopefully this would allow the buck to pass to Mari Minto. After that it would be up to Rita to spin her fantasy tales to her daughter or whoever wanted to listen.

But first, in response to Rita's text, Kez made her final play; perhaps there was something else he might disclose:

"Dr Bolinchetti, thank you for being so willing to share your misgivings with us, but did you not say that Mrs McKindless said Ms Verratti was keen to see you and had left her business card inside, beside the papers for signing? Perhaps we should try the Yale key again and have a look inside, just you and I?"

Kez fished into her shoulder bag and found the SOC pouch:

"Dr Bolinchetti, one moment please. Let us both put on these overshoes, gloves and masks. Of course, you will understand I must ask you not to touch anything in case we are dealing with a crime scene."

She ignored Rita's angry stares at her exclusion.

Marco tried the Yale key and once again it rotated slightly before jamming and the old, solid door failed to open, even when he thumped against it with his shoulder.

"Ah, look, Dr Bolinchetti, higher up, there's a second lock, a mortise, probably the original. Why not try the keys on your bunch, the ones which failed to open the front door?"

However, none of the keys fitted. Using the torch on her phone, Kez scanned the gap at the closing edge.

"Ah, look, just above the Yale lock a cross bolt has been used to secure the door from the inside." Thinking aloud she added, "Perhaps the McKindless woman locked this one as she entered intending to leave by the front door?"

From the side, Rita sniped:

"Aye, but how come yon front door is locked tae and they keys don't work on it? Maybe there's somebuddy inside trying to prevent us gettin' in? If so, whit the hell are they tryin' tae hide?"

Rita's phone pinged an incoming message. Hoping it was Kenny, she checked at once, disappointed to discover it was a safety pre-message text from her brother-in-law's

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automated taxi booking service advising a caller was waiting to discuss a booking, a call to be answered when traffic conditions allowed.

In a move which probably saved her life, she turned quickly and stepped out of earshot:

"Dan Daily's Taxis, how can I help?"

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Massacre

The scene which unfolded before Rita Minto was a slow-motion nightmare.

As she watched, the handsome head of Marco Bolinchetti exploded into a red and grey pulp. Two further hits caught him in the nape of his neck. Kez Goldau ducked instinctively. Crouched, she did not escape the three shots which caught her, also in the head and neck area.

With her upper mind, Rita wondered if she was lost in another of her psychotic dreams, hoping she would soon be rescued from this new horror by Billy's icy cold feet touching hers, his arms cuddling her as he came to bed after a night shift nabbing joyriders racing around the backstreets of Kilmarnock.

There was no sound of gunfire from the silenced weapon, no clue of the shooter's location but Rita was already duck-running for the corner of the building when the pings and zings of a stream of ricocheting bullets splintered the wall and patio pavers. As the adrenaline rush spiked, her legs pumped at maximum output. She stumbled through the deep gravel at the front of the house onto the rough grass, running as fast as she was able, tripping then cartwheeling headfirst in an improvised forward handspring before regaining her balance to continue downhill through the entrance then slaloming sideways to crouch behind the safety of the boundary wall.

The further salvo of three ice bullets from the Kill Drone missed, whining through the small pocket of air space where Rita's head would have been had she not tripped.

Wheezing heavily, her rush of adrenaline subsided, morphing into a mixture of relief and survivor guilt at the realisation that she had escaped while Kez and Marco had been assassinated. Her stomach heaved; she dropped to her hands and knees expecting to throw up but nothing came. A whack of pain seared across the front of her head making her think she had been hit by a bullet until she recognised the familiar stabbing throb of another PTSD headache. Her tears were in full flood. Snot blocked her nose which she wiped with the back of her hand before crawling across the pavement to her taxi. Staying low, she blipped open the locks then cracked open the front passenger door, leaning inside to grab a box of tissues before moving back to the safety of the wall to blow her nose and wipe away the tears.

As the panic attack subsided, she took in the scene.

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Alec Thom and probationer Harriet Duffin were standing just in front of their patrol car, looking in the opposite direction towards the barrier of blue and white tape beyond which the media circus was still setting up. The corpse of Edith McKindless had been certified as dead and Control had authorised Alec to allow the ambulance crew to remove her remains. With its blue lights flashing, the vehicle was gathering speed as it moved out of view with the SOCO van tailing it in close company.

Unaware of the massacre which had just occurred behind *Bellavista*, all parties were awaiting the arrival of the specialist forensic traffic team to investigate the finer details of the hit-and-run incident. Alec had requested backup to help with the media circus, but Govan Area Control had put this on hold as their focus was the manhunt for the missing van driver.

While careering down the hill, in the back of her mind Rita had been planning to try to reach Mari to give her a heads up on the developing situation. Realising she had dropped her phone during her escape, she knew she had no choice: her call to Mari would have to go through Alec Thom. She sensed he would be awkward, disbelieving, because of her reputation. Moving crabwise she edged first to her taxi then scuttled across the gap to the Police patrol car where she kneeled just behind him, using the car as a shield.

Thom was on his personal mobile:

"Wendy, it's me, Alec. This is a wee call to give you a heads up. I'm at a hit-and-run outside a big house in Bridge of Weir called *Bellavista*. It might be the same van that was at the M8, but we don't know yet. We think the perpetrator attempted to commit suicide by driving headfirst into one of those huge farm tractors which was carrying drums of fuel and chemicals. Surely you must have heard the explosion and seen the black smoke?"

Drumming his fingers on the bonnet, he listened then cut in:

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, OK. So, the farmer's dead, burnt to cinders they say but there's no sign of the van driver. Anyway Wendy, the point is, if you see a stranger running or holed up, or anything suspicious at all, you let me know as soon as, OK? Got to go Wendy, duty calls."

"No Wendy, sorry, not now. Got to go, duty calls."

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The delicious 'surge' from the two kills gradually abated but Franca's fingers on the Console keyboard were still tingling in the afterglow as she studied the scene below, noting the increasing number of media people with their long lenses.

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Both drones were parked at 700 metres, optimal for the *Peekaboo's* cameras and their linked directional microphones. Hovering in tandem, the Kill Drone was manufacturing a fresh batch of deadly high-velocity ice bullets, topping up ahead of the next assault.

Using the array of *Peekaboo* lenses and directional microphones, Franca was quartering the area around the taxi and patrol car which were blocking the *Bellavista* driveway. This taxi woman had overheard too many names, information which might lead the Police to Franca's door at Kelvin Court. Having missed her twice, the Sicilian was hoping for a clear shot but it was evident this woman knew she was a target and was hiding. There was also the problem of her phone which she had been using to record Marco but if she could be caught in the act of using it, that would be ideal.

At least there had been no mention of Angie Simpson or the Serbs.

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Tugging at his trouser leg while fighting back another bout of rising bile, Rita hissed:

"Alec, Alec, they're baith deed. Ye need tae get oan tae Control tae get an armed response team here. Ah think there's sum 'day locked themsells in the hoose. Ah'm sure baith the back and front doors ur baith bolted and that could only be done frae the inside."

"And *who* exactly is dead, Mrs Minto?"

"Kez is deed and so is the Italian guy, Marco Bolinchetti."

"**What?** Ah, nice one, you nearly got me there. Come, come, Mrs Minto, you're taking the Mickey, surely? You're acting out one of your murder mystery scripts, seeing if you can wind me up. Good try though."

"Naw, fur **FUCK SAKE**, Alec, sum'day shot it the three o' us. They're baith deed, Kez and Marco, baith stone deed, right in front o' ma fuckin' eyes. Then they wur shootin' it me, just a few minutes ago. Ye need to get yer arse in gear and get oan tae Control, **RIGHT NOW!**"

"Hold your horses Mrs Minto. Let me take a wee look-see first. We don't want to escalate this alleged drama into a crisis without checking, surely?"

"Alec, this is serious. OK, you don't want to commit, then gimme yer mobile and I'll call intae 999 ma'sell."

"No way, Mrs Minto. Stay right here, please. You are not in charge, right? You are a civilian, an onlooker, right? In fact, go and sit in your taxi at once, please. And Harriet, make sure she waits here while I check this out. And for God's sake, for her own good, keep her away from those media hounds at all costs."

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"Alec, **DO NOT GO UP THERE**. Please, son, please. Ye could get shot at, honest."

PC Alec Thom had been the butt of too many such pranks during his time in the force. He took off, sprinting up the gravel driveway before switching to the track through the overgrown grass lawn then slowing as he ran through the deep gravel at the side of *Bellavista*, heading for the patio. He reached the corner and stopped to witness the carnage. The wasps and bluebottles were already at work on the two bodies.

Frances spoke, quietly but firmly:

"Franca, you do realise this one has to go too. He knows far too much now. The girl Harriet and Rita the taxi woman can wait."

Franca 'acquired' the new target in the crosshairs and the sounder buzzed in her headset. She squeezed the stud and Thom's head disintegrated, blown apart by the salvo of three ice bullets from the Kill Drone.

Crouching in the back of her taxi, Rita caught sight of Ronald McKindless in her peripheral vision and turned to see him standing half-way down the flight of steps leading from the main door to *Ridgeway*. The small, white-haired man seemed to be beckoning to Harriet but the girl had not seen him. Directly above him Rita spotted what she thought was a face peeking around a curtain at a second-floor window. In this she was mistaken, the face was that of *Goliath*, a huge Maine Coon hybrid house cat, a gift from Edwin to his parents on their recent fifty-fifth wedding anniversary.

Under her breath Rita whispered:

"Aha! Is that you, Edwin, hiding out with yer Daddy."

Frances spoke again, urgently:

*"Franca, Ronald must go too. It looks like he's cracked, ready to give himself up to the Police, spill the beans and spoil everything. Weak son, weak father. Take him out. It was always part of the plan. Do it **now**, please."*

Then, as if in a pantomime, Rita watched as the elderly man staggered back, clutching his throat, jerking like a puppet as two further shots hit him. In slow motion he sagged then collapsed forward and tumbled onto the steps, eventually coming to rest, sprawled untidily. As before, there was no sound of gunfire.

In that instant, Rita was sure that Alec Thom was almost certainly dead.

Once again doubled to a crouch to minimise her exposure, she dodged her way back to where Harriet was standing, looking down at her mobile phone.

On her knees, looking up, Rita asked:

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"Harriet, can Ah borrow your phone, hen? Please."

"But Alec specifically said you've not to call Control until he checks."

"It's OK hen, Ah wullnae call Control, Ah promise ye. Ah waant tae call my man, Billy, tae get him tae ring my Mari en ask her tae ring me. She listens tae him."

"Sorry, Mrs Minto, I'm not following what you're saying. Do you mean Chief Superintendent Mari Minto? She was at my passing out parade at Tulliallan."

At the mention of her daughter, Rita flipped to her posher voice:

"Yes, Harriet, Mari still listens to her father so she'll take a call from him but when I call her, she usually just let's my call go to voicemail. So, I'll ask Billy to ask her to call me back urgently, OK?"

Rita accepted the young policewoman's phone and began tapping Billy's mobile number, trying to think where he might be, hoping he had not been called to the M8 incident, even though it was well off his usual patch.

Harriet crouched down beside Rita:

"Are you all right, Mrs Minto? You look, well, dreadful, really ill. And you have a huge bruise on your forehead."

"Harriet, would you do me another wee favour, hen?"

"What?"

"Just get into your patrol car and lock your doors and duck down. Please, it's for your own safety."

"Why? Oh, I get it, you mean there really is a sniper. So, you're deadly serious, are you?"

"Yes, look ower there. See him, oan the steps? That man lying there?"

"Oh God! His head has been shot off! Oh God, no, **NO!**"

"Listen, Harriet, *silencers*. They're usin' silencers. Ah'm sure they've taken oot Alec tae. Ye heard me tell him no' to go up there, didn't Ah? C'mon, ye kin try Alec on yer radio but inside yer caur first. An' why is ma Billy no' answerin'? Ah just hope tae God he's miles away. Bit whit if he's been hit tae? Ah'll need tae try Mari direct. Quick hen, scoot, **inside yer caur right away. Scoot!**"

"Oh God. My Dad told me not to join up. I've got a Master's degree in Fine Art. Dad wants to set me up with a gallery but I wanted to try the Police."

"C'mon, Harriet, good girl, that's it, in you go."

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With the girl safe, Rita crouched behind her taxi. Tapping the number, she noted the time: 15:37. She explained to Control it was an urgent and very personal family matter and after a short delay, she was put through.

Mari's voice had its usual hard, 'business comes first' edge to it:

"Hi Mum. Look, this is *not* a good time! I'll have to call you back, maybe tonight, OK?"

"No, our Mari, no way is it 'OK'. Dinnae ye *dare* hing up oan me. This is bluddy, bluddy fuckin' serious. Three people huv been shot deed here, right in front o' ma eyes. An mi'bee even anither two coz Alec Thom is missin' inaction tae. Ah telt him no to gang up there but he jist went, stupit bugger. I'm sure he's deed tae. And mi'bee even yon van driver yer huntin' fur. *Silencers*, oor Mari, thur usin' fuckin' silencers. An' thur's a team o' thum..."

"Oh Mum, for goodness' sake speak properly! Your language is a disgrace. Why are you calling me about this anyway? This is police business. It is nothing whatsoever to do with you. In any case, you should be calling the 999 service, not me. And forgive me for asking but have you had your medications today and have you taken them according to the schedule?"

Rita closed her eyes, exhaled fully, filled her lungs with a fresh charge of oxygen and re-started, this time speaking 'properly', as Mari always insisted on nowadays, now that she was going up in the world.

"Our Mari, I am very, very well thank you, even though I've been shot at and even though not four hundred yards from me there is an elderly man lying dead with his head blown off. Silencers, our Mari, silencers. Imagine that in Bridge of Weir, eh?"

"Ah, this is the hit and run incident then, is it? Please let me speak to whoever is most senior at the locus. And be aware, I'm recording this conversation for Control."

"Most senior? That would be me, actually. There is a probationer, Harriet 'somebody' but she is hiding out in her patrol car 'cause I'm doing my best to keep her alive for you."

"Is Kez Goldau not there yet? She should be in charge."

"Sorry, she's dead, shot through the head. Slaughtered. Like the Italian footballer guy. He wiz first then Kez and they just missed me. I ran away just in time but I saw the bullets hit the wall just beside me."

"I can see from tasking that Alec Thom is there too. Please put him on."

"Our Mari, fur fuck's sake! Did you not hear me? Alec's deed too, probably. We need an Armed Response Unit here before we move another inch. I'm hiding behind yer uncle's taxi and I can feel their eyes on me, through their telescopic sights."

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"Mum, language, please. Remember this is being recorded, those are the rules. Just tell me, slowly and carefully, what you *actually* saw and what you are assuming. Try to separate fact from fiction. Go ahead now please."

"OK, our Mari, let me spell it out again so you can play it to Control who, by the way, don't have a fuckin' clue what's going on here."

Talking slowly and clearly Rita reiterated her story in a calm voice limiting herself to the synoptic facts, as Mari had always insisted.

Then she offered a summary:

"So our Mari, old ninety-three-year-old Maria Bolinchetti who owned *Bellavista* was found dead by Edith McKindless aged eighty-seven who lived in *Ridgeway*. Remember, these are massive houses, worth millions. Stinks of drug money tae me. Was Maria killed to order by someone? And now, of course, Edith is dead to, taken out in the hit-and-run. Or was she shot first? Her heed was pulp, Ah saw it wi' my ane eyes. And 'member her son Edwin is missing. Huz he been shot too? Ah can guarantee his faither is deed cos Ah saw it happen and Ah can see his corpse from here and his heed has been shot right aff his shooders. Once the media guys spot him, it'll be all over the tele and social media. Ah just hope the shooters don't huv a go at them tae. And guess what our Mari? - the only cop ye huv here is a rookie, a nice wee lassie wet ahint the ears."

"Mum, this all seems like one of your fantasies. You're making it up, right?"

"No, our Mari. This is real and it's happening right now. Luckily the media people haven't clocked it yet. There must be about thirty or more here now. So, I repeat - **SILENCERS!** Our Mari, there using silencers and from what I can see, there must be a squad of them, totally hidden. It's got to be about drugs."

"Please confirm. You say there are three dead you saw with your own eyes and Thom is missing, not answering his radio?"

"EXACTLY! So, our Mari, **you tell me**, is this a drugs turf war? Are your famous Serbs making a move at last?"

"Let me consult on that."

"Remember the key question from what I told you earlier: "Why did Marco deny the Camorra are involved?" Come to think of it, why did he spill the beans about the family feud? As I said, I have it all on my phone, which I lost when I fell running away. Yes, our Mari, when we get the phone, I'll have the big footballer's statement for you to play to Control, verbatim. You must get a full team here and you'll need feet on the ground to find that phone."

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"Mum, I'll mute my voice to talk to Control but carry on talking, tell me what you can see, any developments. Remember, I'm still recording you."

"So, our Mari, is that clear and calm enough for you? Five dead that Ah'm certain of and I would put my house on it that Alec Thom's a goner tae. And remember, Ah'm pinned down hoping not to get wiped out masell. As I keep tellin' ye, we need an Armed Response Unit here pronto, pronto. Fur fuck's sake, hen, is that something you can make happen?"

"Mum, Control are fact-checking so if this is some sort of weird wind up, stop it now. This is the very last thing I need, today of all days."

"Our Mari, every word is true. Ah'm hiding behind yer uncle's taxi. I've put the wee lassie Harriet in the patrol car, to keep her safe. The shooters are still out there probably using high-powered rifles and silencers. It's a **massacre** we huv in progress here. There's a team of them out there, must be. And they're very, very good. And there's no sign of Alec Thom. He ran up there to the big house ages ago. Has he been onto Control to ask for an Armed Response Team, like Ah telt him tae dae?"

Mari was tapping on her *iPad*, reading and responding to the log as it was being generated by Control.

"No, Mum, Thom hasn't called anything into Control. Ah, but PC Harriet Duffin has just asked for an Armed Response Unit. Wait a minute, Control have cited **you**, Mrs Rita Minto as the person who reported the incident to Duffin. She says Thom is missing, that he has been out of contact for nearly twenty minutes. Mum, if this goes pear-shaped, I'll be blown out of the water. Are you *absolutely* sure Kez Goldau and the other two are dead?"

"Yes Mari. With my own eyes I've witnessed all three shootings. There was no sound. Silencers, as I said. If they got Alec Thom, that's four. And what about Edith McKindless, did they shoot her first, throwing her into the path of the hit-and-run? And were they shooting at that van driver, causing him to swerve? As I said, Marco Bolinchetti mentioned the Camorra so it must be about drugs."

"Mum, you sound a bit screechy. Are you sure you've taken your pills today?"

"Listen Mari, honey, I know I'm not doing too well here but even though I'm a bit wobbly you've got to trust me. There is a massacre going on here and I don't think it's over, not by a long shot. Ah, sorry, no pun intended. And our Mari, your father is not answering his mobile. Have they taken him down as well?"

"Mum, just stay down and I'll sort this, OK? But it will take time, it always does so be patient, please."

"Oor Mari, fur fuck's sake, Ah'm shitting masell here."

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"Mum! Language! I told you this is on the record. Now, please keep your head down. I'll sort it. I can see from the feed from Control to my iPad that the nearest ART are finishing up a call-out in Ferguslie Park, a teenager shooting at neighbours' cats from his bedroom with an air rifle. They are on their way to you now, ETA of 16:07. Stay on the line and relay any new developments direct to me. I'll mute myself again but I'll be listening. I need to speak to Control and ask to be assigned OIC of this situation. And Mum, remember to watch your language, you're still on record."

Rita heard the echoing cracks then saw the first cloud of smoke escaping from the upstairs windows of *Bellavista*. She started the video recording App on Harriet's phone, pointing the lens at the blazing house. A further series of explosions blew out the front windows then a larger explosion (fuelled by the gas main) blew the roof to smithereens as a huge fireball reached to the sky, carrying with it sparks and dark sooty smoke which rose vertically in the still air.

Remembering the locked doors front and back, Rita's imagination took another leap.

In a low voice, barely audible, she said:

"Fuck it! Ah shooda realised they would try tae destroy the evidence. How many other corpses huv they left in there? Was this Edwin's work? Or is it the Camorra? Or the Serbs? Urr they in it the-gether?"

Then speaking louder, for Mari:

"Our Mari, did you hear that explosion? *Bellavista* has been blown up and set on fire, probably to destroy the evidence. It's burning like a torch. Edith said it's full of dry rot."

Mari's voice returned:

"Say again? An explosion? Mum, have you gone over the edge?"

"No! Look our Mari, all the stuff about the Camorra from Marco Bolinchetti, I told you I have his statement on my phone."

"You have direct evidence of Camorra involvement?"

"Yeah, definitely. I told you all this afore. I dropped ma phone somewhere, maybe even up at the house while I was dodging the shooter but probably on the lawn when I fell running down the slope from the house. There's other stuff on Kez's phone and in her notebook. Oh God, her handbag with her phone and notepad is still up there too but with this blaze, will any of it survive? Oh my God, look, the walls are collapsing. I'm recording this on Harriet's phone for ye."

'No need, we are getting images and commentary from a direct TV newsfeed. Look, Mum, I'm disconnecting. The helicopter has landed here at Govan to pick me up. I'll be there

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with you in about eight minutes, OK? Lie flat on the ground and try to get under the car, OK? And Dad is OK, flat battery on his phone. And Mum, no heroics or theatrics, OK? Love you, Mummy. Love you lots."

As the remaining windows blew out, *Bellavista* became a raging inferno. Still videoing the scene, her back pressing into the door of the taxi, Rita closed her eyes against the surreal horror, her mind refusing to accept what she had witnessed over the last few hours.

The air began to fill with the undulating wail of approaching emergency vehicles. In the far distance, Rita heard the first whup-whup sounds of a helicopter with Mari aboard.

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From the live drone feed, Franca checked the scene by zooming in on the Police cordon where the media group were jostling for pole position, disappointed that Ronald McKindless's body had not yet been noticed.

With Angie, Edwin and now Ronald out of the picture, Franca's next target was *Ridgeway*. Inside there would be legacy evidence which could lead them to her, fingerprints and traces of DNA from her several visits a month earlier, back when she had still hoped that Edwin and his parents might be 'persuadable'.

At her feet she had Edwin's man bag containing all his various sets of keys, his supply of Greenies and Blues and mini cans of grapefruit juice he used to swish them down. And for backup she had The Skeleton Key. She had switched off his mobile phone and removed its SIM card to prevent it being triangulated. And she still had twenty or more mini-egg bombs in her rucksack.

Her mind jumped back to Edith.

The white van hitting Edith must have been organised by the Serbs. Were they closing in on her too? If so, what sort of vehicles were they using? Were they mingling with the media group? Did they have silenced laser weapons concealed in fake long-lens cameras?

Frances's voice intervened:

"Franca, my dear one, you have been doing well. And yes, do place the incendiary devices in Ridgeway but first you must dispose of that taxi woman. The foul-mouthed Rita Minto is the last material witness. She knows almost everything. She could lead her daughter to us. You must get her phone too, it has crucial evidence on it, as you well know. And please, stop daydreaming about the Serbs, they can come later. Get that taxi woman NOW, please."

"I should do Ridgeway first. My prints are all over it."

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"Franca! Rita Minto first! **DO IT NOW!**"

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Near hits pinged off the tarmac near Rita, always coming in three-shot bursts and getting closer, she judged.

Her upper mind told her she was being targeted by a professional sniper, perhaps ex-army, using a semi-automatic rifle, silenced:

Ah'll soon be fucken' deed if Ah stay here.

Pumping adrenalin and sucking in huge gulps of air she rose to a crouch, taking up a sprint starting position with the girl's phone held in her hand like a relay baton, intending to run for cover and crawl under Harriet's vehicle and shelter below the BMW's engine block.

Her arms and legs felt wobbly. She hesitated, realising this move might put the young policewoman in danger:

Was it the supersonic whine of another incoming volley which caused her to throw herself flat again?

A searing pain exploded in her shoulder and Rita Minto's world became a kaleidoscope sequencing slowly from blue through pink to vivid white before subsiding into a deeper purple red then fading through grey into black nothingness.

Seeing Rita fall for what seemed like no reason and thinking she had had a seizure, PC Harriet Duffin reacted instinctively and ran from her place of safety to help.

Harriet's phone was on the ground, still grasped in Rita's outstretched hand.

Franca acquired the device in the crosshairs of the display. When the buzzer sounded, she pressed fiercely on the stud and the electronics did the rest. The salvo caught the arriving Probationer in the line of fire, the three bullets raking across her back, puncturing her heart and lungs, causing her to collapse on top of Rita, her body shielding the phone from view. Although severely damaged and unconscious, she was still alive.

In frustration, Franca pressed the firing stud again and again and again. Without an acquired target, dozens of bullets arrived in a scattered pattern. Randomly, one ricocheted off the tarmac and lodged in Harriet's neck at its junction with the skull, severely damaging her spinal cord, disrupting her autonomic system, affecting her heart, her respiratory control system and disrupting other vital functions.

The Kill Drone buzzer emitted a long, continuous undulating tone signalling it was out of ammunition and was in 'RELOAD' mode while it regenerated a further batch of ice bullets.

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During the silent drama of this double shooting, with the fallen victims hidden from them by the Police car and the taxi, still unaware of what had just happened, the media pack had been firmly focussed on the spectacular fire at *Bellavista*.

Frances spoke, firmly, reassuringly:

"Franca, stay calm. This is what happens from time to time. Randomness scuppers perfect planning. Take a couple of Blues and focus on the here and now. Get yourself to Ridgeway. Put up the comms sphere. Pretend to be a freelance media person. Join the pack then slip up the lane to the back of the house and set the egg bombs and then make your getaway. There is still work to be done here before we go after the Serbs. Trust in your technology, you know it works. MOVE, Franca. And NOW, please!"

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While the full attention of the media was still focussed on *Bellavista*, the *Fiat Doblo* van arrived from behind and slipped up the service lane to the rear of *Ridgeway*. Ten minutes later, with the comms sphere retrieved and out of sight, Franca-Julia slipped away, back along *Glenniffer Grange*, returning to her safe haven beside the gate on the disused farm track.

During this short trip, Franca-Julia was tempted to activate the egg bombs at *Courchevel* as well as *Ridgeway*, worried about what might happen if the dog-walker contacted the Police to tell them of the dog's injuries. Parked up at the entrance to the cow field, she checked with the *Peekaboo* cameras. Although the entry gate from the street into *Courchevel* was fully open, there were no police or other cars in the vicinity and no sign of anyone snooping around the building. On this basis, she decided to keep this explosion in reserve in case she needed another diversion.

Franca-Julia tapped the master activation code into the App on her *iPhone*. Inside *Ridgeway* the devices exploded in muffled unison with a loud and satisfying '**thrupp**' which she could just hear in the distance while the whole event was being auto recorded by the *Peekaboo* cameras.

During the sortie to *Ridgeway* Frances Verratti had been strangely silent. Franca was enjoying the freedom this allowed to let her mind soar and plan ahead without being 'corrected and commanded' every few minutes.

After she had reviewed the *Peekaboo* recordings, Franca-Julia intended to visit Edwin's house and set charges there too, to remove any possible traces of her presence. Choosing the right time to detonate Houston would be an interesting problem but there was no rush as, like Vera Verdi, Edwin McKindless would not be coming back to haunt her.

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After her assault on Rita Minto, the *Peekaboo* drone had continued to automatically record the fallout from her attacks, footage she would review soon, as she planned her next moves.

Smiling, she was looking forward to enjoying a fresh cafetiere of coffee, two bananas and a *Twix*. But first she needed to squat on her porta potty and relieve the pressure in her bowels and bladder.

Then she needed to rest her mind and prepare herself for the next phase.

Frances spoke, gently:

"Yes Franca, you do need rest but only for a few hours. Set the rouse alarm on the Console. Two Blues only. And no Grappa."

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The helicopter landed and Chief Superintendent Mari Minto disembarked accompanied by DCI Avril Galloway and two armed PCs from the ART standby group at Govan. Racing to join her in his Audi TT sports car was Inspector Eric Ewing, Deputy PA to CS Minto. He had been off duty when the summons arrived from Control.

As Mari ran towards the two bodies sprawled on the ground between the taxi and squad car, *Ridgeway* exploded, providing the media with another spectacle.

The priority was twenty-four-year-old Harriet Duffin who left for hospital with a police escort eight minutes later. Tragically, the Probationer died just as the ambulance arrived at the Southern General Hospital. (Perhaps this was a blessing as a later autopsy confirmed that had she lived, the young woman would have been a zombie due to cerebral hypoxia.)

A few minutes later, with much less fanfare, an unmarked private ambulance drove away with the unconscious Rita Minto on a drip. Mari had elected to travel in the vehicle with her mother, mindful that Rita was the only material witness remaining, provided she survived the trauma of her recent assault without suffering a further PTSD breakdown.

This dark grey long-wheel-base Transit was accompanied by two unmarked escort vehicles. The passenger in the BMW X5, the lead vehicle, was one of the armed PCs from the helicopter while the following vehicle was the Audi TT driven by DI Ewing, now assigned as Rita's personal protection officer with his pistol located on the seat beside him concealed by a Partick Thistle football scarf.

Still in the dark about the full extent of what had happened, the media were spewing our screeds of speculative misinformation, working themselves into a frenzy in the process.

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Protective Isolation

At Bridge of Weir, there had been no further sniper attacks since Harriet Duffin's demise. It was hoped the ART search teams had spooked the shooters, causing them to flee.

A volunteer SOCO team led by Sergeant Emma Vernon had retrieved the headless torso of Ronald McKindless and erected a protective tent at the locus before withdrawing, wary of further sniper attacks.

Covered with rubble, the corpses of Keziah Goldau, Alec Thom and Marco Bolinchetti had not yet been recovered.

At the private Nuffield Hospital located deep in the leafy suburbs of Glasgow's West End, CS Mari Minto was desperately hoping her mother would be able to provide the necessary starter clue, something, anything to lead them to the perpetrators before any further assassinations occurred.

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The discrete wall clock above Rita Minto's bed showed 21:32 in small pale green numerals. This VIP suite had been purposely designed to offer full protection for high profile patients and mirrored those used by the Metropolitan Police. There was a similar suite in Edinburgh and, because of the Royals, others in Aberdeen and Inverness.

The suite was air conditioned with triple glazed bullet-proofed glass incorporating interstitial blinds with overlapping slats set permanently at forty-five degrees to prevent 'sighting'. The electronic lock on the reinforced door which gave access to the corridor leading to this single-bed ward was monitored by CCTV cameras. The lock mechanism was controlled by two armed officers located in a side alcove off the corridor with a full view of the door. These custodians were in their turn monitored by a further CCTV camera with both officers in constant touch with Mari's team at the Artemis Project Office at Govan where a parallel log of all visitors was maintained at the Artemis Command and Control desk where all key decisions were made by the Artemis Duty Officer who exercised the ultimate veto over who may or may not be allowed entry to their 'asset', Mrs Rita Minto.

The slits of the venetian blinds shimmered, followed by a muted crack and rumble as the eye of the storm began its slow progress from Arran, heading north and west where, in the darkness before the coming dawn, it would stall again, this time above Ben Lomond.

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Keeping her eyes closed, Rita Minto edged back to reality, free of pain and supported by the comforting warmth of her medication, enjoying the gentle caress on the back of her right hand, recognising a rough-skinned finger she knew well.

Sergeant Billy Minto, dressed in his uniform, had been called directly from his duties at a traffic incident on the M77, a pile up caused by a Mercedes sports car weaving to overtake a determined elderly lady in a Mini who had been hogging the outside lane at sixty-three mph.

From the familiar smell, Rita knew she was in a hospital.

Am I back in a psychiatric ward again?

Feeling deliciously sleepy, she resisted the urge to ask. Just below her threshold she could hear familiar voices talking quietly. Through slitted eyes she saw her immediate family were gathered around her bed, even her teenage grandson Alfie with his wireless earbuds inserted, head bouncing to the beat of music, thumb-tapping his phone.

Concentrating harder, she picked up the thread: her husband was talking about traffic on the nearby busy Great Western Road (A82), the primary artery from the city to the Western Highlands and Islands. Billy was riding one of his familiar hobby horses, the effect of heavy rain on traffic and how stupidly most drivers behaved, refusing to slow down, often increasing speed, feeling invulnerable inside the presumed safety bubbles of their vehicles, travelling nose to tail at well over prevailing speed limits.

Since the death of the child under her ambulance, Rita had never fully recovered her mental stability. Under a new Consultant, an insightful man called David Pettigrew, Rita had discovered creative fiction as a therapy. This outlet for her energies had stabilised her psyche and had led to Rita crafting a career as a budding writer of short stories and quirky, offbeat modern scripts popular with avant garde am-dram groups.

Although Mr Pettigrew was pleased with Rita's progress, Mari secretly held the view that her mother was becoming schizophrenic, blurring the difference between factual reality and her own creative version of events.

Can I believe her? In Court, would she come across as a reliable witness?

Moving her head slowly to widen her field of view, Rita saw her eldest daughter with a tall man in a white coat with a stethoscope dangling around his neck. The pair were studying his clipboard, whispering. Mari was dressed in her full uniform, which she had been wearing for the promotion interview abandoned amid the drama.

Rita smiled inwardly:

They are both in uniform!

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The stress in her daughter's body was obvious despite the mask of her stern, professional face. Mari had always been a natural actor and could easily project an impassive demeanour to conceal her feelings from even the most inquisitive colleagues. For interrogators or probing media cameras, she had the knack of producing a concerned look or a convincing smile at will, a ruse she had learned to use to disarm her protagonists.

Rita guessed rightly that they were discussing her condition, but she could not make out what they were saying. Concentrating, she watched their lips, a skill she had developed in various psychiatric hospitals to avoid being excluded from what her carers had been saying about her.

"Magnus, when Mum comes round, I must have a chance to interview her, please. I wouldn't ask but it's crucial, absolutely crucial. She is the only source we have. All the others with any knowledge have been killed, ruthlessly executed by professionals to protect themselves from discovery. We have imposed a news blackout on her condition. If they discover she is still alive, I believe she will remain a target. That is why she is here, under protection. But as you might guess, this secret cannot hold forever. The media frenzy is building. We are expending resources at an unprecedented level. The Chief Constable has been applying pressure on all of us to get results, and fast."

"I know, but Mari dearest, from your mother's history, I'm worried for her. The injury to her shoulder muscle was minor but there was a lot of blood loss due to the delay in reaching her. Psychologically this trauma could force her into relapse. I'm not a mental health expert but I know enough to know what she has suffered could push her over the edge, perhaps permanently."

"Magnus, please trust me to be sensitive. I know Mum inside out. I'll be careful, I promise. Please say yes. It's crucial, there are killers out there, ready to strike again. She has been shot at twice, we think, and she may well still be a target. We must catch them for Mum's sake too."

"I do understand, dearest one, you know I will allow this access if I can. Let me see how she is when she comes around. If she is fit enough, you might be able to have her for a few minutes, fifteen at most. I suspect she has suffered the trauma equivalent of a mini stroke so expect gaps in her recall although the missing bits and pieces should return gradually as the trauma subsides."

The doctor glanced over his shoulder at the monitor and caught Rita closing her eyes. In his normal voice he said:

"Ah, our heroine returns from the Land of Nod. Please, everyone, would you wait in the family room while we carry out an audit of our patient's stats. Thank you. Chief Superintendent, perhaps you may wish to remain?"

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Two nurses came and went, bustling officiously, casting surreptitious glances at the attractive unsmiling police officer. Mari checked her phone repeatedly, hoping for good news from Avril Galloway, racking her mind, haunted by the feeling there must be something she had missed. At the crime scene Mari and Avril had been through the contents of her mother's tote bag retrieved from the taxi, checking for clues. They confirmed her phone was missing. Mari had called it but had received an "out of service" message suggesting it was either switched off or severely damaged.

Had this phone also been destroyed in the inferno at Bellavista? How important was it anyway?

The techies had tried to triangulate its last whereabouts without success, reporting a well-known *Vodafone* black spot in the immediate vicinity the *Bellavista* location.

The nurses eventually completed their tasks leaving Rita in a sitting position, woozy but held in place by a cocoon of plumped-up pillows. As the painkilling medication began to wear off, the first tugs of pain in her right shoulder began to catch like a fishhook. Rita gasped but managed to suppress the curse which sprang ready formed to her lips.

Watching her daughter's eyes boring in on her from behind a mask of apparent concern, Rita braced herself for the grilling which must follow, concealing the smile at the memory of Mari's nickname, 'Minto the Shredder', a nickname which had followed her since her years on the Kyle Academy debating team.

Eventually the doctor returned and peered again into her eyes with his pencil torch, checked the monitors and nurses' notes:

"Well then Mrs Minto, how do you feel? Are you up for a brief chat with your daughter? She tells me it is imperative she speaks to you without delay as you may have some crucial evidence?"

Rita thought:

Posh. But is that lilt Highland, or from the Western Isles?

"Yes Doctor, not too bad, thanks." Rita could hear her voice; hoarse, her words coming slowly and a little slurred. "May I have a sip of water please?"

"Of course. Now, Mrs Minto, let's all agree on one thing, you are very lucky to be alive and relatively undamaged. We believe it was a ricocheted fragment which passed through cleanly, snicking the nerves which connect your brain to your arm. I imagine the pain would have been incredible but thankfully the damage done was minor and should heal within a month or so."

Definitely north of Inverness, like Grampa Joe Rennie.

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"Doctor, will my shoulder heal?"

"Yes, I predict a full recovery on that front. Meanwhile, your arm needs to be restrained, as you see. With good physio, you should be restored to full strength and mobility within three months. Thankfully, you are a very fit woman. Very fit."

Turning to head for the door, he smiled at Mari, "Fifteen minutes maximum, please, Chief Superintendent."

Mari flashed him a smile of gratitude. "Thanks Magnus. It was very good of you to come yourself. Only the best is good enough for my special mother. I owe you one."

Rita had noticed the breast pocket of his white coat was embroidered in red with the insignia, "Mr M R MacPherson". And he did not wear a wedding ring nor was there a tell-tale mark where one had been removed, as many medics did when on duty.

Had Mari found her special one, at long last?

The door closed and mother and daughter were alone.

"Right Mum, are you sure you're up for this?"

Rita nodded, and closed her eyes, recognising her daughter was morphing into her role as a super-efficient police officer, the other Mari, the one whose mind was entirely focussed, clinical, cold, ruthless.

Mari opened the door to the corridor: "Eric, would you step inside as my corroborator."

Rita eyed up the smallish, slightly built man placing him in his late twenties. His thin hair, dark grey suit and high forehead over a solemn face wearing Harry Potter style glasses gave her the impression he was an academic. As he entered, he nodded to her, his hand reaching into his inside jacket pocket to retrieve a slim notebook, mauve leather, not the usual Police issue.

"Mum, this is Inspector Dr Eric Ewing. He is my deputy PA and for the present is coordinating your personal protection."

Rita checked again and saw although he was carrying a weapon and wearing a protective vest, because his suit was expertly tailored, these items were not evident. As he glided across the room, he reminded Rita of a version of Peter Sellers in *The Pink Panther* role. By choosing to stand in the corner beside the door to the en suite toilet area, he placed himself out of Rita's line of sight. Remaining silent throughout, in her medicated state, Rita quickly forgot he was present.

Turning on her voice recorder and placing it on the swing tray beside Rita's bed, Mari began the formalities:

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"The time is nine-fifty-four pm on Tuesday 13 May 2014. This is CS Marissa Minto interviewing Mrs Margarita Minto generally known as Rita Minto. For the record, Mrs Rita Minto is my mother. The following information she is about to give is in relation to the major incident which occurred in Bridge of Weir earlier today."

"Right, Mrs Minto, please tell me, in your own words, exactly what happened yesterday."

"Mari where am I, is this the Southern General?"

"No, you are in a private hospital, under police protection. Please, Mrs Minto, no more questions. We are under pressure of time, as always. Tell me what happened, without embellishments, please."

"You don't really think they're still after me, do you?"

"Please, Mrs Minto, we need your statement, urgently. You are our only witness."

"What about Alec Thom? The wee lassie, Harriet?"

"Sorry. Only you survived. Now, please, tell us what you can remember, take your time and tell us every detail. Do it now, please."

Aware she was being recorded, Rita spoke in her poshest voice and recounted everything which had happened. Throughout, whenever she asked for information, her daughter refused to answer, saying:

"Not yet, Mrs Minto, just recount what you know, please, give me the *facts*, without speculation."

As Mari had expected the fifteen-minute time allotted by Magnus was not sufficient but when he returned and saw that Rita was still keen to continue, he agreed to an extension then retreated.

Eventually Rita concluded:

"The last thing I remember before waking up in here was the sound of your helicopter. I ducked to check my watch. I think ducking like that must have saved me. Whoever was shooting at me were crack shot snipers, using silencers."

"Why do you say there was more than one?"

"Because the shots came from different directions."

"How do you know that? You said they used silencers."

"OK, OK, so I don't know for sure. It was just a feeling. There was the pattern of shots, bursts of three, and yes, of course, they came from nowhere. Silencers. They used silencers. Possibly ex-SAS snipers or maybe Russian equivalents, hired in for the hit job."

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"You think it was a hit job, pre-planned? Why do you hold this view?"

"Marco did hint at Camorra and Mafia involvement but maybe they were Serbians. As you well know, Mari, the Serbs are all over the UK and now they're here in Scotland too."

"Well, Mrs Minto, we will note your views, your *speculative* views, but we shall follow the evidence. Is there anything else you wish to add?"

"This is just a hunch Mari, but you should check out Edwin McKindless. From what his mother said, he sounds a bit shady to me. Definitely."

"Thank you for your suggestion, which we have noted. Do you have any other *facts* for us? Anything you have missed out?"

"No. Oh, did you find my phone?"

"Not yet."

"And Kez's handbag?"

"Sorry, that is not information I can share. Is there anything else, Mrs Minto?"

"Look, Mari, these shooters, well, from the sightlines, the geography if you like, surely your forensic people will be able to work out where they were hiding. Could they have been in the woods? Or up one of the electricity pylons?"

"Again, we have noted your suggestions but now, Mrs Minto, is there anything else you want to add? Any *facts* you have that could help us?"

"Not really, except, as I said, Edwin. There was something in the way Edith McKindless spoke about him. There was a sort of exasperation, a sort of despair that her precious son was not quite kosher, a bit of a wide boy."

"Anything else, Mrs Minto?"

"No, not really. Oh, just that the man, his father, Ronald McKindless, when he was waving and shouting to me, it felt as if he was desperate too, it was as if he realised there was something he wanted to tell Harriet. I think he wanted to sort of confess. I'm sure he was disappointed in his son too, I think. . ."

Interrupting, Mari let out a sigh of frustration:

"Well, Mrs Minto, thank you for your input. We will have this typed up and you can read it over and sign it, please. This interview is ended at eleven ten pm."

With the voice recorder switched off on her phone, she tipped her head in the direction of the door and Eric Ewing glided across and out, leaving mother and daughter alone.

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"Right Mum, thanks. To be honest, no, not all that helpful, not really. And honestly, why did you have to keep adding your flights of fancy even after I warned you? How can you possibly *know* that Edwin was a failure? According to what we know of him so far, he seems to be a moderately successful property developer. I admit it's strange he is missing but I expect he'll turn up. No, Mum, you are off on the wrong tack, inventing fantasies, as usual. Anyway, medically, you are obviously on the mend and as soon as we have solved this riddle, you will be free to go home. All you need is a good rest so resolve to enjoy it. We want you to stay here and keep a low profile until we catch whoever is behind all this."

"So, Mari, you *do* think I'm a target then?"

"Mum, think of this as a purely precautionary measure. The perpetrators do not realise you know virtually nothing of interest, but that ignorance will not protect you."

"I could try posting on *Facebook*, say I saw nothing, say I am merely an unfortunate victim caught up in a tangle of criminality that is inexplicable to me. That would let them know I'm not a threat to them, wouldn't it?"

"For *God's* sake, Mum, give over on this fantasy stuff! I absolutely forbid you to put anything on *Facebook* or to mention anything of what we have discussed here to anyone except Eric. What you've told me just now, that's information you *must* keep to yourself. Do not tell Dad or anyone else. *Never*. Remember, you are a material witness in one of the biggest cases of my life, probably one of the major crimes of the century in Scotland, and until this is all over and we have them banged up for life you must never reveal what you have just said in your statement, OK?"

"OK, Marissa Minto, off ye go lassie. Mount up on yer high hoarse and bugger aff and gie me peace. Tell Billy and the gang Ah'm fine but Ah need tae rest, OK?"

"Will do. But if you remember any *actual facts* you haven't mentioned, tell Eric and he'll let me know at once. Remember, only Eric, no one else, right?"

"Gotcha!"

CS Mari Minto swept out of the room. Rita was alone until the nurses returned. They checked her metrics, offered a sleeping pill which she refused. They adjusted the bed to the reclined position, dimmed the lights and left. Eric Ewing looked in, smiled then closed the door, withdrawing to his seat in the corridor, using his *iPad* to access the Artemis Team log at Govan to keep himself abreast of events.

Rita looked across at the window and noted the slatted blinds were *inside* the window panes.

Was the word "intervenietial", like Venetian?

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As her anger at Mari ebbed, she felt a tug of something important that she had missed. Running the whole story from the pick-up at Prestwick, she began sifting everything she had heard and seen, trying to find something to help Mari. Everything was fuzzy, half-remembered. If only she had her phone. Everything was on her phone:

What was the name of the lawyer, the woman who had prepared the legal documents for Maria Bolinchetti?

Was it Vigiletti? Or Vagilatti? Vetarrinno? Or Vitarrano?

Was it Freda? Or Freya?

Had she told Mari about her? Yes or no?

Should she remind the policeman, Dr What's-his-name?

What kind of "doctor" was he? A Doctor of Psychology, like Mari?

How secure was this hospital? Where was it? Hidden in the depths of the country? Or in an anonymous location in Glasgow, or Paisley? Would someone on the staff blab to the media in return for a secret payment? Perhaps someone whose brother or sister or partner worked for the BBC? Or would the assassin be able to infiltrate police communications and find her that way? Would they come impersonating as a nurse or a doctor? How big is this place? Is Magnus MacPherson in overall charge, the big cheese? Poor man, he seemed too soft for Mari; did he not know she was a driven woman? Maybe he was the same? Would there be a child? She was not too old at thirty-eight. But how would she cope with a child and still climb the greasy pole?

Rita's brain slowed and she felt drowsy. Letting go she drifted down into the half-world just below the surface of consciousness, her creative zone, her escape from the pressures of the world crowding in on her.

She watched herself hiding behind the taxi. The first volley had missed. The police helicopter seemed to be coming nearer but the sound was odd, more like the whirring of her sewing machine than the thud-thud she had heard earlier. She twisted round to note the time on her watch. The stream of bullets came in bursts of three. A heavy weight dropped on her, suffocating her and the blackness came again.

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Downpour

When *Ridgeway* exploded into flames, adding further confusion to the mix, it gave the media people new photo-opportunities and lines of speculation.

Redirecting their telephoto lenses, the corpse of Ronald McKindless was spotted. The gruesome sight of the small headless and blood-spattered male corpse was a godsend. At last, with these dramatic images the newshounds had something tangible to fashion into their competing theories. This footage was soon augmented by the further drama of Harriet Duffin and Rita Minto receiving first aid and CPR before being removed together in an ambulance.

The initial distant rumble of thunder from the approaching storm was followed by a loud resounding crack and a flash of sheet lightning.

Frances roused Franca:

*"Wake up! **NOW**, please. It's time to detonate Courchevel before this storm arrives to douse the flames. Franca, do it **NOW**, please. We need complete destruction."*

A further and louder crack signalled the detonation of the first of the *Courchevel* incendiary devices. This was followed by further cracks as the remaining mini-egg bombs exploded in sequence as the still dopey Franca fiddled with her phone App.

The effect gave the impression the target had been hit by mortar shells. This action set off dozens of car and home alarms in the vicinity, adding to the confusion.

At Artemis Control, the view took hold that these attacks were intended to draw the emergency services into a trap where they would be easy targets for the snipers.

Frances reassured:

"Well done Franca. Now cuddle down and go back to sleep. I'll wake you when you're needed again."

The sight of smoke and flames leaping from a third building nearby sent a segment of the media pack scurrying away to investigate. In their wake and acting on their own initiative, aware that their efforts at *Bellavista* and *Ridgeway* were futile and likely to be hampered by the risk of falling masonry, the Paisley Fire and Rescue vehicles raced en masse to *Courchevel*. However, before they could fully deploy their equipment, they were withdrawn by Artemis Control at Govan because of the assumed danger of snipers at this site also.

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The 999 switchboard was swamped with callers. On overload, the system shut down. Five minutes later, the 101-switchboard also shutdown. In the immediate aftermath, the Govan Campus switchboard re-booted, closed itself down then re-booted three times more until it began to function again in 'essential service mode' only.

(To balance budgets, these system renewals had been deferred twice. Currently, a rolling programme of partial upgrades was planned from mid-2016.)

When the ART Commander Inspector Willie McMaster and his ten-man detachment had arrived initially at the *Bellavista/Ridgeway* locus, he discovered that the Deputy OIC (DCI Avril Galloway) was off-site, following up on the explosion at *Courchevel*. In her absence, McMaster took charge and declared a quarantine of the entire area, ordering everyone to remain inside their vehicles for fear of other shootings.

There was, unfortunately, an ongoing animosity between McMaster and Galloway. This bad feeling had started two years earlier. Galloway had refused permission for the gunman to be taken down during a hostage situation, fearing collateral damage. Shortly afterwards the man had shot his wife and his three primary age children before committing suicide. The heated exchange of their views had been witnessed by several officers and one had recorded the exchange on her body camera. In a closed meeting with the Chief Constable prior to the Fatal Accident Inquiry, both senior officers had been censured. Fortunately, the FAI had returned an 'open verdict' and the potential charges against both officers had been quietly dropped.

When additional Fire and Rescue Service vehicles arrived from Greenock, they were held outside the new quarantine zone at the far end of *Glenniffer Grange* but ordered to remain at readiness.

Previously requested by Avril Galloway, two teams from Scottish Gas Networks arrived and within minutes they shut down gas supplies to the entire area around *Glenniffer Grange*, as requested. To avoid major disruption to the power network, Scottish Power teams isolated the corresponding 11,000 Volt ring main, adding to the inconvenience of many residents, already forbidden to leave their homes and now deprived of power and gas.

Following his first appraisal of the tactical situation, McMaster called up two further ART groups (from Glasgow North and Hamilton). While they were awaited, McMaster had a private person-to-person conversation with Assistant Chief Constable Ronald McCabe during which Willie requested and was granted permission to 'shoot to kill', but only if circumstances dictated this necessity, effectively leap-frogging Avril Galloway's authority.

With the area inside his quarantine perimeter effectively in lockdown, everyone settled to watch and wait.

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During this waiting period, McMaster made a quick reconnoitre of the *Courchevel* site. The complete destruction of the cottage had taken less than fifteen minutes.

Since there had been no sniper action there, he persuaded DCI Galloway that the overlooking building at *Rosemount Mansions* should remain a second priority for her interviewing team, provided the premises were first searched for snipers after which they would be sealed and given protection by a deployment of unarmed officers, as a safety precaution and window dressing for the watching media. For this exercise, McMaster agreed to provide a temporary contingent of four armed officers to act as escorts, provided their involvement was minimised and his men returned to their ART group in quick time.

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Back at the *Bellavista/Ridgeway* locus, with the full contingent of thirty ART men and women huddled under a temporary awning behind the Incident Room truck, McMaster gave them a long and detailed briefing. Using an Ordnance Survey map downloaded to a large, touchscreen tablet, he deployed them in groups of three to investigate the most likely vantage points where the assassins were thought to be hiding. With his teams ready and checked, he sent each trio out at five-minute intervals, each member darting in turn from one point of safety to another while covering each other against a possible but invisible sniper.

The quarantine zone descended into an eerie silence broken only by the popping, cracking and rumblings of walls and roofs collapsing as the remains of the two grand old buildings were consumed by flames.

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Driving her adapted and souped-up unmarked grey Honda CRV, Chief Superintendent Mari Minto returned to Bridge of Weir to take charge, arriving shortly after seven o'clock. Like Eric Ewing's Audi TT her CRV was provided by Police Scotland and fitted with an upgraded security system. Preferring to drive herself, (shunning a police driver as her rank entitled), Minto used this innocuous vehicle as a mobile office, with many reference files and DVDs secured in a lockbox bolted down in the boot. When seated in the rear of the vehicle with one of the two other rear seats folded flat, this lockbox was accessed directly from her 'desk'.

With Galloway beside her in the front passenger seat and McMaster in the rear at her desk seat, Mari listened to their reports, asking for detail as required. When she was satisfied, she responded:

"Well done, both of you. Excellent teamwork too, which I will note to your files in due course. Good to see we are all pulling together, as we must. Yes, a good start. Now, our

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overriding priority is to gain access to the grounds of *Bellavista* to search for my mother's phone. We must, of course, make sure, within reason, that it is safe to send our people in to search for it. My mother claims she recorded Marco Bolinchetti being interviewed by Kez Goldau and that he mentioned Camorra involvement. Eric Ewing is currently typing it up and will allow both of you access to read it after this meeting. However, this witness remains traumatised and her recall is patchy. I must emphasise at this stage her testimony is heavily spotted with speculation and must **not**, repeat **not** go beyond the confines of this vehicle. Apart from Eric Ewing, we are the only three people who know about my mother's assertions. If word gets out to the media about this, I will know where to start looking for a source. Now, please acknowledge this direct instruction. Do I have your promise?"

The pair replied in unison: "Yes, Ma'am."

"And you both know my mother's history so that promise is for her too, as well as for my father. So, if this phone of hers can be found, even if its damaged, we might be able to retrieve the recording App data and check out her statement and, hopefully, fill in any blanks in her memory. One way or another this information could be absolutely crucially important. As soon as we can get people in and around *Bellavista*, the better. So, this is an annotated print out from the OS download with my best guess of where she made her escape from the first sniper or snipers who shot Kez, Alec Thom and Bolinchetti. You'll see she ran across the lawn, where she said she tumbled, so that would be the best place to start looking, right?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Galloway. "May I take a snap of this to give to the people who get the job of searching?"

"Yes, but keep the circulation to a minimum, please. We do NOT want this appearing in the media, right?"

"Yes, Ma'am, need to know only. And I was thinking, from a sniper angle, so to speak, this heavy rain coming in should help. What I mean is the storm will definitely reduce visibility, wouldn't it, Willie?"

"Spot on Avril. Look, Ma'am, give me some time, please. I want to check progress with my people, move them into position to provide best cover for the search area. When the storm comes through, I'm fairly sure we should be able to give you the go ahead for a small search team to go in, with the proviso whoever volunteers accepts they are at risk until we apprehend the shooter or have definite proof they have scarpered. One thing we do know about them is they are good. Very, very good."

"Yes, of course Willie but it's the usual circular argument, right? We need the phone to get the data that could lead us to the snipers or to their controlling influence, right?"

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"Yes, Ma'am. We'll do our best for you, right Avril?"

"Yes. And Ma'am, I think I know the very person to do this search. I'll speak to her team leader and get them both bought into it. Leave it to me."

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The light breeze was still warm but heavy and humid. Intermittent flashes of sheet lightning and distant rumblings of thunder heralded the approaching summer storm which had been building all day from the southwest.

Undeterred by the actions of humans, competing blackbirds continued to pour out their personalised arias while chaffinches defiantly trilled their repetitive clarions. In the background, hidden deep inside hedges, house sparrows added their argumentative chirruping. Overhead, swallows, swifts and house martins swooped, dived and swerved nonchalantly after insects. On the ground, ever-curious families of jackdaws and magpies and their stubby tailed fledglings hopped and pecked around the vehicles, checking for food or trinkets.

Hours ticked by while everyone waited for an all clear from Willie McMaster and his now invisible ART trios.

As night approached, the Sun dipped behind dark clouds over Arran, making the crime scene gloomy. Around one o'clock in the morning as the last of the early summer light faded, the first icy cold drops of slushy rain began to fall. Within minutes it was hammering down in angry gusts finally dowsing the embers at *Bellavista* and *Ridgeway*.

With heavy cloud and torrential rain established and because there had been no further shootings since mid-afternoon, Mari Minto had eventually persuaded a reluctant Willie McMaster to declare the incident site 'safe and secure' sufficient to allow the search for the mobile phone to begin. However, the ART Commander had insisted only the absolute minimum number of 'persons at risk' be deployed. Unseen, his groups continued to probe for snipers even though most people believed they had long ago left the scene.

The Fire and Rescue Services were not allowed to participate. The backup contingents from Glasgow were released to return to normal duties although the Paisley crews were ordered to remain on standby.

The hunt for clues, anything which might yield fingerprints or DNA to compare with databases was seen as paramount. After a delay to make sure the searchers were fully aware of the dangers, volunteers were selected.

The priority was to examine the scene of the shootings on the patio behind *Bellavista*, an area now covered with fallen masonry and charred timbers and made dangerous by the risk of further falls from the remains of the weakened structure. According to the

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report from Mrs Rita Minto, somewhere under this rubble lay the bodies of Kez Goldau, Alec Thom and Marco Bolinchetti.

Because of the continuing perceived risk of snipers and following a detailed risk assessment by DCI Galloway and her deputy Sergeant Emma Vernon, a small volunteer group of two police officers and two SOCO technicians was selected. Exposed, operating under arc lights while being recorded remotely from a safe distance, this brave team of four was sent to investigate the rear patio area, with their first priority as Kez Goldau's handbag and with it, her mobile phone and notebook.

Throughout this initial search Mari Minto, Avril Galloway and Willie McMaster watched on a monitor in the Incident Room truck, gradually relaxing as the minutes became an hour and the team were not attacked by sniper fire.

Midway through the second hour, as the damaged structure cooled in the downpour, a further section of the rear wall collapsed suddenly and spectacularly.

After this near miss, Chief Superintendent Minto was forced to suspend the patio search until a fuller risk assessment could be made in daylight by a qualified Structural Engineer but only when the site could be declared free of possible attacked by sniper fire.

It seemed likely that the remaining structure would require to be demolished prior to a detailed SOCO investigation, adding further delay and frustration.

The search team moved on to their second priority, Rita's missing phone.

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Stalemate

From Bridge of Weir, Mari had returned to the *Nuffield* to try again with her mother. Ahead of this journey, she had spoken to Magnus on the phone who had checked with the nursing team. Rita was reported as 'all clear', sleeping soundly. Magnus had granted Mari permission, provided her mother was allowed to waken naturally, without undue pressure, warning her of his fear that the shock of being wakened suddenly might initiate a trauma attack in his patient.

However, subdued by her medication, Rita Minto refused to respond to Mari's repeated whispered requests:

"Mum, Mari here. I need to ask you a few questions, please."

After trying for twenty minutes, she left Eric Ewing sitting with her mother, waiting for her to waken naturally.

Once again, situation stalemate.

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Sitting in her CRV 'office' parked across from the *Nuffield* beside the impressive church, Mari Minto felt shivery and ran the engine to get some heat into the car. The dash display was 04:57. The rain was pounding down making visibility close to zero.

After the failed second interview attempt, it had taken ages to convince her father and the others to leave and go home, all the while fending off their questions with evasive answers and warning them forcibly and repeatedly to keep shtum and post nothing on social media or respond to any calls from friends over the days ahead. Then, before saying goodbye, she had again warned them about the dangers of spoiling or weakening a potentially successful prosecution by tainting the evidence trail with unfounded speculation.

Alone again in the CRV, she checked her emails from the Artemis Team in Govan.

Within the last hour it had been certified that the white van stolen from the Ferguslie Park compound and found at the tractor collision was the same vehicle which had caused the M8 chaos. However, the van driver, believed to be a drug addict called Gordon Tennant was still missing. Although he was of crucial interest, it was considered highly unlikely he was one of the shooters at *Bellavista* and *Ridgeway*. Indeed, it remained a possibility Tennant had been and may still be a target.

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Reviewing her 'performance', her mind ranged back to the previous evening. Shortly after nine o'clock, without any suspects in prospect and with no clear motive to help her spin credible answers, Mari Minto had been in the Media Centre at Govan, seated alongside Assistant Chief Constable Malcolm Napier, her line manager.

During her grilling as OIC of the Bridge of Weir massacre and questioned about the prior M8 incidents, she had been forced to fend off the barrage of media questions with anodyne responses, steering a course through the grilling, knowing it would soon end because of the approaching deadline of the ten o'clock television and radio news broadcasts and by the imperative of the approaching deadline to submit pieces to editors for the morning newspapers currently on hold, waiting to be printed.

Mari was weary, heavy limbed. Because of the prospect of the promotion board, she had not slept well on the previous evening, eventually resorting in the early hours to one of the tiny blue sleeping pills Magnus had supplied. Now, to counter her tiredness, she drank a black coffee from a drinks flask and swallowed one of the green herbal pills from the foil pack. She and Magnus both used these organic vitamin supplements to help them in their busy lives and as a booster ahead of energetic sex.

When she had been appointed as OIC of the Bridge of Weir massacre, Mari Minto had chosen to name her investigation as 'Operation Artemis', naming it after the Greek Goddess of the Hunt, the twin sister of Apollo. It was a designation she had been saving for a big one.

The caffeine and organic herbal pill took effect. She felt the expected rush: her mind was racing, competing questions popping and fizzing:

Was she dealing with two different groups, rivals?

Had the villas been destroyed because they had been drugs warehouses?

Could the Camorra or Mafia be involved, as her mother claimed?

Was it possible, as her mother had suggested, that Edith McKindless had been shot in the head causing her to stumble into the path of the vehicle which had braked and swerved while trying to miss her?

Was it the start of a grand takeover move by the Serbs?

From the CRV she called her Artemis Team at Govan for an update, thankful there had been no more shootings or arson attacks.

DS Dan Spiller, head of her media monitoring group relayed the gist of the reporting from the local and national news outlets. In the absence of firm evidence, media speculation had risen to dizzy heights:

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It was a terror plot, a disaffected group from Bradford.

It was a war between dissident groups from Northern Ireland, the New UVF and the New PIRA, a conflict from Belfast which had spilled over to the mainland.

It was a pathological maniac, a weapons freak, escaped from a mental hospital, possibly from Carstairs, or maybe somewhere in England or even Norway.

It was a drug-fuelled frenzy, part of a turf war with the Drugs Barons of Paisley's Ferguslie Park being targeted by the Drugs Barons of Glasgow's Easterhouse Estate.

It was the Mafia, a vendetta, drawn to the home of Maria Bolinchetti and her inner circle for revenge.

Spiller advised that a TV, radio and Facebook appeal by Police Scotland managed from the Crime Campus at Gartcosh had attracted hundreds of wild accusations and suggestions but nothing useful so far.

The Artemis duty night shift manager DI Cammy Miller gave her a synopsis of what had been achieved on the ground at Bridge of Weir.

Mari was disappointed to learn that police door-to-door interviews combined with massive media attention had resulted in near panic. Within hours of the shootings and arson attacks, there had been a steady exodus as Bridge of Weir residents opting to take refuge in their holiday homes on Arran, the East Nuke of Fife or decanting to luxury hotels such as Turnberry, Gleneagles, Dunblane Hydro or the like. Mari would have liked to be able to restrain them, keep them in their homes but she knew this was both impolitic and impossible. She must accept their departure with good grace, even though it was a further source of disruption. These people were rich and connected and would not miss any opportunity to have their say and, regardless of the outcome, the local and national press would inevitably be filled with negative comments of the actions of the Police and Emergency Services and their 'failure to protect and preserve'. And, with so many houses now unoccupied, there was the added risk of opportunistic burglaries.

It was time to visit Bridge of Weir again.

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Legwork

The wide street separating the ruins of *Bellavista* and *Ridgeway* was jam-packed with lines of support vehicles, their lights winking and strobing lazily. Artemis was the largest operation Police Scotland had mounted in the last few years and there was still a palpable buzz, albeit subdued by the downpour. Mari dared to hope that the attackers had fled leaving it to her team to hunt for clues, piece together the jigsaw and begin the pursuit to track them down.

The only positive was that the deluge from the storm had diminished the attending media pack to a mere handful, all sheltered in their cars and minivans. When the storm passed, Minto intended to request a helicopter with heat seeking equipment to scour the area to be sure there were no hidden corpses or terrain anomalies in the vicinity which might lead to interred bodies. If the sniper was a lone wolf and already a full-blown psychopath, these recent shootings might lead to the discovery of dozens of previous victims buried in the area.

The road was now blocked off at both ends, entry and exit for remaining residents controlled by manned roadblocks - a case of bolting the stable door far too late, the online media had claimed.

As the investigative machine rolled forwards without making noticeable progress, the tension between the Police and the media had risen several notches. The luckier ones who had been early to the scene, had protested at being moved and were now corralled at the far end of *Gleniffer Grange* beside the *Paisley Fire and Rescue* vehicles and well beyond the access lanes to the rear of the two properties currently being searched for clues.

The zone they had once occupied was now home to a group of police domestic support wagons purveying teas, coffees, juices, water, hot filled rolls and chilled wraps. There was also a row of ten unisex portaloos.

On the pretext of encouraging her troops by demonstrating a 'visible presence', CS Minto made visits to both *Ridgeway* and *Bellavista* where search teams were picking through the soggy remains around the peripheries of the ruins and around their grounds, hoping to find anything which might lead them to the attackers about whom nothing was yet known.

In the continuing downpour and going through the motions unenthusiastically, old hands were thinking their overtime was hard-earned. Mari knew from experience not to overdo

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this 'encouragement' and soon left those doing this boring but necessary legwork to go about their business under *Avril Galloway* and her deputy *Emma Vernon*.

After an hour or so at *Bridge of Weir*, *Minto* relocated to *Govan Campus* to defend her corner and make sure her authority was not undermined or diluted. She also needed to garner information of the big picture including progress on the *M8* incident and the death of the woman driver in the *Maserati*. She hoped for some clue on the whereabouts of the missing driver from the white van and tractor collision. Also, par for the course, there would be political rumblings to understand, deal with and resolve before settling to prepare for the media update session scheduled for eleven o'clock, ahead of the mid-day news bulletins.

From her rain spattered office window at *Govan*, she saw the sky lightening and realised *Project Artemis* was now almost at the end of day one with a total of twelve deaths not counting the missing van driver and *Edwin McKindless*: and with no sign of a breakthrough.

On a notepad, she jotted the victims down in approximate time order:

Dead:

Maria Bolinchetti, former opera singer, owner of *Bellavista*. Accidental death or assassination? Victim of arson. Postmortem results awaited.

Mrs Angela Simpson, driver of the *Maserati*, tourist guide. PM results awaited. Resident at *Courchevel* in *Bridge of Weir* (renting). Victim of arson attack. Accident or sniper assassination?

John Buchanan, 28, Royal Mail delivery driver, dead at the *M8*, hit by the stolen white van. Married with one child aged two years. No alcohol or illegal drugs in corpse.

Mrs Gail Parker, 37, Nursing Sister dead at *M8*, heading for *QUEH*. Divorced, two children, boy aged 7, girl aged 3. No illegal drugs in corpse. Minor trace of alcohol, below legal limit.

Mr Abdul Khatun, 43, Radiotherapy Technician, heading for *Beatson Clinic* at *Gartnavel Hospital*. Married with three children all girls, ages 12, 10 and 8. Died at *QUEH* from massive brain damage two hours after arrival at *A&E*. No alcohol or illegal drugs in corpse.

Mrs Edith McKindless, registered owner of *Ridgeway*. Accident? Assassination? Victim of arson. PM results awaited.

Robbie Falconer, tractor driver, beef farmer. Accidental death, collision. No criminal record. Family man, wife and four children. Captain of his Rugby Club. No drugs connections. Incinerated remains are beyond PM investigation.

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Marco Bolinchetti, nephew of Maria Bolinchetti. Dentist? Footballer? From Turin? Sniper assassination? (99% certain). No corpse yet.

Sergeant Keziah Goldau, sniper assassination? (99% certain). No corpse yet.

PC Alec Thom, sniper assassination? (99% certain). No corpse yet.

Ronald McKindless, retired orthopaedic surgeon, husband of Edith. Sniper assassination. PM results awaited.

PC Harriet Duffin (probationer). Sniper assassination. PM results awaited.

Missing:

The missing driver seems almost certainly to be Gordon (Gordy) Tennant(75%?). Unemployed, drug addict, Ferguslie Park. Again, almost certainly driver of stolen M8 white van (75%?). Tennant raised in Bridge of Weir until sent to prison as a teenager.

Edwin McKindless, son of Edith and Ronald. Man of Straw? Gay? No drugs record. Property Developer and Green Energy enthusiast. World traveller (!!?) China many times. Drugs Courier or Fixer? Linked to Maria Bolinchetti and *Bellavista*?

Mari closed her eyes as her brain whirled ahead:

Oh God Mum, I hope you are not fantasising and that your phone does have proof of Camorra involvement. Camorra means drugs and that might mean the Serbs. At the very least Camorra involvement might help me justify the monies that are being expended on my say-so.

But where do the Serbs fit in? Is Gordy Tennant the link? Or Edwin McKindless?

Or are they in this together, employed by or coerced into a new partnership by the Serbs?

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At Mari Minto's direction, the case of the 'simple' hit and run of Edith McKindless had now been formally included in the wider investigation, re-classified as a potential assassination.

The spot where Edith's corpse had been found was brightly lit and covered by a large tent to preserve the locus. The area under the tent was being meticulously rechecked under the direction of a more experienced team of SOCOs led by Marian Michelson.

This was now the third SOCO investigation of this locus.

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At the specific direction of CS Minto, they were hoping for traces of bullets or ricochet indentations showing the deceased had been shot prior to the hit-and-run by a vehicle. Although Marian Michelson thought this scenario to be unlikely, she had not shared her opinion with The Shredder as it seemed clear the high-flying CS Minto was keen to have the hit-and-run tied into her Project Artemis hunt for the shooters. Privately, Marian had emphasised to her team they should concentrate looking for paint flakes or plastic headlight lens fragments which might be used to certify if the van which had rammed the tractor was the same vehicle which had struck Edith. Finding bullets or ricochet marks would be a bonus.

From the SOCO team who had checked the burnt-out van and tractor, a partial VIN had been recovered which pointed to the van as one that had been stolen from a yard in Ferguslie Park. Marian noted from the record that neither van had been eyeballed hitting Edith making it a possibility that two separate vehicles could be involved. Even though it was an unlikely scenario, it must not be excluded at this stage.

If she found anything, it would require to be compared with the many vehicles hit by the Ferguslie Park van at the M8 and nearby, information Michelson and her team had collected on the previous day when she was the lead SOCO at the death of the woman in the sports car near the M8 slip road at St James Interchange. When concluding that investigation, she had been further assigned to lead on the myriad of forensic checks required to damaged vehicles hit by the mystery white van.

Marion had initially thought it was highly unlikely these M8 events were linked to the shootings at Bridge of Weir but now agreed her overlapping forensic investigations were almost certainly linked. Three incidents, including the tractor incident and so many tragic deaths must surely be linked. The Shredder would have a hard task unravelling this one.

As Marian inched forward to start on a new patch of roadway, the rain began to ease. Her back was aching, her knees too. Some SOCO team leaders did not muck in but that was not her style. Raising her head to check on the others, she could see that in about an hour they would have finished. Only then would she be able to dismiss them before returning to her vehicle to prepare her report for the Artemis Team in Govan. With her report lodged, she would deliver her digital images and physical samples to her waiting lab team before heading for a bath and bed. Running in the back of her mind was the thought that there would be months of detailed work ahead to satisfy the Procurator Fiscals' Office, where her son Keith was a rising star.

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Dilemma

By seven o'clock on the morning after the Bridge of Weir massacre, Mr Adam Polwarth, Scotland's most senior forensic pathologist, was at the police mortuary in Glasgow, meticulously examining the corpses of Maria Bolinchetti and Edith and Ronald McKindless. From his briefing, he knew these were persons of substance whose grand houses had been destroyed by arson attacks.

He had already checked the 'sparse remains' of the Maserati woman from the M8 incident, concluding nothing of significance could be established from these roadside scrapings apart from her DNA which would be sent to the NHS medical records database for checking. He had been told the VIN number from her sports car suggested she was probably a widow called Mrs Angela Simpson, the occupant of the third house in Bridge of Weir which had been destroyed by an arson attack.

Polwarth, a bachelor now in his mid-fifties, had admitted to his closest friends that he found most women, even educated ones, to be 'confusing and illogical in their thinking'. When first contacted by Control in Glasgow the previous evening, he had been at Fettes College Old Boys' Bridge Club. Prickly and self-important, he had been reluctant to perform these autopsies, eventually persuaded by a personal request from the Chief Constable, Sir James McFarlane, a man he knew quite well from their golf duels at Gullane.

Polwarth had been mollified to some extent when he learned he was part of a full-scale emergency exercise supported by a laboratory team of medical forensic scientists led by the equally gaunt and precise Dr Karen Eynon.

Like Polwarth, Eynon and her team had been summoned from their homes and were at hand, ready to subject the organs and fluids of the three elderly people to every test the pair might suggest, to establish, if possible, precisely how they had died. Additionally, as was always necessary in such cases, they must test to confirm or otherwise if these corpses contained illegal drugs or if they were suffering from a major illness, such as heart disease or cancer, findings which would be cross-checked with their NHS medical records.

Earlier, for completeness, Polwarth and Eynon had reviewed in detail the SOCO findings, digital photographs and video evidence of the remains of the victims at the multiple crime scenes on the M8, jointly agreeing their interim verdict:

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"These records from the M8 fatalities and the dash cam data of the subsequent bizarre behaviour of the white van driver are unlikely to yield any significant forensic or pathological information in relation to the three Bridge of Weir deaths."

From the sealed viewing gallery, watching and listening to the dialogue between Polwarth and Eynon as they worked on the corpses of the three elderly people, Mari Minto was aware of the pressure building. As OIC, she shuddered at the expenditure which Project Artemis was racking up, monies she would be called upon to justify. Her mind leapt ahead to a few months hence when, regardless of the outcome of her investigation, she would be subjected to an aggressive Project Resource Expenditure Audit (PREA), as was the norm in modern policing.

Running over and over in Mari's mind were the deaths known to be caused by the snipers, deaths for which she had no solid clues to lead her to the perpetrators.

Hoping for a flash of inspiration, she stared down at her list of names and shuddered.

Mum could have been on this list.

If that had happened, I would have been removed from the biggest case of my career.

Oh God, forgive me for that thought.

Earlier, on the assumption that Edith had been hit by the van which had crashed into the tractor, it had been agreed Minto would assume overall control of the investigation into the rampage on the M8 prior to the Bridge of Weir incidents.

Where had the van driver gone?

The dog teams had drawn a blank. Because of the risk of snipers, they had not made a start until mid-afternoon when the trail was already cold. Further, they did not have a trace smell to follow as the white van was a burn-out. Added to this, the network of paths they searched were well-used by dog walkers and their doggy smells had distracted the police dogs from their ill-defined tasks. At midnight, with the onset of the storm, Mari has been forced to call them off. After the deluge, any traces of the van driver would have been washed away.

Other disturbing thoughts hovered in the back of her mind.

Could there possibly be another white van involved?

If Edith was also a victim of a shooting, this would make five victims shot by sniper fire.

Edwin McKindless was missing with no responses to either of his mobile phones and no signs that his house in Houston had been occupied in recent days.

Was the younger McKindless also a victim?

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If so, had he been hiding in either of the grand houses and burned alive?

Were there other bodies not yet discovered?

The online research feedback completed so far suggested that none of the people killed or missing had any police or other negative records sullyng their reputations. Ditto regarding their NHS medical records, no negatives.

Operation Artemis was developing into a nightmare, one that could make or break her.

Mari thought back to how she had got caught up in it all. Had her mother not called from the scene, Mari would not have pressed for the assignment. Back then Control had advised the Bridge of Weir 'hit-and-run' was almost certainly linked to the white van stolen from Ferguslie Park, a well-known drug hotspot and close to Bridge of Weir. It was this proximity which made Mari almost certain that drugs were involved in some shape or form. Re-running her memory of that telephone call from her distressed mother, Mari now thought the sight of Edith's corpse might well have pushed her mother over the edge again.

Did Mum really witness Kez and Bolinchetti being shot?

If she was needed in court at a future time, due to her medical history, she would be a tainted witness.

Proof was the problem, and Mari Minto knew from experience not to be tempted into running the drugs theme as the only strand of her enquiry. She must encourage and drive her Artemis Team in Govan to keep focussed on the histories of all the victims, trying to root out their dark secrets and uncover a loose end to tug at, something which would help her unravel the tangle and lead her to the culprits.

Given the timeline of events, there must be more than one person involved in the killings.

Was it indeed a 'local' turf war?

Had one or both sides hired in professional hit squads?

Had it started with the death of Maria Bolinchetti?

Had this also led to the death of her nephew, Marco Bolinchetti?

Could the Camorra or Mafia be involved?

The key was her mother and what she had recorded on her mobile phone.

Mari Minto had seen and heard enough of the slow and meticulous deliberations of Polwarth and Eynon.

She must find a place to settle and think.

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She checked her watch: 08:08.

Less than ten minutes away, the unoccupied unit at Hillington Industrial Estate would be ideal.

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Elli and Emma

It was a little after sunrise on the morning following the massacre.

Hidden above a thinning layer of cloud, the sun was climbing steeply, its watery light seeping through as darkness began to change to a damp murky gloom. The wind dropped. High pressure was building to the southwest, pushing the remaining clouds eastward, bringing a return of the previous good weather. As the air temperature rose, an eerie layer of mist formed above the wet grass in front of *Bellavista*.

In the *Doblo*, parked at her favoured spot beside the gate at the farm track, Franca was frustrated, jittery from lack of sleep and too many *Greenies*. Mentally, she was locked in a 'tunnel', focussed solely on the visor screen audio and video feeds from the *Peekaboo* microphone locked on to the heat signature of the police officer who was searching for the lost mobile phone. All thought of Edwin's house in Houston had been forgotten.

Although both drone cameras were capable of operating using infra-red heat sensors, she was not proficient in this mode. When the rain stopped, she had taken the opportunity of the remaining dark hours and poor visibility to land both drones and refit them with gear-train replacement packs before parking them directly above *Bellavista* at 3,000 metres, waiting for the weather to improve.

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PC Elaine (Elli) Chisholm was approximately mid-way between the burnt-out ruins of *Bellavista* and the entrance to the driveway at the foot of the hill, searching the designated taped area inside the two-hundred-metre long by three-metre-wide corridor, the informal pathway it was believed Rita Minto had used to escape the shooters.

Five hours into her painstaking search, the toe of her Wellington boot made light contact with something solid.

Stooping, she put down her probe lance then placed the powerful handheld lantern near to where her foot had been. Focussing her headtorch beam, she felt for the object with her latex gloved hands. Parting and teasing the mesh of long grass, she retrieved a mobile phone, hoping it was the one she had been looking for, the one which Mrs Minto had dropped while fleeing from the scene of the initial shooting at the rear of the house, before the arson attack.

As she placed a numbered flag to mark the location of the phone, a twinkle reflected from a step ahead. Leaning closer she found a fine silver chain buried deeply in the

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undergrowth. Lifting it carefully she saw it was broken. Looped on the chain was a pendant with two entwined silver hearts with a tiny star shaped diamond at the junction. As the trinket turned on its chain, the diamond glinted, reflecting light from her headtorch.

Is this Mrs Minto's?

Reaching forward to place a second marker flag, rain seeped down the back of her neck. Turning her head away from her second prize, she sneezed and shivered, feeling too miserable to be anything other than relieved. The last thing she needed was another summer cold on top of her hay fever.

Fishing out her personal phone, she took photographs of both objects and their flagged locations, intending to use the phone timings when she wrote up her report in her notebook later, in the dry. Sweeping the lantern beam, she realised that her flags were in a zone where the grasses and flowers were partially flattened and that there was a large skid mark which had created a deep gouge.

This must be where she fell.

On her phone, she switched to video to record what she was seeing. Then with her head torch in spot mode, she examined the Minto phone and saw it was badly damaged, its screen cracked and the rear cover loose.

Pressing the comms button on her police radio, she reported to the Incident Room in the truck parked in the wide street below.

"PC Chisholm here. I've found a damaged mobile phone. It's an *iPhone*. The screen is cracked and it's soaked through. I've also found a necklace, the chain is broken but the diamond intact. It seems highly likely these items belong to Mrs Rita Minto."

"Hi Elli, Penny Pierce here. Can you see the ID number on the phone?"

Penny was a comms support technician, not a police officer.

"Yeah, here it comes."

Elli read the number and Penny read it back to her as a check.

"Excellent! I've sent your findings on to the Artemis Team at Govan. I'll give Sergeant Vernon the heads up."

Elli fished out two Ziplock transparent evidence pouches, placed the phone and necklace inside them and used a waterproof pen to note the time and location flag numbers, adding her personal details to establish a chain of evidence sequence.

The twenty-seven-year-old police officer turned to look up towards the floodlights at the remains of the house and then back to the driveway entrance at the foot of the

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slope. Emma Vernon waved as she started up the narrow muddy path which fringed the gravel driveway. The taller woman was carrying a basket of fluorescent plastic stepping plats. When she was directly opposite Elli, Emma placed a marker flag then picked her way carefully across to the taped corridor by placing a line of plats ahead of her to preserve the locus.

As she arrived at Elli's side, Emma's radio crackled to life.

"Sergeant Vernon, Penny Pierce here. Govan Area Control have received confirmation that the *iPhone* is registered to Mrs Rita Minto. No info yet on the necklace. Shall I put a call out to Chief Superintendent Minto?"

"No, Penny, leave CS Minto to me and note in the log I'm sending PC Chisholm down with this evidence. Get a car to take her to Govan Campus and pre-warn the lab boffins we need their undivided attention to see what we can get from the Minto *iPhone*."

"Right on it sergeant."

Elli sneezed and fumbled for a tissue from her rucksack.

"Oh honey, you look as white as a sheet, you're probably hypothermic. When did you last have a break?"

"I don't know. About one o'clock, I think, just after we were banned from searching the patio area."

"God, Elli, I'm so sorry it had to be you up here alone. When I heard you'd volunteered, I was scared witless you might be the next target for the shooters."

"No worries, Emm, I lost track of time too. And I know the ART squads are out there somewhere, at the ready, which is actually quite reassuring."

"Sorry Elli, I was in charge at *Ridgeway*. We got the body of Ronald McKindless off to the morgue for examination. You probably got missed in the changeover at three o'clock when the search teams were refreshed. I know I should have checked. *Mia culpa*."

"No, they did ask if I wanted to stand down but I know how important it is for your next promotion board and well, I did it, Emma, didn't I?"

"Yes, sweetie, you did. Great work, thanks. Look, here's what you must do. After you deliver this evidence to Govan, sign-off on my authority and go straight to my place and have a hot chocolate and a cheesy toasty, turn on the electric over-blanket, have a hot shower and a Lemsip and go straight to bed, OK? And switch off your mobile as soon as you leave Govan, OK? I'll join you when I'm clear here although it might be a while."

"Thanks, Emm, you're right, I am feeling a bit woozy."

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"Right, leave me the search kit pouch and I'll keep looking until I get a replacement searcher in case there's anything else around worth finding. Good girl, off you go."

"See you later alligator. Love you Emma." said Elli.

"Love you back Elli," replied Emma, forming a sweetheart kiss with her lips. They had been a secret couple for nearly two years.

Elli placed the two evidence pouches in her rucksack, checked it was zipped, then picked her way back across the stepping plats. Reaching the muddy path, she trudged downhill, already looking forward to slipping under Emma's duvet.

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After signing out from the scene of crime, Elli waited in the Incident Room truck for transport to be provided. She found a seat out of sight in a corner beside an electric heater where she sipped from a mug of weak, milky, sugary tea. Leaning her head against the partition, she allowed the burble of radio chatter to wash over her while hoping that the data on the *iPhone* was retrievable. Although it was supposed to be a secret, the word was it contained crucial evidence and that this was the reason Rita Minto had been targeted by the Camorra assassination squad who had been waging a turf war over drugs.

Her eyes felt heavy. Putting her mug down, she slipped over into a dwam, revisiting a favourite memory.

In her time off, Elli loved roaming the hills, wild camping with Emma. Although she had a degree in Biology, her interest in wildflowers was new. At Emma's suggestion, Elli had chosen to focus on wild orchids, an idea which had prompted a trip to Oronsay in search of the ultra-rare Irish Lady's Tresses, a trip which had unleashed their passion.

In theory, in the ethos of Police Scotland, same sex relationships were entirely acceptable. However, the two women had been careful to keep their friendship secret to avoid the possibility of one or other being re-assigned to a different division, a move deemed to be necessary to 'preserve their professional status', an outcome that would have risked them being on different shift patterns, wrecking their social lives, just as it often did for heterosexual couples in the force.

After what seemed like seconds, Penny Pierce rose and came over.

"Elli, would you be alright with a taxi to take you to Govan Campus? Control say they are stretched to breaking point on resources and although we have lots of vehicles, we have no spare drivers."

"Hey, I've just remembered. I have my own car at the end of the road. I was going off shift from typing up the M8 follow up interviews when I got the shout from Control. I was still toggled up, so I came direct."

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"Right, great Elli. That's a big help. So, I'll let Govan Campus know you're on your way, shall I? At least the rain has stopped and look, the sun's coming through again. I'll give them an ETA of five after seven. That gives you just over half an hour, OK?"

"Yes, sign me out will you, please."

"Sure. I'm off duty myself at eight, looking forward to a nice hot bath and a big Gin smoothie."

"What? Gin for breakfast?"

"Just dreaming, Elli, just dreaming. You know - 'You gotta have a dream', right? Like that film. Was it 'Pretty Woman'?"

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Lying in Wait

PC Elaine Chisholm eased her car passed the media pack gathered around the commercial chuck wagon on *Glennifer Grange* and made her way towards the M8 and Govan Campus. The feeder roads were slick with rain but empty of traffic and she pressed down on the accelerator. Her *Golf Cabriolet* soft-top was two-months old and still had its new car smell. She was enjoying the novelty of the extra power, a marked step up from her previous ancient *Fiat 500*. Emma had helped her buy it as a special eighteen-month anniversary present to mark their commitment to each other. In return, Elli had given Emma a miniature French bulldog pup and together they had eventually decided to call her *Anouk*, after the little girl in the film *Chocolat*.

Elli's movements were being watched from above.

Franca, breakfasting on her last banana and a mug of strong coffee and further boosted by another two *Greenies* and a can of *Red Bull*, was seated at the *DKS Control Console* in the *Fiat Doblo*. Above her, the drone comms array was masked inside a tough, light-weight plastic sphere slightly larger than a full-sized soccer ball. The sphere was supported by a five-metre telescopic rod protruding from a weatherproofed hatch in the roof of the van.

To a casual observer, this setup seemed in keeping with the many other comms dishes and paraphernalia used by the media pack a few miles away at *Glennifer Grange*. With its tinted windscreen and side and rear windows of smoked glass, to a more curious observer the off-white *Fiat Doblo* might have seemed rather more sinister.

Behind the mesh screen which separated the rear payload area from the driver's cab, she could look out through the darkened mirrored glass windows, giving Franca an all-round one-way view out to her surrounding environment. With the driver's compartment empty, it seemed as if the van was unmanned. However, close to, a low hum could be heard caused by the auxiliary propane-fuelled generator which provided stabilised power for the *DKS* electronics and the back-up high-definition LED screen used to provide her with a silent mirrored 3-D image integrated from data gathered by the lenses on both drones. This screen gave a more complete and less claustrophobic view than that provided by the headset visor which she used mainly when operating the Kill Drone.

For slow moving targets such as pedestrians, runners or cyclists, the *Drone Kill System* could sight and kill from an altitude of up to 1,000 metres in favourable weather conditions, day or night. Targets moving at higher speeds required the drones to be flown at a lower altitude. Coated with a special paint, above 150 metres these drones were

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difficult to spot with the human eye, even in bright daylight. In darkness, they were completely invisible.

Clear of Bridge of Weir on a secondary road and heading for the M8, Elli put her foot down, enjoying the thrill of speed, defying her police driver training by ignoring the wet road shining like a ribbon of silver from the low Sun almost directly ahead, causing her to stray across the centre of the road. Fortunately for Elli, at this early hour the road was empty of other vehicles.

Wearing her visor, Franca eased the Kill Drone down until it was 200 metres above the Golf and 300 metres distant. Concentrating fiercely, the Sicilian acquired her target with the Kill Drone sighting algorithm 'locked' on the front left wheel with the 'ready' icon flashing.

As the Golf Cabriolet swung into the chosen left-hand bend, the drone assassin pressed down sharply with her thumb on the joystick of the hand-held controller, releasing a salvo of three ultra-high-velocity pea-sized missiles which hurtled at just below Mach speed, their heat-resistant pyro-glass formers designed to fragment to dust-sized particles on impact, leaving only microscopic remains as evidence.

As her Golf entered the bend, the steering wheel jerked in Elli's hands. She panicked, stamping hard on the brake pedal while reaching for the gearstick. From that instant, with the other tyres lacking grip on the wet surface, the Golf's sophisticated inbuilt technology fought to regain stability and control, compromised by the conflicting signals generated by the young policewoman as she hauled wildly at the unresponsive steering wheel.

Aquaplaning, the car became airborne, ripping through a wire mesh fence and sailing out into space high above a field of startled cows causing them to stampede, seeking safety. As it nose-dived, it hit the far bank of a muddy ditch which acted as a cushion. Impelled by its momentum, the vehicle tumbled head over heels four times before coming to a halt resting on its roof, facing back towards the hole in the fence high above the steep embankment and the wide ditch running full of muddy brown water from the recent rains.

During the potentially fatal incident, the Golf's comprehensive in-car safety system functioned as per design, deploying seat-belt tightening, firing multiple airbags and exploding the safety roll bar into position. In parallel the sophisticated onboard vehicle management system, sensing the car spinning through the air, the algorithm ignored the driver's instructions sensed from the steering wheel and pedals. On the assumption that the car's tyres were in contact with terra firma, the algorithm simultaneously reset braking, suspension and steering equipment as it attempted to reassert control. However, none of these potentially beneficial interventive actions had any effect on the flying vehicle.

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Eventually, sensing the *Golf* was inverted and at rest, the safety management system shut down the engine and isolated the fuel circuits to minimise fuel leakage and the risk of an explosive fire.

PC Elaine Chisholm, her pretty face white and pale, hung suspended by her seatbelt with her head dangling exposing her long neck, her short blonde hair stirring in the gentle breeze. Her brain, already tired from a hard shift hunting for clues at *Bellavista*, and disrupted by excessive *G*-forces, hovered just below consciousness for a few minutes then retreated into a dream world filled with images from *Chocolat* playing in slo-mo.

Regrouped at the far side of the field and watching with soft, moist eyes, a herd of curious long-horned Highland beef cows began a slow, tentative progress back across their field to inspect the mystery object which had invaded their territory.

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Parallel Loop

Amongst several other key individuals in the Artemis team, Emma Vernon and Mari Minto had both received the cryptic, red-flagged email from Avril Galloway now working at Govan Campus as part of the Artemis Team. The e-mail confirmed the iPhone which Elli had found was Rita Minto's but the rider to the message seemed like it might be their first big break.

From the deserted car park outside the unoccupied industrial unit at Hillington, Mari immediately called Emma Vernon at Bridge of Weir.

"Emma, have you read the email about the off-white van which the dog walker phoned in, the van she said she saw near *Courchevel* early yesterday morning?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I've just had a heads-up chat with Avril who told me the vehicle is a *Fiat Doblo* registered to a company based in Guernsey. When she tried to follow up on it, she was side-tracked. There are 'pre-set procedures' which must be followed, apparently. She sensed the locals in Guernsey are playing coy. They like to keep their secrets, as we all know. We may need to get a helping hand from our friends at the Met to get Guernsey to respond but I expect that would require the Chief Constable's office to intervene."

"No way am I asking the dragon at this stage! The old prat would stall me, ask for the actual proof of the link, the very thing we are trying to verify. We would be stuck in the slow lane for weeks, miles off the pace."

In the silence which followed this uncharacteristic outburst of frustration, Emma waited.

"Oh, *bugger!* Emma, I didn't say that out loud, did I?"

"Say what, Ma'am?"

"Good. Right. Thanks. So, Emma, what's your instinct on this?"

"Well, Ma'am, this is our best lead so far, apart from the mobile phone which PC Chisholm is taking to Govan Campus as we speak. From the serial number, we know it's your mother's iPhone. If you check your emails, there's a pic of a necklace found near it. Could be your Mum's too. However, the device is quite badly damaged and I'm not sure we'll get anything from it unless the techies can work their magic. On the ground here, my worry is that the shooters are still out there. I think it's only been the heavy rain which has stopped them. Like everyone here I feel certain the underlying action is being driven by a drugs war or maybe a feud. I worry there could be more action from them now the storm has

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passed through and shooting conditions are much improved. But the whole shooting attack is bizarre, the victims do not seem connected, not so far as I can see, it might be a random killing spree of innocents, maybe to demonstrate power from a rival gang who want to take over this patch. What I can't figure is where they could be shooting from, but I think we have to concede their accuracy has been exceptional. To me, it smacks of a military involvement. Is it at all possible that MI6 or MI5 are behind this, and the whole thing has got out of hand?"

"Emma, you're absolutely spot on about the drugs scenario. But no, I'm sure you are off beam with MI6 and MI5, they would never shoot at police officers. Let's stick to what we actually have. This second white van, do you think it's important enough to set up an intercept perimeter and send up the helicopter again?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Most definitely! If it was a legitimate media van, it would be with the rest of the media crowd? I mean, that's how they hunt, in a pack, like jackals, isn't it?"

"Exactly my feelings but no, not jackals, more like hyaenas. Hyaenas are much sneakier than jackals and more prone to individual action. Let's see if we can find this off-white *Fiat Doblo* with the *Guernsey* plates. It might be nothing but if it is, we can eliminate it and move on. I'll press all the buttons at *Govan Area Control* and get this moving. Oh Emma, let's hope we have this one right or the budget boffins will crucify me with their bloody perfect 20:20 hindsight!"

"Ma'am, may I have permission to stand our people down right away?"

"Yes, I'll call *Control* and issue that command officially but move on that now, please."

A few weeks earlier, when she had been out for a jog in *Pollok Country Park* with *Magnus*, *Mari* had spotted *Emma Vernon* and *Elli Chisholm* from a distance, hands around each other's waists while walking a small dog. The couple were a good match, she thought, both diligent and hard-working. It was possible they had seen her, she supposed. If so, perhaps she would have some leverage.

"And Emma, are we agreed this little chat on our personal mobiles is off the record, please?"

Mari held her breath, hoping for certainty.

"What chat was that Ma'am?"

Although it was uncomfortable, she would have to trust *Emma* not to reveal her outbursts.

"Thanks *Emma*, you're a star."

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Still in her full-dress uniform, Minto felt sticky and sweaty. In the boot of the CRV, she always carried a few changes of clothing for such situations. Five minutes later, having cleansed herself thoroughly with perfumed wet wipes and changed into fresh underwear, she was now wearing a smart, cashmere trouser suit and matching dark grey low trainer pumps, comfortable and practical. After a quick revisiting of her make-up and hair, she felt renewed, ready for the task ahead.

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The Jogger

While Mari and Emma had been talking on their phones, the unmarked *Fiat Doblo* arrived at the bend where Elli's vehicle had smashed through the fence. The *Golf* lay upturned at the foot of the steep embankment, hidden from traffic on the road. Half a mile beyond this bend Franca slowed. As planned, she eased the *Doblo* through a partially open gate leading to a towering wall of blue PVC silage roundels and parked behind it, hidden from view.

From her review of the most recent auto recorded footage from the *Peekaboo* audio intercepts at *Bellavista*, the Sicilian had discovered the two policewomen did not personally hold any crucial information which could identify her.

However, they had seemed certain the device found at *Bellavista* by the one called Elli belonged to Rita Minto, the taxi driver. That this nosy woman was the mother of Chief Superintendent Mari Minto was an unexpected and unwanted complication. From online research, Franca had learned this up-and-coming policewoman had a dangerously clever mind and a strong track record for solving drug related crimes.

After what had been a long silence, Frances spoke:

*"Franca! No, do **NOT** contemplate killing that senior policewoman. To do so would stir up a hornet's nest of trouble for you. It is far wiser to avoid her like the plague if you can. Meanwhile, we will watch for opportunities to feed her misinformation, to distract her. Now, go to the *Golf* and retrieve the mobile phone. Check it out. If it really is Rita Minto's, destroy it but make sure you do not re-activate it, not under any circumstances."*

"Frances, why do you always blame me for everything? And why do you always hector me?"

"But Franca, dear one, you know why, don't you? It's because I love you and I want you to succeed. You know we all depend on you, don't you?"

"But I'm so tired Frances, so very tired. My head is thumping and my body feels like lead."

*"Keep going, my dearest one. Take **THREE** Greenies and go at once to get that mobile phone. But if you can, avoid killing the young policewoman called Elli. She is so, so beautiful, don't you agree? Just think, you will be right there with her, in touching distance. How lovely is that?"*

"Yes, Frances, Elli is very beautiful. Why was I made so ugly? It's not fair, is it?"

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"But you are beautiful, Franca, especially when you are dressed as Molly. But you know that, don't you? Now, Molly, go get that phone, honey! Yee-haa!"

Franca's mind was in turmoil. She was a desktop person operating outside her comfort zone, not a confrontational field agent.

As she had been told to do, she swallowed three Greenies, and mindful of the nagging pressure on her spasmed bladder, she washed them down with only a tiny sip of *Red Bull*.

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In the *Doblo*, sitting at the console, Franca was wearing her latest favourite wig, styled into a shoulder length ponytail. Choosing her wig was always the first item on her agenda when dressing up. This hairpiece had been lovingly coloured using a L'Oréal rinse-out dye in a dark blonde hue. Laura and Aneesa had both said this colour complimented her Mediterranean skin tone perfectly. Under her spandex one-piece jogging suit, she was wearing a well-padded skin-coloured body suit, an apparatus she used when she appeared naked for her kinky online Karaoke sessions as Molly Parson.

To complete her outfit, she would wear a no-logo black skipped cap, keeping her eyes hidden behind wrap-around mirrored sunglasses with fluorescent pink frames to match her lipstick and the vibrant pink of her jogging outfit.

Dressed for the role she was about to play, 'Molly' checked her make-up, pulled on her cap then slid from the seat to the ground. Locking the van with the fob, she zipped it into her lightweight expandable jogging rucksack containing the essentials for this hands-on part of her mission.

The transformation into Molly Parton had taken her only fourteen minutes, a new record.

From hours of solitary practise, Molly had perfected a repertoire of country and western songs sung in a pleasant alto voice and was often voted the winner by her fellow songsters, both for her singing and dance routines. Although in the mirror of her mind, Franca believed she was an excellent body-double for her icon, the reality was that the Sicilian looked eccentric with a bizarrely over-bulky upper body on weird spindly legs making her more noticeable and memorable.

Standing at the entrance to the silage store, she looked both ways. Fortunately, this narrow and winding side road was seldom used by early morning commuter traffic.

Vacillating, Franca was engaged in a non-verbalised conversation with her other selves, behaviour which had become increasingly commonplace with the deterioration of her mental health and her increased drug taking.

If only Marco had not responded to his aunt's request to visit, everything would have been simpler.

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Edwin was always the weak link, refusing to kill Maria as he had agreed to do, forcing us to finish her off.

You were always too good for him Franca, way too good.

And then the stupid cow Edith interfered, which meant we had to kill her precious Edwin to stop him revealing what we did to his 'Dear Zia Maria', the fat old bitch.

Anyway, remember that Edith was on our list for later, but she had to go early before she told her dozy husband what Marco had said. And so handy she fell under that van, making it look like a hit-and-run.

Then Marco blabbed to the police, revealing the link to Uncle Sergio and Raffa which meant we had no choice but to act ahead of schedule, taking him out too.

Yes, Franca, we know taking down the police officers was regrettable. And yes, it will make them more persistent in their hunt for us. But why worry, we know they haven't a clue who they are chasing.

That's why our priority is that damned taxi woman recording everything on her phone. But remember, she can wait, if she is still alive. From Kelvin Court, you'll find her through your backdoor into the NHS online admissions system.

***Focus, Franca, focus.** What we agreed is that we must first get the phone from the Golf.*

But please, please don't kill the girl Elli, if she is still alive. She looks so sweet, doesn't she?

***We know, Franca, we know you're worried about this!** So don't be so hard on yourself, you are doing well, making the best of the tricky situation we find ourselves in. You **know** it will all come good and soon, won't it?*

With better processing power at Kelvin Court, we'll soon crack Vera Verdi's encrypted list then we can make a new plan to take down the Serbs using the drones.

Then, Franca, as we planned, with the field cleared for him, Raffa will have to pay attention to you, won't he?

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Setting out towards the Golf, Franca Vitelli was jittery, fearful of exposure to physical danger and direct face-to-face confrontation. As an accomplished desktop guru, she was a proficient online gamer, a clever wordsmith, a devious schemer who had dabbled in blackmail, not a hands-on field agent.

But she knew she had no choice; the mobile phone must be retrieved from the Golf.

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Pushing herself, she set out to jog back along the edge of the embankment, moving as fast as she could manage, constantly checking all around to be sure she was not being observed, nervously adjusting the straps on her rucksack, feeling the weight of the pistol inside as it bumped against her. Within a few minutes, overheating and seriously dehydrated, she was forced to reduce her pace, eventually settling for a jerky version of speed-walking. Breathing heavily, she reached the bend where the Golf had crashed through the fence.

She looked in dismay at the long, steep, muddy slope and water-filled ditch at its base.

Clearly a no-go route. Most definitely not feasible.

Tracking back, she found a spot where the slope was less steep. Forcing her way through the fence into the field, the barbed wire snagged a patch out of her jogging suit. With the silenced pistol held by her side, she picked her way down through the soggy grass leaving a trail of footprints. Within minutes her trainers and jogging suit bottoms were soaked through, adding to her discomfort. To make sure she could not be seen if her target was still alive and lucid, she circled out into the field to approach the upturned car from behind, promising herself she would only kill the girl Elli if necessary. Tingling with anxiety, she was keeping a wary eye on the herd of around fifty cows, mothers with their almost fully grown calves to foot, mooing and jostling each other as they trundled steadily towards her.

The roof material of the car had been ripped clear by the impact, revealing the frame of the safety rollbar. The girl was suspended upside down, motionless.

Fearing a confrontation, part of Franca hoped Elli was already dead.

Kneeling beside the suspended girl, her pistol at the ready, her hands trembling from the repeated excessive use of Greenies during the previous few days, Franca reached forwards to check for a pulse. Apart from those platonic cheek-to-cheek 'brushes' against Edwin's face when he welcomed her to his home on the night of the dinner party at Houston, this was her first intimate contact with anyone since her banishment to Scotland. She had invested so much effort accommodating his whims, giving time to his doubts. They could have achieved so much together, had he been more pliable. Like other painful and inconvenient memories, her execution of Edwin had been put in an inner compartment of her mind and locked away. It was as if the stupid man had decided to emigrate, of his own free will. Even the shooting of Angie's stupid dog had been forgotten.

At her touch, the girl Elli jerked and twitched, groaning softly: "Emma, Emma, Em. . .".

Ducking back out of sight, Franca reached forward with the syringe loaded with a shot of Propofol from her private supply, used to help her sleep when her demons came visiting. Estimating the girl's weight as roughly twice her own, she judged this dose would

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keep her target under for around six hours. Selecting a spot behind the left earlobe, Franca pricked then injected the liquid. Almost at once the girl Elli visibly relaxed and Franca replaced the wet and muddy pistol back in her rucksack.

Cupping her captive's chin with a latex gloved hand, Franca turned her head gently, examining her closely from different angles, deciding Elli was the most exotic creature she had ever seen.

Relishing the sensation of being in total control, Franca's smug smile widened into an eager grin.

With her eyes focussed on Elli's face, Franca-Genny revised her previous fantasy then began to play out her role as the dominant partner, the generous giver with Elli as the grateful receiver.

They were together on her waterbed at Kelvin Court, both naked, glistening with massage oil, Elli wearing a Kitten mask and soft, pink furry ankle boots, Franca wearing a Tiger mask and high, black PVC knee-length cowboy boots with 8" stiletto heels and soft rubber spurs.

The lighting and sound was set, the mirrors in position and the cameras running.

With her own Molly Parson version of 'Stand By Your Man' playing quietly on a loop through her surround sound system, they were kneeling on the waterbed with Franca on top, doggy fashion, wearing her tight skin-coloured knickers incorporating her current favourite sex toy, a slim but stiff aubergine coloured vibrating dildo with its black hairy crotch and wrinkled, deep-hanging scrotum with bulging testicles, the dildo fixed to the knickers with a strong Velcro pad.

In the beginning, during their gentle coming together, rocking slowly, Franca's hands massaging Elli's breast, Elli's end of the dildo engaged but with only partial penetration.

In Franca's mind, time passed slowly at first before galloping to a vigorous crescendo, both participants shuddering and moaning loudly.

Gasping, Franca opened her eyes.

Her ecstatic smile morphed to a bitter snarl as she felt again the surge of resentment at the unfairness of a universe which had endowed this girl Elli with every aspect of beauty while she, Franca Vitelli, had been consigned to live out her life as an odd, hairless dwarf with an ugly, off-putting face, forced to pay for ersatz 'talk sex' in anonymous chatrooms while comforting herself with a vibrating dildo. As she listened to her ersatz lovers for hire, her mind endlessly replayed her 'siesta afternoon', lying side by side with Raffa on an old mattress in the pitch-black attic of their grandmother's house, both high on sniffing cocaine, exploring each other's nakedness with soft, gentle, probing hands.

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In Franca Vitelli's 'memory' this 'just touching sex' had happened only once but Franca had relived the imagined experience thousands of times over, reinforcing it as a vivid reality, a sad concoction created by a lonely drug-fuelled haunting need to be wanted, to be desired physically by another person.

Leaning forward, she removed her latex gloves, giving way to the urge to touch the girl Elli skin-to-skin.

Frances intervened:

"Franca, remember you are here for the Rita Minto mobile. Business first, pleasure later."

*"Frances, go home to Newlands. **At once.**"*

Keeping a close eye on the sleeping girl, Franca-Laura-Genny-Aneesa rummaged in her open rucksack until she found her make-up bag then brushed her hair and checked her eyeliner and mascara. Wiping off her pink Molly Parson lipstick, she re-coated her lips thickly with her current favourite shade, a dark aubergine, chosen as an exact match for her new dildo.

Ready for love, the Sicilian reached forward, angling her body and head to align it with the girl's face. She tugged away the elasticated band to loosen her blond Molly ponytail. Parting the girl's hair with her bare fingers, she traced the back of her hand slowly across the fine downy hairs of Ellie's face before stretching forward to bring her own lips to rest against her cheek, a butterfly kiss, touching only softly without exerting any pressure. Her free hand slipped down and unbuttoned the girl's blouse, moving inside her bra to fondle her breasts, cupping and squeezing and tugging each nipple in turn.

It was the tickle of moist warmth from the unconscious girl's rhythmic breathing which tipped Franca over the edge, breaching the dam of her surging desire. Lunging forward, she crushed her captive's chin in her cupped hand, thrusting her tongue through soft pink lips in a violent act of domination. To her disappointment, Ellie's tongue was unresponsive, flaccid, causing Franca's passion to quickly ebb, leaving her sad, lonely, desolate.

Despite the cocktail of stimulating chemicals swirling in her body, her mental resolve was flagging.

Seeking respite and fulfilment, she closed her eyes and drifted off, back to Italy, to the attic with Raffa, to another well used fantasy. the one in which she and Raffa were together again, in a grand villa, in a four-poster bed.

The tape began to run again.

Seconds drifted into minutes.

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Startled, Franca was brought back to reality by the snuffling and blowing of the cows tossing their heads. Standing in a tight circle around her, their horns looked enormous, vicious, threatening. With no experience of cattle, she did not know they were docile, approaching in the hope she would feed them.

Chewing two Greenies, she waited for them to take effect then forced her mind to focus and move ahead to the next stage.

Easing herself backwards out of the upturned car, she lifted the girl's bright orange Versace handbag onto her lap. Unzipping and peering into it she saw the transparent evidence pouch containing the damaged mobile phone. She checked the labelling. This was what she had come for.

The tension in Franca's neck and shoulders eased. Ticking another box on her mental list, she zipped the girl's handbag closed then wiped it clean with her sleeve. It looked as if it was new. On an impulse, she decided to keep it as a memento of her encounter and packed it carefully into her rucksack, adjusting the shoulder straps to accommodate the extra bulk.

Had Franca checked Elli's handbag more carefully, she would have discovered the girl's own phone was zipped into a concealed pocket beside her credit card wallet. Although Elli had set her phone to silent, it was still active and in constant communication with the Vodafone telephone network.

Pulling then pushing on the undercarriage of the car to get herself upright, Franca realised she had carelessly left fingerprints on the damaged chassis. Glancing down, she saw the girl's lips were smudged with her aubergine lipstick and that there were strands from her Molly hairpiece on the girl's uniform sweater.

Her mind leapt ahead:

At Kelvin Court she would check the secrets held on the damaged phone. If its owner was still alive, she must be taken down before she could retell what she had heard.

But there would be no further messy hands-on confrontations. Using her drones Rita Minto's elimination would be anonymous.

With this final loose end dealt with, and secure in the knowledge she was totally in the clear, she could move to the next phase, leaving the police to flounder in their ignorance, chasing straws.

In the unlikely event that the police did manage to uncover details of the McKindless family's links to the Camorra, they would assume the killings were linked to the Serbs, especially after they too had been eliminated by her drones.

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She stooped and studied the girl for the last time, imprinting her beautiful face and breasts to use in future fantasies. From the bottom of her rucksack, she retrieved two handfuls of egg-bombs and scattered them inside the Golf. Using the App on her phone, she set their timers for two hours by which point she should be safely inside her citadel at Kelvin Court. Checking, she reached back inside and moved three of the egg-bombs close to where she judged the vehicle's fuel tank was located.

In her Molly accent she whispered:

'Sorry honey, but there aint-ah no goin' back now.'

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To avoid running the gauntlet of the approaching cows, Franca chose the more direct route back to the road above her. She checked out the obstacles. The ditch was about twenty metres away. The fence across its length was a mesh type which she judged would be easier to climb. So far as she could tell, there was no barbed strand along the top.

What did it matter if she got dirty, she was already soaked through?

Taking a deep breath, she reached into her zippy sleeve pocket for another two Greenies and was dismayed to discover the plastic strip was empty.

Driven by fear of the snorting cows, she ran.

About halfway to the fence, she tripped on a hummock and fell heavily into the lush grass, coating herself in slimy mud caused by the previous night's downpour.

Confused by her 'disappearance', the cows stopped. Crouching in the long grass, she made a second dash for the fence but was soon reduced to a slow, stumbling plod. She reached the fence just ahead of the cows. Climbing the mesh, she threw herself over, landing in a heap while the beasts pressed aggressively against the fence, snorting, breathing on her and complaining loudly.

Wading waist deep across the ditch, she hauled herself out on the far side. From her crouched position beside the Golf, she had judged the climb to the road to be about twenty metres but now realised it was almost double this distance and much, much steeper. Scrabbling and skidding, she had no choice but to keep going, hauling herself up the slope, stopping repeatedly to catch her breath and rest her aching muscles.

With her eyes closed she inched her way upwards, on and on, inch by slippery inch.

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Without warning, she arrived at the edge of the road. Bent double, she swivelled around. The cattle had already lost interest and were making their way to higher ground, out of the muddy area beside the ditch, already well beyond the upturned car.

Crouched on her hands and knees, she checked both ways then hauled herself upright, stepping through the gap in the fence caused by the Golf to begin a slow jog-walk back to the safety of the *Fiat Doblo*.

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Inside her jogging outfit, her body suit was soaked through with sweat and muddy water, her skin cold and wet, making her feel shivery, jittery, filled with a sense of dread.

Standing beside the *Fiat* with the rear door wide open, still wheezing and coughing, physically drained and mentally weary, she slumped down to sit on the edge of the floor of the vehicle. Her digital watch was blank, waterlogged, useless. Glancing into the van, she checked the clock on the Control Console. Although it had felt like forever, retrieving the mobile phone had taken less than an hour.

She stared at the exterior of the van: like herself, it too was filthy, streaked and splattered with mud. Everything felt as if it was slipping away, out of control. Tears of frustration and self-pity formed in her eyes. She sniffed them away before sneezing mucus into her hand. Disgusted, she flicked it away where it splattered on the nearest blue roundel adding to the trail of forensic evidence she was leaving in her wake. She also failed to notice her missing latex gloves, left with her skip cap beside the drugged girl in the Golf.

Shielded behind the rear door, she shrugged out of her wet outfit, dropping everything into a heavy-duty builder's waste disposal sack already partially filled with her domestic rubbish. The only item she kept aside was her special Molly Parson wig which she intended to shampoo later.

Naked, her eyes closed and working by feel, she used two packets of wet wipes then rubbed herself dry with a grubby towel before gathering these items into her disposal sack, intending to store it at her lock-up in Milngavie until she had time to burn it, somewhere remote, perhaps at Glencoe.

From the rail of travel suiters which held her wardrobe of disguises, she selected her school uniform. This distinctive green jacket with its yellow piping, her white shirt and green and yellow striped tie, white socks and favourite clumpy black brogues identified her as a senior pupil. With her eternally young skin, these clothes transformed her into a teenager, an impression confirmed by lapels adorned with a full set of badges for Prefect, her House and other Awards, all items purchased online. To complete her transformation, she fixed in place a different wig of shoulder length dark brown real

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hair. This wig had a deep fringe she used to conceal her face by leaning forward as if looking at her phone. To help this disguise, she added Harry Potter spectacles with a slight grey tinge to shield her pale blue eyes and to avoid eye contact. This was a well-used ploy which Frances had told her, helped her to remain 'anonymous and invisible' when travelling on trains and buses.

Franca Vitelli never used taxis, only Frances Verratti when she travelled to and from Newlands.

As her sole essential accessory, she retrieved her old-fashioned school satchel from the base of her school outfit suiter. After transferring the entire contents from her dirty jogging rucksack, she added it to the disposal bag for burning. Thankfully, despite its dowsing in water, the rucksack had kept its contents completely dry.

Her final item was a three-quarter length dark grey puffa coat to hide the school uniform while driving and moving around outside the vehicle. The coat was overly long, reaching well below her knees.

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Over the Rainbow

Back in the safety of the driver's seat of the *Doblo* with the doors locked, her eyes were heavy, her bladder aching and her mind stalled, making it hard to concentrate.

All she wanted was a big pee, a hot bath, a banana, two Blues and a long, long sleep.

Forcing herself, she entered the Bluetooth code in her phone App to release the door of the concealed glove compartment on the passenger side.

As the drawer began to drop slowly, powered by the almost inaudible hiss of pneumatic motors, she snatch up a large pink furry pencil case, ripped open the Velcro top and reached for a fresh strip of ten *Greenies*.

The foil on the reverse was labelled: "*Wellness Organics of Jersey*: premier multi-vitamin supplement capsules".

She popped out four *Greenies*, washing them down with a long tepid draught of strong black coffee, the dregs from her two-litre pump flask. Taking four together was something she had never done before.

Closing her eyes tightly in anticipation, she waited. In less than a minute she felt the welcome restorative buzz lifting her, filling her with confidence. The aches and pains from her earlier exertions faded away and she was once again alert and ready to continue.

A hidden memory snagged.

Why did I forget my back-up weapon?

Also in this hidden glove compartment was a fake owner's manual for the *Fiat Doblo*. Franca transmitted a separate Bluetooth code from her phone and the 'book' lid popped open to reveal her back-up personal weapon, a Jericho model 941, as issued to Israeli Security Forces for close quarter work.

This compact handgun which she had chosen from a short leet on offer from the Swiss arms dealer, was designed to take a nine-shot magazine of Smith and Weston parabellum man-stopper hollow points, bullets developed originally for the FBI. Fully loaded, the polymer body and magazine weighed just over a kilogramme. She had read up on this gun online, learning this heft was said to make it more stable when fired. But what had impressed and excited her most was the destruction caused by the special ammunition. She had practiced at *Glencoe*, firing two-handed as per the training video provided, loosing over a hundred rounds at makeshift targets, eventually achieving seven out of

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nine hits at up to twenty metres. It had been supplied with a silencer, an irritating and fiddly extension which she had subsequently discarded because it reduced her accuracy to less than twenty percent.

OK, it's not silenced but it is so much lighter and easier to conceal.

On impulse, and because she liked the feel of the Jericho, she swapped it for the pistol in her satchel, placing it out of sight beside the policewoman's Versace handbag.

Annoyingly, because of its extended length with its silencer, the larger and heavier pistol would not fit into the glove compartment. Checking there was a bullet in its chamber and the safety was set to "ON", she lowered it onto the floor of the passenger seat well, from which it was easily retrievable, if required.

Using the sunshade vanity mirror, she carefully re-modelled her face to that of a schoolgirl, attaching shorter eyelashes, creating simpler eyebrows, adding a pale pink lipstick without lip gloss, aping a shy teenager, a role she had performed with success many times before.

While changing her face, Franca slipped into another fantasy which she had been nurturing during recent weeks, imagining the panic among the Serbs when they discovered Vera Verdi was no longer active as a player, having seemingly vanished.

Did they know she was Angie Simpson based at Courchevel - a building now obliterated as the Peekaboo footage had proved?

Would they conclude she had been consumed in its flames?

How would they make sense of the fact that both Bellavista and Ridgeway had also been destroyed in the same time frame.

Did they know about the Camorra links to the McKindless and Bolinchetti families and, if so, what would they think when they realised both families had been terminated?

Would the Serbs panic, believing the Camorra was aware of them, hunting them, making an all-out turf war inevitable?

Or would the Serbs ignore everything and move swiftly to bully their way into the lucrative West of Scotland territory vacated by the missing Vera Verdi?

Whatever way it went, Franca reasoned this dilemma would draw them out into the open, make them less cautious, more willing to move around freely and therefore easier to zap with her drones creating another series of inexplicable hits which would continue to frustrate Police Scotland.

She was grinning now as she recalled the images of the Kill Drone hits already achieved, results which proved how simple it had been to eliminate the opposition using her superior

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technology. Her high-risk investment had proved its worth, empowering her while preserving her anonymity. Later, when her new set-up was stabilised and she had secured Vera Verdi's clients for herself and remodelled the Serbs network to our own more secure distribution system, she would draw up plans to expand her operation into Edinburgh, Fife, Aberdeen and Inverness.

Perhaps at that stage I might make a surprise visit to Naples and agree with Raffa how we should move south into England and remodel his outdated networks there, using my more secure mailed distribution approach deploying only the minimum number of trusted operatives.

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Coming down quickly from the massive boosted high, Franca's eyelids were again heavy, desperate to close. She had been operating continuously for almost three days without proper respite, snatching an hour or so here and there, snacking lightly, mainly on bananas and spicy houmous spread thinly on crackers. Without proper nourishment, her body was stressed beyond its limit, drawing on the last of meagre fat reserves, her metabolism disrupted by drugs, her mind frazzled.

She yawned deeply but forced herself to go on, as she must.

A calm electronic voice from the *DKS Control Console* quietly informed her that in eighteen hours the rotating mechanical elements of both drones would require servicing and calibration checking. An explanatory addendum stated that this urgent situation had arisen from stress caused by flying the drones in 'highly unsuitable conditions' noting that URGENT ALERTS posted to the DKS Pilot Log had been ignored. Checking, Franca discovered she had been advised repeatedly to land the drones during the overnight storm.

Franca complained to Frances.

"Oh God, what next! I can't be doing with this. Help me, please."

"Franca, my dear one, do not worry about this, just keep heading for Milngavie. Remember what we studied together in the operating manual and the video? We know how to do this, don't we? We have lots of time, after you have rested."

These were complicated procedures which Franca-Julia had already performed twice by following the detailed step-by-step videos provided with the kit. To avoid error, this task must wait until she was rested, recovered, mentally alert with steady hands. Her intention was to land her drones at her OBS, (Operational Base Station) a term she had gleaned from the training video. This small forest clearing was in a remote location in the Glennifer Hills, accessed by a forestry track and defended by three gates which she had secured with new heavy-duty padlocks and chains. It was from this OBS she had flown

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both drones on reconnaissance flights while learning the Bridge of Weir layout and the various road and tracks where she might hole up, as required.

Currently, both drones were parked in tandem at her 'default location', hovering under autonomous GPS control at fifteen hundred metres above the highest hills in the area, amongst the wispy clouds, invisible, at a location which the DKS system had self-selected. According to the manual, this location was undetectable by any form of radar or satellite monitoring, an essential requirement specified by the joint CIA/GCHQ commissioning team.

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Before she could retreat to the sanctuary of her flat with the damaged Minto phone, she must park the *Fiat Doblo* at her secure premises in Milngavie. From there, she would walk five minutes to the terminus followed by an eleven-minute train ride to Anniesland station then a final short walk to her flat at Kelvin Court.

Using double-sided tape, it was time to change the *Fiat Doblo's* number plates for a fourth time. She still had three backup plates available, all clones of other white and champagne *Fiat Doblos*, vehicles currently registered with the DVLA and in daily use in various parts of the UK. Such decoy plates were easily ordered in the *Dark Web*.

After a jerky multi-point turn, she renegotiated her way to the gate from the silage store where she activated the vehicle's Sat Nav and called up the pointer for Milngavie. The system advised that on a clear run, this would take about twenty-three minutes, but she knew there would be issues with traffic.

She was nearing the final lap of her odyssey.

To help her fight off her tiredness, she selected her Molly Parson version of *Rainbowland*, setting it to play on a repeat loop,

*Living in a Rainbowland
Where everything goes as planned
And I smile, 'cause I know if we try
We could really make a difference in this world
I won't give up, or sleep a wink
It's the only thought I think,
You know where I stand,
I believe we can,
Living in a Rainbowland*

Singing along with herself, she eased out onto the narrow winding road, keeping her speed down to avoid drawing attention to herself, all thoughts of Elli in the Golf and the egg-bombs on countdown forgotten.

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On Track

Ten minutes later, on joining the heavy press of traffic on the local commuter rat run, the *Fiat Doblo* quickly became anonymous among the other vehicles heading to the M8.

Nearing the St James Interchange bottleneck, the traffic slowed to a stop-start crawl. When it ground to a complete standstill, she popped another three *Greenies* and washed them down with a slurp of *Red Bull*. After resisting, her head drooped forwards and she was instantly asleep. Due to constant overdosing, her boosters were no longer working as before.

Roused by the voice of *Google Assistant* from her phone, she was advised she should take the off-ramp heading for the Erskine Bridge, thereby avoiding the usual snarl ups ahead at the Clyde Tunnel and the melee at the complicated traffic lights at Anniesland Cross. Franca Vitelli had only once attempted the transit of the mile long tunnel under the River Clyde and the claustrophobic experience had frightened her. Driving at 30 mph in rigid obedience to the stated speed limit, she had been unnerved by aggressive following vehicles tailgating her cautious driving.

The traffic ahead began to inch forward but she was slow to react, still drowsy until brought back to reality by the loud blasts from the queuing traffic behind her. A drawback of her modified *Fiat Doblo* was it did not have a rear-view mirror. Checking, she saw both of her over-sized wing mirrors were filled by a huge truck jump-edging towards her, as if intending to nudge her forwards. In panic, she hauled the auto-box from park into drive and floored the accelerator, veering onto the hard shoulder, attracting a cacophony of complaining horns from the line of slow-moving drivers she was 'undertaking' as she raced for the off-ramp signed for the Erskine Bridge.

A dozen or so other drivers, some who had been involved in the white van incident the previous morning, reached for their phones and reported her to the Police Scotland 101 service, the sharper ones able to give details of her (false) vehicle registration number.

Her misdemeanour was captured by an ANPR camera which automatically registered her offence and would, in time, attempt to generate a penalty notice.

Franca crossed the Erskine Bridge well below the limit at a steady 40 mph, then swung down onto the A82 heading towards Glasgow. Approaching the Auchentoshan distillery to her right, once again the traffic ahead was slowing to walking pace as it neared the busy Drumchapel/Clydebank roundabout a mile ahead.

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Her Sat-Nav updated its advice directing her to exit the dual carriageway towards the suburb of Duntocher taking her onto a narrow road dotted with parked cars and pavements busy with pedestrians.

Crawling along at just above 20 mph, Franca was back in her comfort zone.

The Greenies had at last kicked in and her mind was racing ahead:

She was in a quandary about her priorities. When she reached her flat at Kelvin Court she planned a long hot bath, a chicken pot noodle and a timed short power nap before tackling her next moves.

But first she had to get the Doblo into her workshop. The drones would have to wait.

The mobile phone was the priority. Or perhaps she might leave the decoding of the phone until she was more fully rested and make a further trip to her OBS to retrieve the drones and store them at Milngavie and service them later.

And she must find out if Rita Minto was alive and, if so, deal with her before she could talk.

Distracted by these thoughts with her eyes fixed in a thousand-yard stare, she was oblivious to the straggle of teenage girls in make-shift uniforms and black leggings making their way to school, racing along the pavement on clumpy heels, heading for a newsagent cum general store, each determined to be first in the queue for snacks and drinks.

As the off-white Doblo approached a Zebra pedestrian crossing, a pup on an extending lead ran out into its path. Franca drove over it without changing speed. The dog's stunned owner stared at the tiny, mangled corpse then hurled curses at the van as it disappeared into a traffic roundabout.

Quickest to react, one of the teenagers took snapshots of the dirty white van and doggy remains and uploaded the images from her mobile phone to her Facebook account with the tag:

"whiet van man slautars cocaypoodal puppi an fleas the scen o the crim"

Completing her posting she added the date and location of the incident and the appeal:

"it wiz a manky bulders transet so tri ann get its reggie number fur the Polis"

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As Franca Vitelli swung uphill past Windyhills golf course on the final stretch of her journey to Milngavie, believing she would soon make it to safety undetected, she breathed a sigh of relief.

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Frances spoke, stern and demanding:

*"Franca Vitelli, pay attention. Now you have possession of the Minto phone, Rita herself is your new priority. Keep focused. This trial of endurance will be over soon. Remember how we used to keep at it for days ahead of your final OU exams? This is exactly the same, you know it is. Later, when she is eliminated, you can sleep for a week if you wish but right now you must go back to the OBS at Glennifer Braes and retrieve the drones for servicing. **NOW**, please, Franca."*

*"No, **NO, NO!** I'll do things my way from now on. You, Frances Verratti can **FUCK OFF!** Go to hell and never come back. We are all finished with you. Forever! And do not go back to Newlands. I forbid it. Why not go home to Dublin?"*

Her other voices sounded in unison:

"Yes, Franca. Who needs that bossy bitch anyway!"

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Needle

Chief Superintendent Mari Minto was in the empty car park of an unlet industrial unit in Hillington Park, in sight of the slow-moving traffic on the M8. With both her official and her personal mobile phones muted and her police radio at minimum volume, she was seeking privacy to work without interruption. Using her blue lights and siren, she reckoned she could bully her way to either Govan Campus or back to Bridge of Weir in around eight minutes either way, as the situation demanded.

Speed reading through screeds of emails and other selected documents highlighted and posted by her team to the Project Artemis database at Govan, she was increasingly convinced the snipers had already left the scene at Bridge of Weir. However, she also knew she must play safe, just in case. The last thing she needed was another killing.

Using the rear of her modified Honda CRV as a mobile office, her laptop was linked through an encrypted and ultra-secure telephone server, the kind which tapped into a nexus of mobile telephone lines reserved for senior officers, designated to ensure a high-speed connection to the *Internet*. Finger tapping on the keypad with her dominant left hand and clicking her Bluetooth mouse with her right, she was totally immersed, ploughing her way through the growing mountain of high-level data flowing into the master file, information cross-checked and verified as pertinent by her Artemis Team in Govan.

In this mound of data, she found an update for the white van which had collided head on with the tractor, an incident which Govan Area Control had initially deemed to be an RTA. The van driver, believed to be Gordy Tennant, was still missing. The VIN had revealed this vehicle was registered to a sole trader firm called *D M Black Business Leasing* at an address in York Place, Edinburgh, a business with no website, no email address, no telephone number and no social media presence. The business was located at a serviced office complex called *ScotiaMicroOffices.com*. Reading on, she learned this organisation offered standardised office units for hire on variable terms from weekly to yearly. Checking on *Google Maps*, she saw this address was close to the *Scottish National Portrait Gallery*, one of her favourite places in Edinburgh.

Reading further in the Artemis file, she learned the owner and letting agent for these offices was a firm called *Scotia Inter-Leasing (2011)*, a Scottish Limited Partnership. Further checking by her team had revealed the letting agent was in turn owned by a shell company called *Nexus Inter-Leasing*, another Scottish Limited Partnership. Like *D M*

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Black, neither of these companies had any social media presence, no way of making contact.

Once again, the thought occurred:

Drugs!

Re-checking the Project Artemis databases she discovered her Artemis Team at Govan had sent an email to Edinburgh Area Control requesting an officer to visit the York Place premises to unearth details about the lessee *D M Black*. It was a long shot but definitely worth probing.

Flicking back through the files, she found the name of the registered keeper of the stolen van:

Archibald (Archie) Macklin: 43, owner *Macklin Drain-Kleen*, fleet of seven vans, 11 employees; three convictions for drug possession 1997-1999; no record of dealing; believed to be reformed; involvement with Church of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons); divorced (no children) and re-married, 30-year-old wife and four children aged 10, 8, 6 and 4 all girls.

Beside it was a linked entry:

Philip John Wilson: 48, divorced, no children; known to intimates as 'PJ'; HNC in Accountancy but is *not* listed with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Scotland; silent partner and majority shareholder in *Macklin Drain-Kleen* and 'accountant' for Archie Macklin; also acts as 'accountant' for many small businesses in Paisley/Renfrew area; PJ is a Bishop in Mormon church involved in outreach work in Ferguslie Park area; no drugs or other criminal records; six penalty points on licence for speeding offences; owns classic Aston Martin DB5 (James Bond!!) and two-year-old Fiesta; arrested twice 2011 and 2012 for kerb crawling in Glasgow's Blythswood Square zone, seeking young men, no formal charges.

The other link to *Macklin Drain-Kleen* was the missing Gordy Tennant, a previous employee and a well-known drugs user from Ferguslie Park but almost certainly too poor to be a dealer:

Could Tennant have been hired as the hit-and-run killer of Edith McKindless?

By Macklin or Wilson or both?

Minto took direct action, drafting a personal email request to the Watch Commander at Edinburgh Area Control. This email upgraded the earlier Project Artemis request, adding a MOST URGENT flag, with a rider asking that TWO experienced officers be assigned to visit the Edinburgh solicitor, not a junior. She then re-worked it, emphasising this should be actioned AT ONCE and that they officers keep the York Place offices under

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surveillance until it opened for business. Re-reading it for the third time before sending it, she revised it again to stress the issue was 'sensitive' and that she be informed WITHOUT DELAY of the outcome, directly to her Project Artemis OIC email account.

Closing her eyes, rolling her neck and shoulders and breathing deeply, she took time out to release the recurring frustration arising from the need to delegate and rely on others, especially people she did not know personally. Stepping away from the CRV, she went through a five-minute routine of increasingly vigorous stretching and aerobic exercises before retaking her seat in the rear of the vehicle.

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Hoping against hope to find the missing virtual needle in the virtual tsunami of information which major incidents like this generated, she used her PAC (Personal Authority Code) to directly access the reports from the Greater Glasgow Area 101 teams tasked with taking calls from the general public. Perhaps there was something in this raw data her Artemis team might have missed, a vital clue to give a specific direction to help unravel the growing 'tangle ball' with its so many loose ends.

Searching these databases with a string of 'key words' which included 'Bridge of Weir' and 'white van', she found an entry of interest timed at 14:05:2014::08:23 from a female dog walker calling herself 'Ronnie Lang' (Veronica?).

The key word search found a synoptic report entered as a tag by the 101 receiving agent Ref GG-101-354:

"Reported sighting of "mysterious" white Fiat Doblo near 'Courchevel' cottage around 06:15."

Using the tag code, Mari listened to the attached voice recording and picked out the phrases:

"Aye, an Ah saw the same van the day afore, oan a farm track where Ah walk ma dugs"

"Aye, an see that van, well, caw me mad if ye like but it jist seemed kinda sinister, ye know, like a sortae spy van, ye know. . ."

At this point, the woman had seemed to drift off into some sort of fantasy, claiming she felt as if she was being 'watched' by someone inside the parked van, and that she had experienced 'an evil presence'.

Minto, who had witnessed the power of 'voice matching' on a previous case, used the software tool on her laptop to run the entire batch of 101 calls received, starting at six o'clock the previous morning.

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It took less than two minutes to turn up a match.

Speaking from a public call box at Braehead Shopping Centre at 17:23 that same day, a woman calling herself 'Mary Devine', using a muffled voice, (speaking through a scarf?) gave an almost identical rehash of the previous 'Ronnie Lang' message.

Before providing her story, the woman had repeatedly refused to give any details of where she lived or a contact number, eventually asking that her anonymity be preserved under the terms of the 101 system protocols.

The voice print match showed both messages were from the same person: 'Ronnie Lang' was definitely also 'Mary Devine'.

Playing both messages over and over, Minto concluded the details the caller had provided were probably genuine.

Crucially, when 'Devine' was asked if she had any other details which might help, as if by a miracle, the woman had provided a registration number for the mysterious off-white *Fiat Doblo* she had seen parked with its blacked-out windows.

Checking back and using the code from the 101 log Minto discovered why this *Fiat Doblo* information had not been prioritised in the Artemis master file.

The *Fiat Doblo* registration number given by Mary Devine had already been traced to Jersey and had been processed but the owner's details were being withheld. Completing the loop, Mari Minto remembered batting aside a request from her Project Artemis Team asking her permission to raise a formal request to the Jersey authorities via the Home Office, a request which would require the endorsement of Police Scotland's Chief Constable's Office.

Now, many, many hours later, she realised this had been a mistake.

Creating a hyperlink to both the 'Lang' and 'Devine' 101 codes, she sent a MOST URGENT link to the Artemis Team at Govan endorsing their earlier request to apply for Home Office support, asking that the Jersey Police and Vehicle Licensing Authority be pursued with UTMOST VIGOUR, (one of her current favourite stock phrases).

Pressing the 'send' key, she sensed this exercise might well run into a dead end or at least a delay:

I betcha we'll find this Fiat Doblo is owned by a shell corporation.

Feeling down, she dispensed a strong, dark, sweet coffee from her flask and washed down another green vitamin pill from the strip Magnus had given her. Closing her eyes, she waited for the caffeine and booster to work their magic.

Questions which competed for attention were:

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The vehicle from the tractor/van incident must surely be the same one which had mangled Edith McKindless?

Alternatively, could it have been the off-white Fiat Doblo?

What was the role of the Fiat Doblo reported by 'Ronnie Lang'? Was this van the snipers' transport vehicle, their mobile base?

Had Edith been shot by one of the snipers before the van hit her?

Or was it too much of a stretch to think it was a third white van, as yet unidentified?

Was the person behind this outfit at York Place the 'paymaster' for the Bridge of Weir sniper hits.

Was this York Place location a cover for a drugs distribution operation.

*With no website or business profile, surely D M Black Business Leasing could **not** be a legitimate business!*

Were the McKindless family and Maria Bolinchetti part of a drugs ring?

If so, was this why Edith and Ronald McKindless and Mario Bolinchetti had been 'executed'?

Where was the son, Edwin? Was he in hiding or was he also dead, cremated in Ridgeway?

These bizarre Executions plus the Fiat Doblo plus Jersey equals Money Laundering which means Drugs!

Everything points to a takeover by the Serbs.

Revisiting the voice of Ronnie Lang on the 101 recording, Mari then searched for a social media profile of the woman who had described herself as 'a dog walker' clearly operating in the Bridge of Weir area.

Nothing Google turned up seemed to fit.

This seemed odd but not impossible: most of this new breed of dog walkers operated in the grey economy, requesting payment in cash. Hearing Lang and Devine using the word 'Courchevel' with a nearly perfect French pronunciation convinced Mari the mystery dog walker knew this premises. Was she a regular there to collect a dog from its owner?

Mari did a further search for details of Mrs Angela Simpson. Once again, she turned up no telephone number, no social media profile.

In Mari Minto's experience, again this seemed very odd. Too much secrecy and anonymity.

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Were these two women involved in dealing drugs? A dog walker as a courier could be a perfect cover.

With Angie dead, is the dog walker in danger?

Is that why she is secretive while trying to help us through the 101 service?

Minto's instinct was to request a ring of roadblocks around Bridge of Weir and send up the police helicopter again to sweep the wider area to try to find the Jersey registered *Fiat Doblo*. With her priority email finalised, she hesitated before pressing SEND.

With the wildly speculative rhetoric being broadcast continuously by the media, the helicopter team might resist, fearing being shot at by the snipers who were clearly professionals and might have other weapons capable of taking down a helicopter.

In the end, she held back on this request and posted her email as a Draft, worried about these risks and the high associated cost attributable to Project Artemis. And, given the time delay between these two *Fiat Doblo* sightings and the reports being lodged with the 101 team, her niggling worry was that this mystery vehicle might now be well clear and holed up in a garage or hidden out of sight, perhaps abandoned under a tarp or dumped in a derelict farm building before the snipers escaped in a backup vehicle.

Instead, she chose the cheaper alternative, asking her Artemis Team to issue a request to all police vehicles in the Glasgow Area to keep on high alert for the off-white *Fiat Doblo* with the registration number provided by Mary Devine, hoping those fitted with ANPR cameras would pick it up.

Minto was, of course, unaware that Franca had changed her registration plates front and back.

Still flying from her recent 'boost', Minto revisited the Operation Artemis file again and noted with surprise the damaged mobile phone found at *Bellavista* had not yet been logged at Govan Area Control. She checked the time: 09:13.

Suspicious, she called Registry at Govan who confirmed PC Elaine Chisholm was overdue, probably due to the heavy traffic at the usual early morning St James Interchange snarl up, as evidenced from the motorway surveillance cameras. However, looking at the M8 directly in front of her, the traffic was flowing slowly but steadily.

Elli Chisholm was late, very late which was out of character.

Had she been involved in a 'shunt'?

If so, why had she not called this in?

Mari Minto decided to check by calling Emma Vernon but using her personal mobile, given what had transpired earlier:

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"Emma, have you heard from Elli since she left?"

"No, Ma'am. She should be at Govan by now. I told her to sign off afterwards, she has a bad cold and she's exhausted. She's been on duty since six o'clock yesterday morning."

"No Emma, I just checked. Elli is not at Govan, She didn't arrive. Worrying, but she seems to be missing. I'm guessing you have her personal mobile number. So, will you call her for me and find out where she is, what's happening? I must get whatever info they can salvage from the damaged mobile ASAP."

"Ah. . ., Ah. . ., so you know about us?"

"Just me, so far as I know, and my lips are sealed. So, Emma, do it now please, and call me back on this number."

"Right-o Ma'am, on it right away."

Mari tried to concentrate on the email she was drafting to send to ACC Napier whose agreement she must have for her escalation request.

A few minutes later her executive police mobile radio pinged; the call was flagged as *Sergeant Emma Vernon*.

"Ma'am. Elli hasn't replied to my call. I left a message. But there's something very odd happening. We share a tracker App linking our personal phones. The App shows her car turning towards Milngavie, from Duntocher. Why would she be so far off course? But there is something else. Have you seen the 101 report from about twenty minutes ago that Bridge of Weir Control got wind of and have just flagged to the Artemis Team at Govan? A passing cyclist has seen a car which has crashed into a field of cows. The cyclist is not sure, but she thinks the car is unoccupied but it's hard to tell because of the cows crowding round it. One part of me says it can't be Elli's car. She's an excellent driver. We've been on the Knockhill Circuit dozens of times. Everyone says she's a natural. But if it *is* her car in the field, why is she heading for Milngavie? Could someone have taken her? As a hostage? Kidnapped her then ditched her car. Should I check out the car or should I follow Elli's signal to Milngavie?"

Mari could hear from her voice Emma was sobbing, holding back angry tears. The last thing she needed was Vernon blue lighting at high speed when she was upset like this.

"Emma, I need you to be calm and **stay where you are**. Keep your phone App running and use your radio to contact the Artemis Team at Govan and keep feeding them Elli's location. I'll call them too, and make sure they know this is top priority and tell them to get a patrol car to Milngavie under your guidance. I'll also authorise an armed response back-up and someone from hostage negotiations, just in case. Ah, yes, now I have it, the 101 report. They've sent a traffic cop to the field to check it out. If it's Elli's car, Mum's

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phone may be there. I have the location details in *Google* now. On my blue lights I'll be there in about five minutes. Elli's car is a *Golf*, right?"

"Yes, a pale blue *Golf Cabriolet*, special edition. But Ma'am, please let me follow Elli's signal to *Milngavie*. I can still speak to *Govan Area Control* hands-free while I'm driving."

"No, Emma, stay at *Bridge of Weir*. Please acknowledge this order."

"Yes, Ma'am, I understand. I'll do as you say."

"Thanks, out."

Mari buckled up, started the *Honda*, floored the accelerator then hit the button for her blue lights and jitter siren. Using voice activation on her personal mobile, Mari accessed her speed dial list to connect directly to *Inspector Kate Mackenzie's* mobile, by-passing the time-consuming *Govan Area Control* reception telephone Firewall used to filter out spurious and nuisance calls.

Her PA answered at the first ring.

"Kate, patch me through to the *Artemis Team* and ask them to listen-in to this conversation. Then add-in *Bryn Evans* at *Rapid Response*. Keep everyone listening-in while I update him."

"Right on it, Ma'am."

"*Inspector Bryn Evans* speaking, how can I help?"

"*Bryn*, *Mari Minto*. I need a back-up team to go to *Milngavie*. We have a possible hostage situation. *Elli Chisholm* is off piste. She is supposed to be heading for *Govan* with a damaged mobile phone which may hold crucial evidence about the shooters. I've got *Emma Vernon* out at *Bridge of Weir* tracking *Elli's* phone on an App. The signal shows her heading into *Milngavie* from the *Duntocher* direction. We think she might have been taken hostage by the *Bridge of Weir* shooters because she knows something. *Elli* is the absolute priority, but the mobile is crucial too. *Emma* should be through to the *Artemis* team as we speak. They will patch you and your guys into her feed. Got all that?"

"Right, Ma'am, on it now. I have *Bob Thomson* and his lads parked in *Morrison's* car park at *Anniesland Cross*. Two unmarked *Transits*. Two ticks, please, Ma'am.Yes, we have go! *Bob's* squad is setting off now. ETA to *Milngavie Town Centre* is five minutes, give or take traffic and roadworks. We all have a direct patch from *Emma* too."

"Right, *Bryn*, go to it. *Kate* will monitor your progress for me, OK? You take charge on the ground, under my authority, OK?"

"Yes, Ma'am, thanks."

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"OK Bryn, OUT."

"Oh, and Kate, listen up, here is what I need. . . ."

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Molested

When Mari arrived at the field where the pale blue Golf was located, there was an ambulance and a police motorcycle parked on the verge by the hole in the fence. From his motorcycle registration, she realised the traffic cop beside the upturned vehicle was Sergeant Ronnie Mitchell, her father's golf buddy, his best mate, a sort of 'uncle'. She called him up on his radio.

"Ronnie, what gives?"

"Hi, Mari, it's Elli Chisholm. But the paramedics are puzzled. Her vital signs are good, no obvious injuries but they can't rouse her. They are suggesting she might be under the influence. It's as if she's been out on the tiles all night partying. I've sniffed, no alcohol but her face is odd, her lipstick is pale pink but there are smudges of dark purple, as if she's been kissing someone. Her hair is messed up and her blouse is undone. I've heard it rumoured Chisholm is gay. Is this a drugs overdose? We'll need to do full forensics on the vehicle before we can say how it ended up in the field. At least she is alive. The main worry is shock and post trauma stress."

"**Sergeant Mitchell**, that wild theory about Chisholm is complete rubbish. **Do not** let that become a rumour or I will come down on you hard. I know Elli and that is not her scene. Anyway, she's been at Bridge of Weir all night, doing legwork in the pouring rain, looking for clues. She must have been exhausted. Maybe she fell asleep, bashed her head in the crash. She'll need to go to Neurology for a scan. Tell the paramedics I said that."

"Yes, Ma'am. Sorry about that. Enough said."

"Ronnie, are you aware Elli was heading for Govan Area Control with a damaged mobile. Can you lay hands on it? I need to get it to the Techie guys to see what they can retrieve from it."

"Yes, Mari, I know, and I've already looked but it's not here. I'll have another look when the medics move her out. It's going to be a right bugger getting her up to the ambulance. I'll give them a hand first. Will I call Emma, give her an update?"

"Yes, Elli is the priority but leave Emma Vernon to me. I don't want to distract her just right now. OUT."

Back on her personal mobile she rang her PA in her office at Govan Campus, located upstairs from the dedicated incident suite being used by her Artemis Team:

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"Kate, we have Elli at the scene of the crashed car near Bridge of Weir. She is unresponsive, so far, although the medics say she is 'normal', whatever the hell that's supposed to mean. Anyway, get onto the Rapid Response guys and update them but ask them to keep tracking the App signal. It looks very much like they have Elli's phone so maybe they have Mum's damaged phone too."

"Ma'am, bad news, the App signal has stopped. Could be the battery is down. Emma lost contact near Windyhills Golf course. The fugitive could be anywhere. However, the social media monitoring team have picked up on an incident in Duntocher. A white van ran over a poodle at a crossing and killed it. The van did not stop. Some people have posted that it was being driven by a child. Most think it was a builder's Transit but the registration number reported is for a vehicle owned by an elderly man who lives in Torquay. He has it kitted out for transporting his disabled wife in her wheelchair and it is parked in his driveway, as of ten minutes ago. Our people are trawling the social media photographs and going through the traffic cameras, hoping for a correct match to a Transit."

"Hell's Bells! Right, I'm on my way to Milngavie now. Call Emma on her radio and tell her the good news about Elli and ask her to keep redialling Elli's phone. Let's hope the Apps will connect again. It may have just been a dead spot or an App time-out. Get hold of Ronnie Mitchell from Traffic and bring him up to speed. He's here at the Golf crash site. And let me know AT ONCE if he find's Mum's mobile. OUT."

Mari ran to her CRV, placed her mobile in the hands-free holder, turned on her blues and siren and gunned it, heading for the Erskine Bridge, unwittingly following the route Franca had taken.

Kate called back:

"Ma'am, great news. Emma's back online with Elli's phone."

"She has a location?"

"Yes, stationary in a business park near Milngavie Railway Station."

"It must be Crossveggate, where my Uncle Jim used to have his upholstery workshop."

Mari hit her brakes and horn together:

"**BLOODY TWAT!** Mondeo changed lanes without signalling. Almost shunted it. This traffic is crazy. I'm bullying my way through the St James Interchange. I'll get back to you. OUT."

Minutes later, Mari rang Govan:

"Kate, I'm just through the junction, on the M8 West, about ten minutes away from Milngavie, traffic allowing. Get them to patch me into Emma on my radio. OUT."

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High above the Golf, as the paramedics were easing Elli's stretcher into the ambulance. Ronnie Mitchell was reaching for the cluster of oval balls when the entire batch detonated. He was killed instantly in the fireball.

The two paramedics heard the distinctive 'boom' as the fuel tank exploded and watched as the car was consumed by flames, numbed by the horror they were witnessing.

As per the agreed protocol, the lead paramedic contacted her dispatcher at Ambulance Control. Believing the incident had been caused by an exploding fuel tank, her report was classified to the database as a 'car accident/fire'. The dispatcher authorised a second ambulance and sent a flash email to alert Fire and Rescue with a courtesy copy to the police at Govan.

With dozens of others, this alert was duly processed in turn but was not recognised as linked to the Bridge of Weir shooting incident. As a result, this horrendous news of Mitchell's demise did not reach Mari Minto until very much later.

In a further unfortunate twist, when PC Chisholm arrived at Neurology, the nurses used wet wipes to clean her face, removing the smudges of Franca's lipstick and her DNA.

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Aerial Surveillance

As Mari was crossing the Erskine Bridge, Kate called her:

"Ma'am, the Comms guys say the link to Ellie's phone has dropped again. But I have Bryn available, and he is fully in the loop. He wants to speak to you. Will I put him through on your radio?"

Irritated by the loss of contact with Elli's mobile phone, Mari barked:

"**Yes Kate!** Put them all through to my radio, that's what I asked for earlier, wasn't it? I need to keep both my executive and personal mobiles free for other calls, OK? OUT."

Bryn Evans came through:

"Ma'am, both of my vehicles are in the car park beside Milngavie Railway Station, in sight of Crossveggate Industrial Estate. They are on 'HOLD', waiting my authority to investigate on foot. The App signal from Chisholm's phone is down again. We have no sighting of a white van of any make. The car park is busy, pedestrians disembarking from a recent train, others arriving by car and foot and boarding. Everything as we might expect. No sign of any likely suspects. My team is in full assault gear. I don't want to create panic or induce a shoot-out with the terrorists. Our best guess is they are still around, given the timings. Ah, but wait, earbud activating. Ma'am, Emma is back in the loop."

"Ma'am, I think Elli's battery must be down. Sorry."

"Bugger! Keep trying Emma, it might be another temporary blip. Bryn, did you hear that?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Loud and clear."

"Right, continue to observe and act on your own judgement while I try to get hold of ACC Malcolm Napier and update him. I want a chopper involved to check the bigger picture. If this is linked to the Bridge of Weir massacre, we could have a squad of terrorists to deal with and we know they are liable to shoot to kill. It may need a very light touch. Softly, softly, catchee monkey. The last thing I need is more casualties."

"Ah, Ma'am, as you know, I am privy to his schedule of daily personal movements. The ACC is at Ibrox. They are hosting a mini conference on crowd management at football matches and Malcolm Napier is the main speaker. He might be hard to reach, he's being given the full hospitality tour and dining experience ahead of tonight's match, Rangers All-Time Greats versus Man United All-Stars."

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"Wonderfull!"

Mari's personal mobile rang again. Kate Mackenzie:

"Ma'am, I think I've found something. You will recall the flurry of *Facebook* and *Twitter* posts about a white van which ran over a pet dog in Duntocher. I use that route to get to my aunt's and so I asked Control to check back on the cameras at Erskine Bridge and we have a white *Fiat Doblo* crossing twenty-two minutes ago."

"Get Govan Area Control to post its registration to the Tech team."

"I did. It is the Torquay vehicle we were told about earlier. It's clear the Erskine Bridge van is using false plates. I think it could be the same vehicle the dog walker reported, the one registered in Jersey, the off-white *Fiat Doblo*."

"I agree. It's almost certainly the *Fiat Doblo* we are trying to find. Let me run this past Bryn."

"I already did Ma'am, by email. He has acknowledged. He is aware."

"Thanks Kate, brilliant work. OUT."

Back on her radio:

"Bryn, you've read the email from Kate?"

"Yes, Ma'am. But no matter what its registration number, we have no sighting of it."

"Bryn, these people arriving and departing by train, do they seem 'normal' to you? We have no idea how many shooters we are dealing with. Do you think the *Doblo* dropped them off and that they are moving away from us by train? The *Doblo* could be parked in a side street or one of the other car parks, maybe *Tesco* or *M&S*. We need aerial surveillance."

"Perhaps, but my gut feel is they are still here, hiding in the *Crossveggate* buildings with the *Doblo* parked inside. Remember, they have been out all night in a storm, they must be cold and wet and ready for some nosh and a kip. I don't see them taking a train at this stage, not all together. Do I have your permission to initiate a discrete search?"

"No Bryn, not yet. Too risky. This is a collateral damage limitation scenario. The *Doblo* could be anywhere. Give me a few minutes while I try to get hold of *ACC Napier*. OUT."

Mari rang Kate:

"Kate, we absolutely **MUST** get a track on that *Fiat Doblo*. The helicopter is the only way. It must be linked to the shootings at *Bridge of Weir*. I need to get hold of *Napier* right now. Ping me the best contact numbers for him and his *PA*. I want that chopper up and searching **ASAP**, please."

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Two minutes later, Kate rang back:

"Ma'am, I've just learned that the ACC's PA Inspector Gordon Gray is off with another stress migraine. Inspector Jane Hambleton is at Ibrox with the ACC, as his stand-in PA. I rang Jane and asked her to tell Napier you need to speak to him urgently, but she is blocking me. She says the ACC told her 'no calls whatsoever' and that he is 'currently incommunicado'. I happen to have Jane's personal mobile number. She might respond better if you speak to her directly."

"Mmm, the ACC is 'currently incommunicado' is he? Quite long words from our Great Leader. Well, thanks but no thanks. I want the Organ Grinder, not his Monkey. Ah, sorry Kate, no offence intended. Well, I'll try his executive mobile phone direct and see what happens. If he blocks the call, I'll leave a voice message then follow it up with an email. We need FULL VIGOUR on this Kate. Get a message to the helicopter crew, give them a SITREP heads up. Tell them to be ready for authorisation to take off in ten minutes, destination Crossveggate. I'll call you back soon as. Got that?"

"Yes, Ma-am. May I ask, are you intending to authorise the helicopter directly, without the ACC's permission."

"If push comes to shove, I *will* push and I *will* shove, OK?"

"He will not be pleased, when he finds out."

"Don't worry Kate. I have a really good feeling about this now. I think we've nearly cracked it! OUT!"

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One Way Ticket

On arrival at Crossveggate Franca parked the *Fiat Doblo* in front of her Unit, just short of the roller shutter door. Since leaving three days earlier to travel to her OBS in the clearing at the remote spot in the *Glennifer Braes* to launch the drones, she had been under constant stress, living out of the *Fiat* like a gypsy, changing outfits from her wardrobe of suiters, hardly sleeping, living on bananas, *Twix* bars and strong coffee. Physically she was running on empty and badly in need of a shower, a condition she did not notice due to her damaged sense of smell. Since her last conversation with Edwin, just before she executed him, she had not spoken to anyone, except Elli and her 'other selves'.

Leaving the engine running, she held a contactless fob close to a reinforced stainless-steel box fixed to the brick wall near the pedestrian pass door. This proximity device unset the first stage of the electronic lock. The spring mounted lid eased up to reveal an alphanumeric keypad. Depressing "F" and "V" and "S" together with her left hand, she entered the six-digit code. The system beeped while the twenty-point locking bolts and cleats withdrew around the shutter door perimeter. Using a Bluetooth App on her phone, she raised the shutter door to its first 'stop' at a height just sufficient to allow her to drive the *Fiat* into the pitch-black interior. Sensing the fob was now inside the premises, the system closed the shutter door and reset its security bolts and cleats to the locked position. Only then did the overhead lights switch on.

Now she was almost safe, waves of tiredness washed over her. To combat her fatigue, she pressed out three *Greenies*, swallowed them with the final drops from her coffee flask then closed her eyes for a few minutes to await the surge.

Re-energised, Franca plugged the *Fiat* into a stabilised mains power supply to keep the *DKS Control Console* operating on standby. She then set the console to send a 'Remote Alert' to relay any emergency signals from the drones to her master desktop PC at Kelvin Court.

Checking the countdown, with the drones flying in better weather, the servicing algorithm now reported she had thirty-four hours to spare until the drones required servicing.

Without Frances to prompt her, Franca was back in a tunnel again. She must get back to Kelvin Court to start the process of decoding Angie's USB stick then make her final push to eliminate the Serbs. Like the problem of her DNA traces at Edwin's place at Houston, all thought of Rita Minto and her mobile phone were forgotten.

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Removing her long coat. Franca-Julia tidied her schoolgirl uniform, added a Hijab, brushed the mud from her rucksack and hefted it onto her shoulders, reset the alarm code for her workshop premises from the internal pad then exited by the reinforced rear personnel door, heading on foot for Milngavie Rail Station where she bought a one-way ticket for Anniesland Station.

Her business unit was now effectively a mini version of Fort Knox but with the added feature that if anyone managed to penetrate its perimeter security system, the built-in and pre-armed incendiary devices would explode and destroy the Fiat and other contents. She had seen example sales videos where drugs labs had been reduced to sterile ash in under fifteen minutes.

As the Sicilian boarded the train heading for Glasgow, Sergeant Davie Dingwall and his ART squad wearing only sidearms dismounted from the unmarked people carrier to take up position to secure the perimeter of the small industrial estate ahead of the expected arrival of their line manager Inspector Bryn Evans.

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On the Move

Blocked from speaking directly to ACC Malcolm Napier, Mari left her message:

"CS Mari Minto here, Sir. This is about Project Artemis. I do not want to leave operational details on this device. Suffice to say only that we have a serious situation here at Milngavie and I need to scramble the police helicopter. I am available on my executive personal mobile when you are free to discuss this matter. If I do not hear from you inside five minutes, I shall authorise aerial surveillance. OUT."

Approaching Windyhills Golf Club with her blues juddering and siren whining, the traffic ahead began to slow and tailback. Mari knew this area well, especially the Milngavie village centre where she did most of her food shopping. Pulling out to overtake, she swung off to the right before the Baljaffray Shopping Precinct and began fiddling her way through the side streets, moving as quickly as she dared.

Mari Minto's personal mobile rang:

"Yes, Kate. How do we stand?"

"Ma'am, the support team from Maryhill Police Station have cleared the car park and evacuated all occupied units. Davie Dingwall's team have the Crossveggate perimeter secured. Bryn reports there are several units closed, unoccupied. We have closed the railway station. Scotrail have issued a formal complaint and intend to seek compensation."

"Typical!"

"Bryn Evans has found what he believes is the target premises. It is anonymous, windows shuttered from the inside with steel plates, ultra-secure doors, no letterbox, a dead giveaway for a drugs warehouse, he says."

"Bingo!"

"The premises on either side of the target are empty. Bryn thinks they may be linked internally. Both have similar secure doors and windows. His team has tried each premises in turn with a listening device. There is most definitely something active, possibly machinery but not actual voices although he thinks there may be people inside, keeping shtum or sleeping, resting up. There are no obvious CCTV cameras."

"If it's a drugs store there will most definitely be CCTV monitors and extra-special security, that's for sure."

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"Davie Dingwall says he is certain we have the right premises and says to tell you we are onto a sure-fire winner. Bryn says he needs your authorisation to enter to check it out."

"So, Kate, we'll need a Search Warrant from Govan Area Control unless I issue a 'Life at Risk Exec Order'?"

"Yes, Ma'am, and Dingwall says they might need Techie backup to beat the alarm system. Bryn is in the loop and has requested this through his channels. Area Control say it will take twenty minutes, probably more to get them over from Govan but they wanted your approval so they can generate a cost code to charge against the Artemis account. I assumed you would say yes and gave an PCO (Proxy Command Order) in your name."

"Yes, well done! So, Kate, first up, I've left our incommunicado leader a message, but gave him no details. Too much of a risk on his message service. To keep us in the clear, you must post a secure email with your update and ask him to call me at his earliest opportunity. His five minutes are up. Issue a PCO to the helicopter team and get them up over Crossvegate so we can see the big picture."

"Yes Ma'am, I'm on it now, typing the PCO as we speak."

"Good work. *Bugger! Bugger! Bugger!* I'm caught in a mile long queue on Drymen Road outside the Ski Club. Traffic jammed in both directions. I'm bullying my way back down Drymen Road to take the long way round to Milngavie, through Bearsden Cross and up over Boclair to Dobbie's Garden Centre then round via Auchenhowie and Murray Park to Crossvegate. *Google* says nine minutes, but I'll back myself to be there in seven."

"Right, Ma'am. I'll let everyone in the loop know you be there pronto, pronto. Take care."

"And remind Bryn and Dingwall there may be shooters *guarding* the premises, hiding out nearby. Hopefully the helicopter might suss them out. Tell Bryn to make sure his team keep their heads down. *I repeat, Bryn and his ART team may be in danger from snipers.* If they think they should withdraw, that's fine with me. Please God there is no more shooting. *Tell them to use their own judgement, on my Instructions.*"

"Got that verbatim. I've sent Bryn a PM (Priority Message) on the EMS (Executive Email System)."

"And Kate, we must track that App signal if it comes in range again. My guess is that whoever has Elli's phone may have Mum's mobile too. Ah, I've Emma calling on my radio, must go. OUT."

"Ma'am, have you heard that Emma is safe? Fantastic news."

"Emma, yes. Yes, I'm so relieved and happy for you both. Yes, I know they say someone dr"

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"Sorry, Ma'am, repeat that! Your signal is breaking up."

"Ah, yes, gotcha! Yes, I know they say someone drugged her. But you mustn't worry. I got an email from a friend at Neurology. They know now from blood samples what drug she was given and say she'll recover fully when it wears off. Where is her App signal now?"

"Lost it again. Look, Ma'am, this App signal, it keeps dropping out then coming up again if I re-activate the App. My last indication was her phone was near Westerton moving towards Anniesland. I'll keep trying to re-connect."

"Hold on! Emma, my guess is Elli's phone must be on the train that left Milngavie station about ten minutes ago. I know that line, there is a long tunnel between Westerton and Anniesland, remember?"

"Is there? Ah! Hey, I have the App signal again but it's moving very slowly. Next stop Anniesland."

"Slowly makes sense. We've closed Milngavie Station so the normal schedule will be disrupted. But that's good news, really. I'll try to get someone to Anniesland then. Stay on your phone and keep me updated by radio. Oh, and tell the Artemis team so they can post it to the log and share with everyone. OUT."

From her executive mobile, Mari used speed-dial:

"Kate, patch me through to the BC (Bridge Commander) at Govan Area Control and make sure you speak to Emma."

"Ma'am, from the schedule DCI Daniel Pattison is just about to take over as BC."

"Oh God, not Plodder Pattison."

"However, Ma'am, we may have a few minutes in hand. I imagine he is reading the logs as we speak, catching up. As you know, DCI Pattison likes to be 'thoroughly prepared'. From my experience of working with him, this will probably take him ten or fifteen minutes. Yes! I've checked, Ma'am and I think DCI Colin Campbell is still in the hot seat. I'll put you through to him. Good luck. No, **Wait**, please. Ah, another message from Emma. Elli's App signal has dead-lined again. Last contact was Anniesland Station."

"*Bugger!* But go ahead, put me through to Bridge, please."

"BRIDGE COMMANDER!"

"Colin, Mari here. I want you to get a couple of squad cars to Anniesland Station and I need a Search Warrant for premises at Crossveggate Industrial Estate at Milngavie. Both are top priority."

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"CS Minto, it's Daniel Pattison here! Be aware, I have posted a formal complaint to ACC Napier regarding your high-handed re-direction of my Rapid Response Teams. According to my information, both Evans and Dingwall are in Milngavie, unless of course you have re-directed them to another location, chasing your near-mythical Serbian drugs outfit. May I remind you we have established protocols and a chain of command which is routed through **ME not YOU**. After all, it is why we established the role of Bridge Commander so that we can circumvent impromptu and unauthorised actions such as this. I simply cannot understand what you think you are playin...."

"Daniel, for your own good, **BACKUP!** I need you to listen. We are tracking the shooters responsible for the massacre at Bridge of Weir. We are sure at least one of them is on a train heading from Milngavie into Glasgow. We think the others are holed up near Milngavie station. That's why Evans and Dingwall are there. And yes, I'm certain its drugs related. That's why I used my devolved authority and budget under Operation Artemis to activate Evans and Dingwall. If we lose these shooters now, this killing spree could go on for days. Who knows what their next target is? I believe the premises at Crossveggate is probably where they are headquartered. I intend to send Evans and Dingwall into that premises and capture them. That's why I need a Search Warrant from ACC Napier. What I need from you DCI Pattison, is a separate team to chase whoever is on that train. My PA Kate Mackenzie has all the details. And tell your people that whoever they catch is very, very dangerous. And I need you to act *right now*. I have a witness to this conversation, listening as we speak."

"CS Minto, you refer to "we". Does this "we" include ACC Malcolm Napier?"

"No, the ACC is not at present responding to his phone. We hear he is at Ibrox, at a football match and has chosen to remain incommunicado for the period ahead. That is why I must act on my own authority. It is what the Operation Artemis protocol demands. Lives are at risk here."

"Yes, I do get your drift CS Minto but be advised I too am recording this exchange. I acknowledge your requests but before I take any further action, I will attempt to contact Malcolm Napier myself, in my role as Bridge Commander. If I cannot reach him, I'll ring Willie McMaster."

"Willie McMaster?"

"Yes, Willie is with him at Ibrox, or did you not know that? Just leave this apparent crisis with me my dear CS Mari Minto and calm down. In future, stick to agreed protocols and do NOT, I repeat **NOT** authorise entry to that premises in Milngavie until I have had a chance to discuss this issue with ACC Napier. Keep this executive line free to take my calls. Goodbye!"

"Emma, did you hear all that?"

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"Yes, Ma-am. I have it recorded on my Body Cam. May I suggest you tell them to sit tight at Crossvegate and let this play out. I'm still trying to reconnect to Emma's phone. Who knows, we may get lucky and get the info we need. God, I can still hardly believe she is safe! I'm passing my phone to DC Urquhart Sneddon. He's been acting as my driver. We've just arrived at the hospital. I need to go and check on Ellie. Urq, take this phone and keep CS Minto updated. Bye for now."

"Right DC Sneddon, stay live on this radio link but I need to mute you for a few minutes."

Using her executive mobile in defiance of Plodder Pattison, she speed-dialled Evans:

"Bryn, Mari Minto. Give me an update."

"Ma-am, we can hear what sounds like computer equipment and there is something else which might be voice or singing but we are not sure. Do we have your authority to breach?"

"Yes, go ahead. I perceive what you have told me to be a Risk to Life scenario. As soon as the Tech Team arrive, go ahead and force entry."

"No need to wait for them, Ma'am. Sergeant Jamie Barrie, Davie Dingwall's number two has been on the B&E course down with the Met and he is confident he will crack it. Shall we proceed on this basis?"

"Yes, go ahead. I'm passing Murray Park as we speak. I'll be with you in a minute or so."

"Right, Ma-am. **Here we go! OUT.**"

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Kelvin Court

In the guise of a fictitious pupil wearing a dark brown hijab, Franca Vitelli left Anniesland Station on the short walk to Kelvin Court. If questioned, something which had never happened over the many years she had used this and similar schoolgirl outfits, her cover story was that she was Feray Veli, an orphaned Turkish refugee who had been adopted by the tiny, severe and reclusive woman called Ms Julia Smith who lived on the top floor of the much sought-after central tower.

In this role, like many other teenagers of her ilk, Feray was toting a large rucksack festooned with stickers and badges. She was carrying her phone in her left hand, checking it from time to time for alerts from the *DKS Control Console* inside the *Fiat Doblo*. This phone's alarm sounder was muted but set to vibrate.

In the right-hand pocket of her long green school coat, her hand gripped the butt of her smaller Jericho pistol, its safety catch set to 'FIRE'.

In her left-hand coat pocket, she carried her heavy fob-torch, an electronic key required to gain safe entry to her flat.

Zipped into the middle section of her rucksack was the evidence bag containing the remains of Rita Minto's phone. Packed alongside it was Elli's *Versace* handbag containing the policewoman's hidden phone, its battery now almost completely depleted having been in continuous use for nearly fifty hours.

Zipped inside the larger padded rear section next to her back, she carried her pistol with its silencer unscrewed, plus a few handfuls of egg-bombs taken from the remaining half-full box left at Crossvegate. In the smaller, easily accessible front section of her school rucksack Franca had her *iPad*, her purse wallet and make-up bag.

In the zipped upper inside jacket pocket beside her mini-wallet of six debit and cash cards in various names, she had a press-out strip with her three remaining *Greenies* and a full strip of ten *Blues* with another strip from which only three had been used. In her flat, she had several thousand strips of *Greenies* and *Blues*, enough to last her for the rest of 2014.

In the secret pocket zipped inside the cuff of the left sleeve of her school jacket, she had Angie Simpson's USB memory stick. In her 'dumb' back-up phone used solely to store key information, a device with its *SIM* card removed to prevent it being tracked or hacked from the *Internet*, she had a photo of the 64-digit alphanumeric code which the drone system decoder software had finally displayed on arrival at Crossvegate. Each

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time this memory flashed across her mind, she smiled as she reached out from her pocket with her gun hand to check the USB stick was safely in its hidden place inside her left sleeve before quickly reaching back to enfold the butt of the Jericho again, this comforting grip restoring her feeling of power.

From her main store at Crossveggate, she had added to the quick access Velcro-flapped top pouch of the rucksack a four-pack of *Red Bull* mini-cans, six *Twix* bars and a hand of five overripe bananas. During the train journey from Milngavie, she had eaten all this food interspersed with a total of four *Greenies*, each washed down with a can of *Red Bull*. Despite this high calorie meal and excessive intake of booster drugs, she was still very tired, desperate to reach her sanctuary, finding it hard to make herself move forward on heavy legs.

As the entrance to the exclusive block of Art Deco flats came into clear view, her *iPhone* shuddered. She stopped, entered the passcode and stared at the screen, stunned by the news that her Milngavie workshop protection system had activated due to an attempted breach.

Her mind jumped to the conclusion this attack on her premises must have been by the Serbs.

With the loss of a contact pulse from the *DKS Control Console* in the *Fiat Doblo*, the *Peekaboo* master drone was programmed to emit an emergency coded signal via a satellite link to Franca's phone App.

Her phone shuddered for a second time. She checked to learn both drones were predestined to self-destruct in a measure designed to prevent their recovery by 'the enemy' and preserve the drone operator's identity and deniability.

She recalled the section of the online manual and knew the two drones were already racing together at top speed to a pre-set emergency location ten miles west of the Mull of Kintyre where, on reaching twenty-thousand feet they would explode into microscopic particles. In the aftermath, tiny clouds of radioactive dust from their miniature nuclear reactors would spread on the winds, diffusing, soon becoming undetectable.

Around fifty paces from the entrance to the iconic flats, Franca lowered herself to a crouch between two parked cars while she tried to make sense of her new situation.

How could she be sure it was the Serbs?

Surely it could not be the Police when they knew nothing about her.

Could it be Raffa, punishing her for Angie and the others?

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There was no better place to find out than in her computer laboratory, unless it too had been breached. She interrogated the 'HOME' app on her phone which re-assured her that her flat was 'SECURE'.

Rising, her legs felt weak and wobbly.

Inside her head an unknown voice screamed:

Scappa! (Escape!)

Fuggi! (Run away!)

Ducking down again, swinging her rucksack from her back she pretended to tie a shoelace. After a fumbling struggle she pressed out her remaining three *Greenies*, washing them down with a further can of *Red Bull*. The effect on her nervous tummy brought an acid burn of vomit to her throat which she gagged back and swallowed.

Closing her eyes, she waited for the surge she needed.

Holding the grab handle of the rucksack in her left hand, she used her index finger to check the safety on the Jericho pistol was still set to 'FIRE' then moved it to caress the trigger.

Rising for a second time, she moved forward, slowly at first then more quickly, her eyes scanning right and left for possible assailants. She pressed the door entry system code into the communal keypad and the main entry door swung open. Franca eased herself inside and after a short delay, the door swung closed behind her and the lock re-engaged with a loud click. Everything seemed normal. She moved ahead quickly and pressed the call button to open the lift door, slipped inside and pressed for the top floor.

At this point, the battery in Elli's phone expired completely.

As the lift door was about to close Franca was joined by a hard-faced, fifty-something woman in a loose-fitting jogging outfit, a face Franca did not recognise as a neighbour:

"Hi-yah, way too hot for-a-jog, eh?" (*"Hi, too hot for a jog, eh?"*)

Franca-Julia reached forward and pressed a floor destination button.

The woman wrinkled her nose and added:

"Hey. Ya want-a big *Geen Gima-a-lat* beforr-a dinn-a? Me too! You hav-a-take-a *pain ta-get-ta gain*, eh?"

(*"Hey, you want a big Gin Gimlet before dinner? Me too! You have to take the pain to get the gain, eh?"*)

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The schoolgirl Feray Veli, shrugged, faked incomprehension and kept her eyes on the woman's feet while gripping the pistol tighter inside her right pocket.

The woman added:

"Too right! Dawn-wanna get hook on-a too much-a *Geen*. Yoo stick *Koh-raan* an-a-fine you-sell-a nice man."

("Too right! Don't get hook on too much *Gin*. You stick *Koran* and find yourself nice man.")

The lift stopped and the door opened at the third floor.

"Ah, hee-a wee-arrrr-a now. Home a-lass. See ya!"

("Ah, here we are now. Home at last. See you!")

The woman exited, the lift door closed and Franca continued upwards alone.

Outside the door to her flat, she checked both ways to be sure the corridor was empty before beginning her entry sequence.

An odd feature of her flat was the absence of a letterbox, doorbell, or nameplate.

For snail mail she used a rented mailbox and for *Amazon* and other online shopping deliveries she had Victor Surtanni, a shadowy character who ran a DIY supplies shop nearby. Victor liked to smoke the best Cannabis in exchange for a no-questions-asked drop-off service for the mousy Ms Julia Smith. This was her carrot. Her stick was a print-out of a selection of summaries from his medical records which she had passed to him in an unmarked envelope. This dossier revealed that in his twenties, Surtanni had undertaken several years of out-patient talk therapy counselling for exposing himself to children in play parks, skulking in the bushes, near public toilets.

The anonymous door to Ms Julia Smith's flat was ultra-secure, incorporating a heavy mesh of titanium steel with eight motorised bolts controlled by the alarm system. The whole package guaranteed as impenetrable was a modified version of the type normally fitted to panic rooms in the homes of celebrities and other high-profile people. It had cost Euro 138,000 equivalent, paid in *Bitcoin*, delivered, installed and commissioned by a Swiss crew during the complete refurbishment of the flat before she had first moved in. Since then, no other person had been allowed inside.

Re-entering her flat was always a moment of high tension for Franca. As with the workshop at *Crossvegate*, any error in the access sequence, however small, would cause the entire flat to explode and burn spectacularly, a feature designed to destroy any evidence which may be of value to police or rivals trying to force entry. There were no second chances, no warnings, no default sequences.

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She lowered the rucksack to allow her to use both hands. Releasing her grip on the pistol, she moved to retrieve her 'torch', a disguise for the bulky access proximity fob needed to open the door. Pressing the button on the base of the torch shaft to release the outer tubular casing, she eased it back, extending the torch shaft to reveal sixteen rings of tiny buttons comprising a total of two hundred and fifty-six buttons marked with numerals, letters, and mathematical symbols.

Holding the outer tube in her left hand and working entirely from memory, her right index finger began pressing buttons, four per ring, moving downwards from ring one to ring sixteen, she entered the sixty-four-part sequential code to prime the torch LED bulb for transmission. To complete this preparation, she slid the outer tubular cover back into place and locked it with a sharp twist. With the torch restored to its disguised appearance, she 'rested' its lens tip gently against the unmarked part of the door frame where the tiny light sensor was concealed.

Then came the final, nerve shredding act when she pressed and held down firmly on the torch button, causing the high-speed flashing of the LED bulb to transmit the 64-character release code to the security system. As a back-up, this first stage activated multiple pinhole cameras located on the door frame which scanned her head and shoulders to create a 3-D image for comparison with its database.

After a short wait, she was rewarded by a very faint dinging confirming the system had been disarmed. This was soon followed by a low hum as the perimeter bolts were withdrawn.

Taking a deep breath, with the torch lens still held in place over the tiny sensor, she fired a repeat of the 64-character release code to the system while simultaneously pushing hard to swing the heavy door open.

The wide internal corridor ahead of her was clear. Her mannikin of Dolly Parton in a skimpy top smiled at her from the lounge. The opening bars of Peters and Lee singing "Welcome Home" drifted from her Linn Audio system in her recording studio, equipment which had cost more than £250,000.

Everything seemed normal. Lifting her rucksack with her free hand she smiled widely: the idea of a Gin Gimlet appealed. Lost in the euphoria of relief and humming along with Dolly, she slipped the fob torch into her rucksack, tugged her hijab free, shook out her ponytail, ran her fingers through her chestnut brown real hair wig and made to step forward to safety and comfort after her ordeal.

The tiny dart hit her neck close to her carotid artery. Franca Vitelli slumped to the ground. The dose was not in itself lethal. It was intended to be temporary, lasting only a few minutes but, given her exhaustion and the other chemicals swirling in her tiny body, it would put her out of action for many hours.

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The assailant rose from his crouched position and whispered in Serbian.

"Marta, dođi, imamo posla." (Marta, come, we have work to do.)

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During their first sweep, the Serbs found Rita Minto's damaged phone, Elli's 'dead' phone and two other phones which belonged to the tiny girl-woman. These phones they immediately powered down, removing the phone SIM and data cards, securing each phone and its cards in a separate Ziplock pouch. Shredding her jacket, rucksack and other clothing to confetti sized pieces, they eventually found Vera Verdi's USB memory stick in the sleeve of Franca's jacket.

These items were then placed in an odd, oval metal container which looked like a large shiny Easter egg, a device which incorporated a Faraday cage to protect its contents from electrical and electronic signals.

Intrigued by its weight and odd appearance, Marta slipped Franca's 'torch' into her handbag.

To be extra sure, the woman also checked the Sicilian's anal and vaginal passages then bound her hands behind her back and her ankles with cable ties, gagging her with a pair of knickers held in place with duct tape then covering her head with a black drawstring hood they had brought for the purpose.

Working as a well-trained team, they systematically and professionally ransacked the entire flat, stacking potential key items in the corridor, close to the exit door. Mostly these items were electrical or electronic devices where USB sticks or electronic client lists might be hidden.

When they left, the Serbs did not observe the required exit protocol and the system countdown began.

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Annihilation

When the signal from PC Elaine Chisholm's phone dropped out for a final time, PC Urq Sneddon failed to notice, distracted by the busy Police radio traffic from which he had garnered that eleven members from the Rapid Response Group had been annihilated when the Crossveggate premises they were attempting to breach had exploded in a massive firebomb. Not for the first time Sneddon was relieved to have been rejected for firearms training twenty years earlier, his 'under pressure' target shooting having been classified as 'wild and erratic'.

From his recent spell of riding a desk at Govan Area Control, Urq had long ago learned to check the restricted Facebook page operated by the Police Scotland Social Media Monitoring Group to get the best up to date inside information of what was happening on the ground. Using his personal phone and his previous access details, he was able to browse the most recent postings where he read a 'priority/high profile' message posted by a lady playing lawn bowls at the nearby Milngavie Bowling Club.

In her Tweet Councillor Marion Ferris (Independent) had claimed the premises had been destroyed by a terrorist rocket which she claimed to have seen dropping out of the Sun from the direction of Glasgow Airport. Ms Ferris was on record as a vociferous opponent of the airport and the noise disturbance effects which aircraft landings and take-offs caused her constituents and their pets.

Based on this report, the Police helicopter had been immediately scrambled by a tetchy DCI Daniel Pattison in the belief that the entire Crossveggate incident had been a terrorist attack, probably linked to recent unrest in Northern Ireland where his brother and his family were still farming in the borderlands between Ulster and the Republic.

In the wake of the Milngavie explosion, ACC Malcolm Napier had been retrieved from Ibrox Stadium by his driver and was now being transported under a noisy high-speed motorcycle escort. As his cavalcade bullied its way through the traffic to Milngavie, the ACC was quaffing strong, sweet black coffee, attempting to counter the effects of the copious amounts of free 'off-duty' alcohol he had been drinking over the last few hours.

Napier was heading to Milngavie to seize the opportunity to boost his media profile. If this meant sacrificing CS Mari Minto to the newshounds, so be it. Her obsession with a link between the Bridge of Weir incident and a phantom Serbian drugs gang had already frittered away thousands of man hours and other resources. From his experience, he was sure the Bridge of Weir shooter would turn out to be a deranged ex-soldier with a grievance against the 'idle rich'.

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In the next hour, as other spurious reports of missiles and rifle toting men dressed in fatigues and wearing balaclavas flooded *Facebook* pages, *Twitter* feeds and the 999 switchboard, Elli's phone search was deleted from the list of priority actions. As a result, there was no last known location for Elli's phone. In the witch hunt to follow, it would take Police Scotland and *Vodafone* several days to verify Chisholm phone's movements before it had stopped transmitting at Kelvin Court.

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After the blast, leaving her car on Glasgow Road two hundred metres from Crossveggate, Mari Minto was edging her way through swirling crowds to stand just outside the blue and white tape cordon, tears streaming down her face as she looked at the mangled remains of the industrial unit. The air was filled with the sound of whooping sirens and juddering sounders. Overhead the approaching beat of helicopter rotors added to the sense of doom.

Mari already knew from a flash text from Kate Mackenzie that everyone in Davie Dingwall's RRT squad plus Bryn Evans was presumed dead. Kate had also advised that the Artemis Team at Govan had issued a request for a bomb search and disposal team which had been scrambled from Faslane naval base, expected at Milngavie in about thirty minutes.

After reading these messages on her executive mobile, Minto had turned the device off.

Later, during the subsequent and inevitable internal analyses for 'The Milngavie Event', this seemingly inexplicable action would be defended by her appointed QC as '*a natural human response to the trauma overload caused by the devastating and diabolical news she had just received*'.

In theory, as the most senior police officer at the scene, CS Minto should have taken charge, but she was temporarily frozen, a zombie, the earpiece from her Police radio dangling unheard by her side, vibrations from her personal mobile ignored, all incoming messages defaulting to her inboxes. Despite her rank, enmeshed in the crowd and dressed in civilian clothing, she was pushed back firmly by the more junior police officers from Maryhill, tasked with clearing the area, implementing the standard protocol to secure the scene for a future SOCO investigation, their aggressive behaviour driven by the concern that there might be other unexploded devices hidden nearby.

A rumour took hold and quickly spread, causing panic:

"Everyone knows these buildings are riddled with asbestos, the deadly blue kind."

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The first responders from the Fire, Rescue and Ambulance services had masked up as if for an NCB⁴ event before approaching the site of the explosion and inferno which had reduced Franca Vitelli's workshop to rubble and twisted metal.

A week or so after the explosion, the local man who had told the F&R Commander the site was riddled with asbestos was found and reprimanded. Alfie Millbank's well-meaning information had eventually proved untrue and his repeated assertions had severely disrupted the first crucial hours of the investigation, delaying progress and adding thousands of unnecessary man hours and costs to the final Artemis expenditure.

In parallel, additional ambulance and F&R rescue teams were arriving to provide reassurance and assistance to residents and passers-by who had been affected by debris which had been hurled over a wide area, shattering windows and causing extensive damage to properties nearest to the blast. Alerted by the news of the explosion, gas mains and electrical networks were in the process of being shut down as a precaution.

The vanguard of the media circus had picked up on what was happening and had abandoned Bridge of Weir, heading for Milngavie.

Kate Mackenzie had repeatedly tried to contact Mari to no avail. She later apologised for posting a message on her private *Facebook* account asking if CS Mari Minto, believed to be in the vicinity of Milngavie Railway Station, was safe, adding an image of her boss smiling, this snap taken at a recent gathering in Glasgow City Chambers to mark the formal ending of *Strathclyde Police* following its transition into *Police Scotland*.

At the make-shift police cordon preventing her entry to the railway station, Elspeth Maguire from Kate's church recognised Mari Minto's image from a re-tweet of Kate's *Facebook* photograph. Meaning to be helpful, Elspeth used her phone to take a snap of Mari's weeping face which she then tweeted back to Kate as a member of her large *Twitter* group. Unfortunately, both images were then re-tweeted by someone else in Elspeth's group. Within minutes the twin images of the smiling and weeping CS Mari Minto were now moving on from one *Twitter* group to another, becoming viral. These were soon picked up by the media circus, placing "Minto the Shredder" at the centre of the dual catastrophes at Bridge of Weir and now Milngavie.

As Mari Minto's numbness began to wear off, self-preservation took hold and once again the familiar thought recurred, growing in importance:

This must be the Serbs.

They have finally gone over the edge.

⁴ Nuclear/Chemical/Biological

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This is clearly an act of terrorism.

Are they watching and waiting for an even bigger target?

Am I that target?

Or are they waiting for a better, more important target such as the Chief Constable, Sir James McFarlane?

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With her brief 'trauma outage' over, it was time to take charge again. Further lives were at risk and the chaos she was observing could scupper her investigation.

Taking a deep breath, Mari blew her nose and checked her make-up. Almost automatically, she fiddled into her handbag, pressed out one then two organic herbal pills, sipping them down with a quick mouthful from her water bottle.

Replacing her police radio earbud, she re-started her executive mobile phone then scanned through her welter of messages before deciding these must wait. Had she checked her personal mobile she would have heard several important calls from her brother-in-law Kenny Dawson urging her to call him.

Forcing herself to concentrate, she looked around, her eyes moving slowly, carefully surveying the scene, checking for likely vantage points where the Serbs might be holed up, waiting for the right moment to re-new their attack.

Her mind reached back to Bridge of Weir and the previous arson attacks. It became very clear to her that these actions were linked, and that the ferocity of the explosions was deliberate, designed to destroy evidence at any cost.

The higher dosage reaction from the booster pills was quicker than expected. Her hands began to shake, her eyes lost focus, her mind was fizzing, making options and alternatives spark across her neurones:

*This was all about drugs - the Serbians - a turf war and **not** terrorists with a political agenda!*

*Had the Crossveggate unit been a Serbs drugs manufacturing plant? **No!** This was about wiping out the opposition.*

Only the Serbs could be so ruthless, so vicious, so blatant. Their track record in the Kosovo slaughter was testament to that with around nine thousand Albanians and others dead.

Were they hiding nearby? Watching and waiting for their next attack?

No, the Serbs were long gone!

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They had moved on, using anonymous escape vehicles which had been parked near to the busy Milngavie Railway Station, obviously a deliberate move to create confusion and worry about collateral damage in a shoot-out.

They had planted Elli's phone on the train and parked the decoy Fiat Doblo stuffed with incendiary bombs inside their opposition's drugs storage unit, after stealing the contents.

Then, watching on a CCTV link, they had deliberately annihilated the ART Team to include them in the rising death toll, their callous, wanton act designed to broadcast the message that they were now in charge, all-powerful.

Or - Or - Or - had they been caught in their own trap by Bryn and Davie before they could scarper? Had their leader blown them up to prevent them being caught and identified, made to talk?

Her eyes opened, her hands returned to normal, the fizzing in her brain diminished to zero. Taking a further series of deep breaths, her heart rate slowed.

Her mind settled on a plan.

The priority must be to remove as many as possible from the risk zone.

Then secure the scene for SOCO to go in when the site was deemed safe and secure. Even amongst this devastation there must be clues: DNA from dead bodies or residues with 'chemical fingerprints' which might lead to the explosives manufacturers and eventually to the bomb makers as had been found after the Pan Am 103 bombing over Lockerbie.

The answer came at once:

Containment!

She would order polythene sheeting to be staked out over the central locus of the destroyed building to give the SOCOs and forensic scientists a better opportunity to investigate. In parallel she would organise teams to collect and secure every piece of debris and log its location, following the protocols which had been evolved after Lockerbie, Birmingham and Manchester, documents she had studied meticulously for her Inspector's examinations a few years earlier.

Striding forwards, her head up, eyes scanning the scene, she made a beeline for the beleaguered F&R Commander.

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Whisked Away

When Kate Mackenzie saw Elspeth's *Facebook* image of a distraught and disorientated CS Mari Minto at the scene, she immediately speed-dialled Eric Ewing directly, fully aware he was five miles from Milngavie guarding Rita Minto. Like many others in the police service, to stay clear of the GCHQ police monitoring and recording system they used their own mobiles to make personal and confidential calls on *WhatsApp*. Both parties knew this off-line communication was frowned upon although it was not actually prohibited.

Now in their second year as an established couple, Eric had moved into Kate's compact mews cottage in *Glasgow's West End*. They had set up a joint savings account, hoping to buy a bigger home with a garden for children, when the time was right. Both knew that Mari Minto was aware of their relationship, hinted at but never discussed openly.

Unlike Eric, Kate was an only child. Her father was an inshore fisherman, crabs, lobsters and langoustines out of Oban where her mother worked part-time as a dental receptionist while caring for her parents, both frail but still living independently in a council flat.

Eric was five years younger than Kate and although they held the same rank, he was technically her junior. Eric, aged twenty-nine, already an Inspector, had been fast-tracked as a graduate entry with a First in Mathematics from *Glasgow University* and a PhD in 'Criminology and Statistics' from *St Andrews*. The youngest of three from a farming family in Perth, his brother Craig now running a large beef operation with his wife Lee with two sons Ethan and Drew. The grandparents, now retired from farming, had moved to live in *Edinburgh* near their daughter Gayle and her husband and three children all boys, Matthew, Isaac (Zac) and Rory.

At the Nuffield, Eric's phone vibrated on silent. Rising quietly, he moved from Rita's bedside into the corridor to take the call from Kate.

"Eric, are you aware of what is going down at Milngavie, the explosion?"

"Only snippets from police radio chatter and the flurry on *Twitter* and *WhatsApp*. And I had a browse through *Govan Area Control's Social Media* stuff on *Facebook*. It looks bad, very bad. I see the witch hunt for a fall guy has started. The media and 'You Know Who' will be looking to pin the tail. Looks like Mari is being set up as their donkey."

"Yes. Unfortunately, Mari did authorise this attempted breach but that's between you and I only. Eleven of our very finest gone, including Bryn Evans and Davie Dingwall. No

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wonder she is devastated. Someone has just uploaded an image of her on *Facebook* and its now on *Twitter*, spreading fast. It's obvious she's traumatised."

"Dearie me, I see it now on my *iPad*. Mari looks as if she is gone right over the edge."

"Eric, that's why I called you. Mari badly needs help. We must get her out of the firing line. If the media pack get hold of her in this state, she will be finished. I want you to go to *Crossveggate* and take her back to *The Nuffield*. I'll get hold of *Magnus MacPherson* at the *Southern General Neurology Unit* and tell him. He'll know what is best for her. My other worry is that she might be the next target for these gangsters."

"Right-o Kate! I'm on the move now. For the record, I have two uniforms at the entry door, just along the corridor, both armed. I also have two plain clothes, both armed. One is gowned up like a medic, sitting in with the receptionist, monitoring arrivals and departures. The other is outside, dressed as a gardener, litter-picking, patrolling the perimeter. We are also following the 'royal protocol' with all fire perimeter doors locked, physically sealed and fitted with wireless remote alarms reporting to a laptop at reception. Outside, in the street, I have a third DPC, unarmed, holed up in an unmarked *Transit* with one-way window panels. She's clocking vehicle movements and checking registrations on the *DVLA* site. With the resources we have, it's as tight as we can make it here. I'll call you back once I have them briefed. OK?"

"**Wait Eric!** As you know, Mari thinks it must be the Serbs, so please be very careful, no unnecessary risks. And please, Eric, no weapon when you get to *Milngavie*. If the media get hold of the notion that Mari has been placed under armed escort for her own protection, they will use it against her."

"Understood. OUT."

Entering his vehicle, he removed his concealed weapon and holster and placed both items in the secure lockbox bolted to the chassis below the rear seat of his *Audi TT*.

He rang hands free when on the move:

"Right, Kate, I'm in the *Audi* now, well clear of *The Nuffield*, with the blues lit up. Should be in *Milngavie* in ten minutes, subject to traffic. OUT."

"**Eric, wait!** I forgot to ask, how is Rita?"

"I've been sitting by her bedside for the last few hours. She was out for the count but just before you rang me, she started mumbling, whispering, almost inaudible. It was as if she was having a bad dream, perhaps the result of the sedation running out? Does the name '*Mirtello*' anything to you? I was intending to try it in *Google* first then ping it to you. It sounded like '*Frank* or *Franco Mirtello* or maybe *Mirtallo*."

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"No, I've dabbled them into our system, just Nil Returns so I'll pump it into the Europol portal here and see what it throws up. And Eric, *please* don't take any crazy risks. And please, please, *please* keep me up to speed. Love you."

"Ditto. OUT."

Kate's executive mobile phone rang almost at once. A *WhatsApp* call from Kenny Dawson, Mari's oddball brother-in-law, the Hippy-Goth guy with purple dreadlocks, piercings and roguish bright blue Viking eyes. Kate had met him only once years earlier at a family party when he got engaged to Mari's sister.

"Hiya, so it's *Inspector Kate Mackenzie* now. Good on you! Look, I can't seem to raise Rita and yes, I know she is down, damaged again and that you have her somewhere safe. Thing is, before she was crocked, she asked me for some help but I was busy at the time. Then, this afternoon, I remembered. I had an hour to spare and followed up on it. Well, what I discovered is red hot! So, I tried to raise Mari but she's out of the loop just now. The Milngavie Massacre, I suppose?"

"Kenny, we're under pressure here so stop being so mysterious and come to the point, please. I'm CS Minto's PA. You know that. Which means I can act for her, if required."

"Okay, *Inspector Kate Mackenzie*, coded message received and understood. So, you're a good guy too, or so I've heard on the family grapevine. Well, the gist is this. Out there, somewhere, hidden in the shadows, is a very odd woman called Julia Smith aka Molly Parson, aka Frances or sometimes Franca Verratti and a host of other names."

"Slow up there a minute Kenny, I need to record this, OK?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah but hey, *Inspector*, no need, not really. You see I've used VTT (Voice to Text) to put in all the details down on Word then into a PDF. Now, make sure you get it to Mari and that she gives it to Rita, OK? I guess only Rita knows why it might be important. OK? And keep this PDF in a closed loop, OK?"

"Agreed, fire away."

"Look Kate, I'm under pressure too, right? I need to go now to collect the kids from school and take them to swimming. Can I send an encrypted secure file to your personal phone. I don't trust the new Police Scotland systems. I bet you a pound to a penny your so-called 'Secure Logs' are being read as we speak by all the journos out there. So, remember, this file is for Rita, for her eyes only, password protected, sixteen numerals. Not too hard. Say to her 'combine the DOBs for two important people in her life'. Tempus fugit. Must go, *Inspector!* Enjoy!"

"Kenny, wait! How did you get this executive mobile number? It's supposed to be a secret."

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"Secrets? Police Scotland? *Aye right!* Your Firewalls at Govan a rice paper thin. Your techie guys need help before someone with evil intent breaks in to your so called 'citadel'. And tell Mari to remember that this Smith-Parton-Verratti woman is very likely to be, how shall we say, 'vicariously unpredictable' and very possibly high on drugs. Bye-ee!"

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Removal

From the firing of the stun dart, it had taken only fifty-five minutes to search the spacious three-bedroomed flat which bounded the strange inner world of the deranged Franca Vitelli. Under the close direction of their leader who had been KGB-trained, this search team had been ruthless and efficient.

A hand-held 'electronic wand detector' was used to screen the walls, floors and ceilings of every room surface and door, including cupboards. Unfortunately for the Serbs, this Russian made device was unreliable and, following a recent change of batteries, the scanner had not been set up and re-calibrated correctly.

Clothes and soft furnishings were shredded and scanned.

In addition, each item of furniture was dismantled and checked for hidden compartments then scanned. All drawers were removed, emptied, searched, their contents scanned meticulously. Every kitchen utensil and cutlery item was checked. The bases of every plate, cup and saucer, drinking glass and vase were diligently scanned for small, hidden items such as SIM cards and computer memory chips after which every item was crushed, its debris checked and scanned a second time.

Movable items designated as '*important and electronically sensitive*' were securely boxed and padlocked for closer inspection back at home base at Blairgowrie.

Each food item in the fridge/freezer was individually inspected, carefully removed, bar codes checked to be sure they were real, packaging scanned then shredded. If required, items were defrosted in the microwave oven then spread and chopped and crushed to mush and scanned again to ensure this residue was not harbouring secrets. Drinks and household cleaning liquids were drained into the sink through a colander, their bottles and containers smashed or shredded then scanned.

From dozens of hiding places bundles of notes in a variety of currencies were deposited in their leader's rucksack. At a rough mental estimate, he judged his haul to be equivalent to one hundred thousand dollars US, give or take.

To destroy traces of DNA or clothing fibres which might lead to them, the Serbs set home-made incendiary charges using clockwork timers set roughly at sixty minutes by which time they expected to be well clear with their booty packed into their van.

Because their scanner was faulty, they had not detected the powerful explosive incendiary charges embedded into the walls of each room or other sensors linked to the

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Swiss alarm system, a system used to activate a feature known as the Armageddon option, designed to incinerate incriminating documents and artefacts in a manner akin to what had already happened at Crossveggate.

With no intention of returning, they deliberately avoided the sophisticated alarm system console, failing to realise the inner exit pad was also finger-touch coded to its owner.

This was a bad error.

As they left, closing the door without using the correct protocol, hidden sensors verified the flat was empty of humans and the countdown began, Armageddon irreversibly programmed for precisely thirty minutes.

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A scruffy unmarked high-sided white Luton van eased out of Kelvin Court onto Great Western Road into heavy, slow-moving traffic. The driver was following the voiced instructions being barked at him in Serbian from his *Google App* now programmed to guide him on a journey estimated at 126-kilometre (1 hr 40 mins) leading to a recently refurbished country house perched on a hilltop 6 km from Blairgowrie.

Upfront in the cabin, beside the driver was Marta, Zivko's long-term girlfriend and business partner. Fastening her seatbelt, she had placed the 'torch' from the dwarf's coat pocket in the central storage bin, on top of her handbag. Earlier, in the lift from the woman's flat, she had scrutinised the device. Because of its disproportionate heaviness and precisely engineered finish, Marta had become convinced it must be more than a mere torch, suspecting it was harbouring important secrets. Later, when the tiny girl-woman recovered from her stupor, Martha was certain she would easily divulge how the torch worked, subject to a little 'persuasion'.

Like Franca, Marta liked to dress up, playing different roles. Born in Amsterdam, the broad-shouldered athletic woman, was self-conscious about her hugely muscular Rugby-player's legs and always dressed in full-length trousers or much more rarely, in full length dresses. In the rear parking area of Kelvin Court and hidden by the Luton, she had changed from her jogging outfit into a smart tweed trouser suit, a cream shirt, a high-collared blouse adorned with a cameo brooch with a thistle motif, her over-large feet in low-heeled tan brogues. This was one of her favourite outfits, used when shopping in Perth or in Edinburgh. In her mind, she liked to think of herself as a younger version of Princess Anne to whom she bore a passing facial resemblance.

In the rear of the van, inside one of many boxes in various sizes, was a larger box normally used to transport sound equipment for rock groups. This box was provided with breathing holes drilled at the end adjacent to the head of the heavily sedated Franca Vitelli, now naked and wigless. The tiny frame was covered in the leader's spittle, a mark

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of his disdain, dubbing her "bela lascia" (in Serbian, 'the white weasel'). Weals from his vicious kicks were already turning from bright red to purple blue from his earlier beating at Kelvin Court while trying to rouse her.

While Marta was changing and before instructing his men to seal the lid, Zivko had conducted a second more brutal search of her orifices, peering into her eras and up her nostrils then prodding his finger into her throat to check her tongue to make certain she was 'clean'.

In a final act of contempt, he had lashed out at her unconscious body with a vicious stomach punch causing internal disruption and bleeding.

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With the Luton on the move, sitting on this larger box, arranged transversely inside the roller door, were three middle-aged men, all medium height, dark hair, wiry, swarthy, almost identical. Two were brothers, the third an older cousin, their natural leader. All three were from a small farming community near Jevremovac, in the north and west of Serbia. They were dressed identically, with blue skip caps pulled low over mirrored glass wraparound sunglasses. They wore plain khaki dustcoats over blue open-necked shirts and blue denims with black Doc Marten boots. All items had been provided, their 'uniforms' for these special operations. Like the soldiers they had once been, it was their responsibility to keep every 'kit item' clean and freshly pressed, this regime subject to snap inspections by Marta.

The men were still wearing the blue latex gloves provided. Even though their hands were sweaty and itchy, they knew they must not remove these until Marta gave her permission. Earlier in the day, she had also reminded them that in the UK it was illegal for passengers to travel in the rear of the truck and for this reason, their operational silence was paramount.

Before she had locked them in, she had inspected their heavy brown plastic ankle bracelets, one on each leg, to make sure they had not tampered with them. According to her threat, if they tried to escape, she could use her phone to detonate them, singly, in pairs or all together, thus blowing their feet off.

It was almost always Marta who gave orders; Zivko seldom spoke. Because of her volatile nature, living on a constant high due to her heavy addiction to crack cocaine, these men were even more afraid of Marta than Zivko Marković, a psychopath who liked to be addressed as 'muj boya' or 'naš vođa' (Serbian for 'My Leader' or Our Leader).

Three years earlier, these men had signed a one-year contract on the promise of a US \$50,000 lump sum which would be paid to their families to be used to educate their children. However, once they had been smuggled to Scotland to become part of Zivko's

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'army', duped into virtual slavery, they were told if they attempted to escape, he would also punish their families by blowing them to 'u komadiće' (Serbian for smithereens). Trapped, they were clinging to their shared hope that one day someone from their past, perhaps a former army colleague, might assassinate Zivko and Marta and set them free.

If 'Marta' had a surname, these men did not know it. But they knew she was not Serbian. From her hair, eyes and skin colouring and her fractured Serbian and odd English, they thought she might be a renegade Russian or Ukrainian. Very few people knew Marta was the bastard child of a Turkish prostitute, father unknown, and named Melek Yavuz after her mother's mother. From her teens, Melek had been skipping from country to country, wanted for drug and people trafficking. If she needed a surname, she chose Black or White or Green or Brown or an equivalent for the language of the current country.

When drunk on Gin and 'crack', Marta frequently boasted she was also wanted for murder. On these occasions she would brandish her favourite weapon, an ultra-sharp surgical scalpel, acting out her preferred approach, simulating an attack from behind to despatch her victim with a single sweeping slash to the throat. Alternatively, in a tight spot, she claimed she would use this blade in an upward stabbing motion to slice open the victim's heart. This weapon was carried at all times, concealed in an ankle sheath, under her trousers.

Before ordering them to pull down the roller shutter, Marta reiterated her earlier 'No Smoking' warning. With the door in the down position, she sealed them inside with a long locking rod fixed in place with an expensive titanium steel six-digit coded padlock.

Although these men were desperate for a smoke, they did not dare to succumb knowing that if they stepped out of line, the deranged Zivko would not hesitate to punish them. Worse, he might repeat their 'initiation', a humiliation beating administered by Marta during their first week at Blairgowrie. In this 'ceremony', during a heavy downpour, inside a large, open-topped mesh cage, Marta had forced them to strip naked before lashing them with her snake whip.

Zivko watched while seated on his ornate 'throne' located in the rear of a Luton van, wearing a loose, knee-length blue smock decorated with a wolf's head embroidered in red and gold⁵. With his left hand he had videoed their ordeal with his phone, his right hand under the smock, masturbating.

The other fifty-odd 'slaves', (all Serbs) who lived in trailer homes inside the compound were forced to watch, as a reminder of their own initiations.

During the three years they had been under his servitude, the three men in the back of the Luton had been forced to witness seven betrayal executions, each following the same

⁵ Serbian flag is Blue and Red. Serbian national animal is The Wolf.

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slow process of mental and physical degradation and ending many hours later with the victim pleading for death. Throughout these humiliations, Marković had sat at ease on his throne, relishing the scenes as they unfolded, smoking hash and sipping Cognac, his dark brown eyes bright in his otherwise expressionless face.

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After a long, slow start-stop procession, the Luton was nearing a set of traffic lights now thirty metres ahead. Zivko eased into the lefthand lane to avoid queuing vehicles waiting to turn right. The *Google* voice advised of an accident ahead, recommending a diversion. Racing up the inner bus lane from behind, an ambulance blipped its sounder causing Zivko to accelerate and make the required left turn into Cleveden Road in defiance of the red light.

The traffic enforcement camera flashed.

The Serb grinned. He was using false plates, making the van untraceable. Like most of his other disposable undercover vehicles this van had been purchased by Marta on the *Dark Web* as a guaranteed 'reliable cut and shut', destined to be driven to a remote spot and torched when it had served its purpose.

The ambulance slowed and edged through the red light, triggering a second camera flash.

Completing the turn, Zivko's smile quickly faded as he groaned at the sight of the steep hill ahead and wondered if his packed vehicle would have the grunt to make it over the hill.

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Bingo!

Mari Minto headed back to her CRV, having reluctantly delegated the role of OIC to Avril Galloway who had also been sent by Kate Mackenzie to Milngavie to help.

Dreading what was to come, Mari was hoping for a period of respite in her mobile office, intending to speed read the current Artemis Project File and prepare for the expected bureaucratic and media onslaught which she suspected was racing towards her as OIC in overall charge of Project Artemis, an operation which was clearly failing, spiralling out of control and burning money by the second.

However, with the immediate pressure removed and the effect of the earlier organic boosters spent, the shock of the deaths of Bryn Evans and Davie Dingwall's team returned, making her feel guilty and exposed, heavy-limbed, lonely and slightly shivery, despite the warm sunny conditions.

As she arrived at her CRV, a beleaguered and bedraggled CS Mari Minto was intercepted by DI Eric Ewing. Eric was immediately filled with concern, seeing a colleague at the end of her endurance, pale, fearful, haunted.

After a brief call with Kate Mackenzie, who explained that her CRV was well known and an easy target for the media hounds, Mari accepted Eric's offer that she travel as his passenger and head to the anonymity of The Nuffield Hospital to be assessed by Magnus MacPherson.

At this stage, making Mari's mental health her priority, Kate was holding back on Kenny Dawson's recent *WhatsApp* call and his password protected report about a mentally disturbed person that Rita had called Frank or Franco Mirtello or Mirtella, a name not registered in the Europol active files. Because of Dawson's casual, off-beat style and unaware of the crucial information his PDF contained, Kate judged it would be an unwanted and unhelpful distraction for both Rita and Mari. For these reasons, she had merely posted the PDF to Mari's inbox with a note about Kenny's password clue for Rita.

In the Audi, with CS Mari Minto at his side, Eric Ewing drove back to the hospital he had left less than thirty minutes earlier. Without his blues and siren, he used the oomph of his Audi TT to skip past slower vehicles. Checking his mirrors repeatedly, he felt sure he had escaped the tailing dark red Mondeo which he thought he recognised as a reporter's car.

Stacked neatly on the jump seat behind them were the entire contents of Mari's mobile office removed from the CRV which was now safely parked in a side street, hopefully

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anonymous. On her lap she cradled her two phones and her *iPad*. At Eric's insistence these devices were turned off although Mari's high-speed mobile *Internet* router was plugged into the Audi and was active, available if required.

Unsaid, Mari guessed Eric's embargo was because he would know that the 'social media chatter' was likely to be unhelpful, perhaps even vitriolic, and that reading it might break her flimsy resolve.

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Unaware he was retracing the part of the route Mari had been forced to use earlier, he raced past Auchenhowie Sports Hub where he played hockey for the men's first team. From the roundabout near Dobbie's, he headed along Balmore Road aiming to turn off through Summerston, using his familiar rat run from Kate's flat to avoid as many traffic lights as possible.

At Maryhill Road, for no obvious reason, the traffic was at a standstill in both directions, grid-locked, unresponsive to his yipping siren and blue lights, trapping him ahead of his intended right hand turn at Kelvin Dock where he would race over the steep hill at Cleveden Road and onwards to The Nuffield.

In his secondary years he had been sent to Glasgow to attend Kelvinside Academy. For those years he had lodged with Aunt Ethel, his mother's eldest sister who worked at the Beatson Cancer Unit at Gartnavel Hospital. Back then she had lived in a spacious townhouse near the school. Now a widow, Ethel was still working at the Beatson as a volunteer counsellor but had moved to a modern apartment block adjacent to Anniesland Station, a building with a retained façade which had once been the Ascot Theatre and latterly the Anniesland Odeon. Until he had moved in with Kate, it was where he had lived as his aunt's lodger.

Glancing across, Eric saw Mari Minto was using a fragrant medicated tissue to remove her make-up; with her toiletries bag open, ready to re-do her face. Her eyes were closed, her jaw set firmly. He judged she was over the worst of the shock, fighting to get back to her usual self.

From the corner of her eye, Mari saw Eric watching her, wondering what he was thinking. Had he seen her swallowing back the repeated surges of bile as her body reacted again to the aftershock of the images flashing in her mind from the scene of devastation she had left behind? Staring into her vanity mirror, she could see it: the anxiety bordering on hysteria as she mentally ducked the boomerang of guilt which returned every few minutes to remind her that the deaths of Bryn Evans and his guys would be blamed on her impatience. The inevitable inquiry would ask why she had not waited for the Govan Tech Team to arrive and take charge.

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Doubt welled up; perhaps she was no longer fit for command, worn out, ready to step aside and take the offer of a 'sabbatical' with Europol HQ, at The Hague, in the Netherlands. Now that the spike of energy from the herbal pills had abated, what she longed for most was a safe, quiet place to sleep and to wake in the strong arms of Magnus.

"Ma'am, did Kate tell you about my update on your mother?"

"Oh my God Eric, I completely forgot about Mum. How can that have happened?"

"Stress, Ma'am. Think of what you've been through in the last hour or so. Anyway, good news. I think your Mum is on the mend, coming out of her deep sleep. Just as I left to come for you, she mumbled something about a "Frank or Franco Mirtella or maybe Mirtallo". Do these names ring a bell?"

"No, not names I recognise. They don't sound like Serb names, do they? More like names from another of Mum's *People's Friend* type stories, something she's working on."

"Kate said she would check it out. Shall I call her for an update?"

"Mmm. I wouldn't bother. Let's just leave it with Kate, shall we? I'm sure if she finds anything crucial, she'll let me know, pronto, pronto. Anyway, we'll be at The Nuffield soon. Maybe Magnus will agree to me asking Mum directly, find out what it is she is on about. But, since we are stuck here, I may as well fire up and find out what's going down, take it on the chin, eh?"

The traffic ahead started to move. At Kelvin Dock the Audi swung off Maryhill Road and raced alongside the Forth and Clyde Canal. Eric blipped the accelerator to pass a black taxi, shuddered over worn-out speed bumps then slomed around the first mini roundabout before standing on the brakes at a second one.

Under his original plan, Eric had intended to swoop down over the canal bridge at the foot of the steep hill which marked the boundary between Maryhill and Kelvindale. Leaning forward, he could see the traffic snaking up over Cleveden Hill in the direction of Great Western Road. The line was at a standstill.

This was an area Eric Ewing knew well and he was working out in his head the quickest way to skip past the blockage by wending through the maze of side streets jammed with parked cars.

Beside him, lost in the *Internet Mari* was skimming. She stopped at the at the copy PDF document from her brother-in-law Kenny Dawson, read the clue for the passcode, tried her guess and gained access. The file was named:

"*Response to your request on Frances Verratti*".

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She clicked and started to speed read, stopped at the word 'Bingo!' then returned to the start of the PDF reading more slowly. At the crucial section she exclaimed:

"Eric, listen to this. This PDF was attached to a WhatsApp posted to my Mum nearly two hours ago. It's from Kenny Dawson, my nerdy brother-in-law who runs a one-man computer consultancy from his home in Ayr. Kenny keeps trying to get me to recommend him to Police Scotland as a digital systems investigative consultant. Anyway, it seems my Mum asked him to check out a **Frances Verratti**. She called him from Bridge of Weir yesterday saying she had been shot at by snipers using silencers. At the time he thought she was fantasising.

"Anyway, Listen up! Tell me what you think. This seems nearly believable:

*Rita, re your request for info on **Frances Verratti**.*

*Frances Verratti is a woman who died in Dublin many years ago. She was an artist, a fashion designer and a much-loved sage at the time, running an agony aunt service. She was also a **very small woman**.*

*However, the person you are interested in is an odd woman called **Franca Vitelli** aka Molly Parson.*

***Franca Vitelli** is an enigma, a tiny, childlike woman who spends a major part of her life in the Dark Web, appearing in various karaoke websites as a Dolly Parton lookalike, wearing a full-on naked body suit. She is amazingly good, with all the actions perfected and singing in a high soprano which is eerily sweet but pitch perfect. In her genre, she is a cult figure with a huge world-wide fan base of like-minded weirdos. She often duets with an overtly gay counter tenor called Edwin McKindless from Houston (Scotland) who presents as Neal Sudaku, a Neil Sedaka lookalike. McKindless also sings solo tenor as Bario Lancelot and as Melvis Parsley. Sadly, for his partner Franca, dear Edwin is a much inferior singer.*

Although you may have to pay to join these shows, it's all quite entertaining in a bizarre way. I found a back door!

However, there is a sinister side to Franca Vitelli's bizarre Dark Web activities.

Recently she bought several very costly items of military ordnance, including powerful hi-tech incendiary grenades, an unmarked special forces pistol and an ultra-secret two-drone kit complete with a customised and mobile control centre built into a Fiat Doblo van. The smaller aircraft, nicknamed a 'Peekaboo' drone, is for invasive eye-in-the-sky-surveillance as used by the security services. This

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drone was developed initially by MI6 and GCHQ with CIA money. In full drone warfare mode, the Peekaboo drone can also be paired with up to thirty high-tech, stealth-coated Kill Drones. It's my guess that Vitelli or her accomplices used these drones in the shootings at Bridge of Weir. I am still digging, trying to get the full system details. I have some downloaded files. As might be expected, they are encrypted so more work is needed.

Franca Vitelli's digital fingerprints are also all over both the Internet and Dark Web as Julia Smith and sometimes as Angie Simpson aka Vera Verdi. Voice clips and phrasing pattern analysis of their messaging verify these three names to be the same person.

On a global search, I found another link of sorts between Julia Smith and Franca Vitelli.

There is a Julia Smith resident at Kelvin Court in Glasgow's West End who works for the NHS as a freelance legal adviser. Her NHS contractor's badge image is a fake, an image snipped from Google of a stunning supermodel from the Milan catwalks called Giulia Fabbri. BTW Google translate suggests "Fabbri" means "blacksmith" so I'd put money on this Julia "Smith" at Kelvin Court is the same person as our Franca Vitelli. Still digging on that, the property is owned by a shell company in Guernsey aka as Bloody Guernsey! and more often as Bloody, Bloody Guernsey!!

The cottage in Bridge of Weir called Courchevel which exploded at the same time as the other two is occupied by a woman called Angelina Simpson. Angie Simpson is listed as a freelance tour guide nearing retirement.

And Bingo! Angie's maiden name was Vitelli, born Greenock.

Her father is still alive in his dotage, resident in a locked ward in a fancy care home in Melbourne, Australia. I dipped into the medical reports on their records system. It seems Tomaso Vitelli has long ago left real life to wander alone in the dark forest of vascular dementia. As Tommy Vitelli, he used to own a fish restaurant in Greenock. Checking back, I traced his roots to Ercolano, which is at the foot of Mount Vesuvius, close to Naples which is well-known as Camorra country. I'd put money on finding a link between Angie Simpson nee Vitelli and Franca Vitelli and the Camorra! I'm still digging on that one.

My take?

The massacres at Bridge of Weir and Milngavie surely must be drugs related.

I'm trying to find a connection between Angie and Franca and the industrial unit at Crossvegate in Milngavie but no luck so far. I'll keep digging in the ether.

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So, Rita, that's it for now but, as I said, given what I've uncovered so far and given your medical condition, **I'm copying this info to Mari.**

Hope that's OK with you?

Get well soon.

LOL

Kenny.

(This time Rita, the Milky Bars are definitely on you!)

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The traffic ahead of the Audi edged forward a few car lengths, inching up the steep hill in the direction of Great Western Road, blocked by the traffic chaos which Zivko's *Google Assistant* had detected before diverting his removal van onto Cleveden Road.

Beside him, Mari was speaking urgently to Kate, organising an ART squad and re-directing the Faslane Bomb Disposal Group to meet her at Kelvin Court.

In his head Eric had a new route planned, intending to race past the blockage on the wrong side of the road and turn right into Dorchester Avenue to pop out at Great Western Road directly across from Kelvin Court, only two or three minutes away.

Ahead and high above the Audi, he caught sight of a scruffy white van as it crested the hill and began to speed up as it raced towards him.

Eric judged he had just enough time. Pulling out, he lit his blues and fired up his siren, flooring the accelerator.

At this instant, the Armageddon countdown timer at Kelvin Court expired. Franca's top floor flat at Kelvin Court suffered a double-hit explosion, instantly becoming a raging inferno.

At precisely the same instant the 'torch' key also exploded in Marta's hand. Both driver and passenger died instantly, shredded by thousands of tiny tungsten steel ball bearings projected by a force equivalent to a rocket grenade strike. The front of the cab was decimated, its shredded remains blown forwards, carrying with it the bloody remains of the front occupants, blood and mucous which splattered the Audi, obliterating the view through its windscreen.

Because of the simultaneous timing of the explosions, the noise from the Luton had masked the faraway "OOMPH" at Kelvin Court.

Carried by its momentum, the van lurched to its left, coming to a dead stop when the engine block hit a low wall at the entrance to a service lane.

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Fuel began to leak and there was a danger the van would catch fire.

Eric slammed on his brakes and stared vacantly at the red mist in front of him. Stunned by the sudden unexpected turn of events and unable to process what he had just seen, he tugged the lever to start the screen wash and wipers at full lash to clear his view.

Somewhere faraway he could hear Mari's voice but could not take in what she was saying.

Mari nudged him fiercely with her elbow, bringing him back to the present.

"Eric! Let's check this out. Another explosion? And not far from Kelvin Court. Too much of a coincidence. What's in the back of that van? Drugs? A Serbian hit squad?"

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Crescendo

At the instant of the explosion at Franca's flat there had been a low booming noise but, due to the peculiarities of the room layout and the rigidity of the structure, the noise was contained, muted, despite the second detonation as the Serbs devices reacted to the initial stimulus from the embedded explosives.

From the outside, the main sign that anything was amiss were the vigorous plumes of black smoke pouring from the blown-out windows. Closer to the external façade, tongues of red flames were licking upwards towards the flat roof and soon the plastic composite roof covering was ablaze.

Due to the seismic shock wave, dozens of house and car alarms had been activated, causing lights to flash and sirens to sound in a multiple discordant cacophony creating a weird sense that the end of the world was nigh.

Drivers and passengers in the slow-moving traffic on *Great Western Road* rang 999 in their hundreds to alert the emergency services, some claiming 'a sighting' of a second terrorist rocket attack like the one reported at *Milngavie*.

On social media platforms, wild speculation backed by real and fake images became viral. During a two-minute period, thousands of additional calls were made to the 999-service from concerned family and friends asking about loved ones known to be attending *Anniesland College* and *Gartnavel General Hospital* nearby. This overload caused what was later explained as a 'crescendo effect' and for several minutes the computer and telephone networks went haywire before automatically shutting down and re-booting slowly and deliberately, node by node, as per design.

This crescendo effect caused a temporary blip in *Police Scotland* communications throughout the *West of Scotland* area, still thought of affectionately by older hands as '*Strathclyde Police*'.

ACC Malcolm Napier, now at *Milngavie*, was isolated from his executive team at *Gartcosh*. Driven by frustration and the remains of alcohol in his system, he acted boldly and made his decision, despatching a message dictated to his stand-in PA (*Inspector Jane Hambleton*) who tapped it out on an *Executive Order* form using her *iPad*.

A compatible printer located in the railway station allowed the message to be printed and it was dispatched by police motorcyclist to be delivered by hand to the *Project Artemis Team* at *Govan*, commanding them to employ all channels open to them to contact *Minto* and pass his *EO* to her.

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The form contained the terse message:

CS Minto, it is clear this new incident at Anniesland is linked to the explosions at Bridge of Weir and Milngavie.

You are now in overall control. Devote your entire energies to this task.

Report your progress directly to me alone at thirty-minute intervals or less, if appropriate.

You are forbidden to speak to outside sources without my express permission.

I shall deal with the media.

Having dumped the problems fairly and squarely on her, Napier sent off his PA to round up the arriving media representatives from Bridge of Weir, the less fleet of foot, those who had not already diverted or left Milngavie hoping to fight through the traffic and reach Kelvin Court while the scene was still hot news.

Wearing his trademark fixed scowl, Napier talked at length on camera in a voice still slightly slurred from his earlier drinking. After several minutes of meandering through the issues involved, he ended with:

*"Now it is becoming clearer what has transpired here today, err-em-ah, and again more recently at Kelvin Court, err-em-ah, I wish to advise you that I have directly appointed CS Mari Minto, err-em-ah, who is one of our finest, brightest women officers, err-em-ah, to take overarching control of all three incidents. And, err-em-ah, in order to ensure her success, I have advised her she will be fully resourced, err-em-ah, fully resourced with all necessary inputs, err-em-ah, from each and every department to ensure that, err-em-ah, to ensure and **enable** her to bring to justice these terrorists, err-em-ah, and other miscreants who have dared to strike, err-em-ah, at the very heart and fabric of Scottish Society. Let me just add, in finality, that I am, err-em-ah, more than, err-em-ah, indeed, I am very, very confident indeed that CS Minto will, err-em-ah, achieve this goal as soon as ever it is, err-em-ah, a **quickly** as is ever as is humanly possible.*

Thank you!"

Had Mari Minto been aware of this, she would have raised an immediate protest as it gave carte blanche to 'everyone' to dump their budget overspends onto the Artemis spreadsheet, a trickle which soon became a flood.

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Having posted this rambling 'no fresh news' diatribe to their editors, the media circus packed up their gear and headed to the scene of the new drama at the Anniesland Art Deco building, the locals among them knowing it would offer a more interesting scenario than a smouldering pile of rubble at the hard to spell and frankly boring industrial unit of Crossvegate, located in the equally hard to spell and equally boring suburb of Milngavie.

Judging this expanding terrorist-cum-drugs-turf-war-massacre story would run and run for weeks, old media worthies were rubbing their hands with glee, thinking of their forthcoming expenses scams. The younger ones saw a wider and equally lucrative scenario in which Minto's enquiries would dead-end, leading to another series of 'failure scandal' exposé articles, yet more grist to the mill of a Police Scotland behemoth raging out of control with a massive budget overspend looming.

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Collared

Weeks later, detailed forensic analyses confirmed by computer simulation reconstruction of the Luton van explosion revealed the blast from the torch-key was asymmetric.

The dashboard, constructed of tough plastic, had splintered into deadly shards. One larger piece decapitated Zivko Marković, severing vital nerves and arteries causing instant death. The head, carried by the blast wave, was recovered a few days later from bushes on the walkway beside the Forth and Clyde Canal, more than four hundred metres distant, this gruesome find discovered by a teenage dog walker who initially thought it was a plastic fake, planted as a joke by her younger brother trying to 'freak her out'.

By contrast, his woman passenger was shredded to pulp, as was the remainder of the man's torso. Micro-missiles had also penetrated the rear compartment of the Luton but their progress was impaired by the many boxes in their pathway and the blast effect did not reach the three men or the tiny woman in the trunk they were sitting on.

Deflected by the engine block, the downward and outward shockwave which passed through the passenger glove compartment dislocated and shattered the suspension, mangling the front-wheel assembly. Thrown free while the Luton was still in motion, the right front wheel rolled off to the side and bumped lazily onto the pavement. Gathering momentum on the steep slope, it raced passed the Audi towards a heavily built figure wearing a long floral PVC raincoat.

Whistling tunelessly under his breath, Jacky Donnelly was shuffling, head down, debating whether he might risk the effort of bending down to pick up the tiny poop just deposited by his toy poodle. Attracted by the noise of the blast he glanced up in time to catch a glimpse of the blurred object hurtling towards him.

Jacky jumped clear but Mitzie was killed outright.

Donnelly, a reformed heavy smoker and drinker, five years clean and dry, recently 'self-outed' as a trans person was recovering from a triple bypass. Staring at the dog before turning to look at the van, he slumped to the ground under the effect of a 'ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction' (a STEMI). Another collateral victim to be added to the rising death toll, Jacky slipped over into oblivion with his large, beautifully manicured hand laid protectively on the corpse of his beloved pooch.

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Unaware of this mini drama taking place behind them, Mari and Eric hauled themselves out of the Audi, their eyes rivetted on the Luton van and the gruesome remains of its cab occupants.

"Eric, who *were* they? Serbs? What just happened?"

"Hard to say, Ma'am. Could have been a grenade or a IED that went wrong? Anyway, they are not able to tell us now, are they? It will be down to SOCO and forensics. I don't envy them that job. Horrific!"

"What the hell is inside the van, Eric? Drugs? Armed thugs?"

"Who knows? But our first responsibility is the general public, yes?"

"Well said, Eric. You do that while I phone this to Kate and see what she has on that registration plate. And I'll ask Govan Area Control for an ART while I'm at it."

Eric Ewing's recent training with the Met in London kicked in. He assessed the situation trying to work out a FSCP (First Stage Contingency Plan).

His Audi was stopped on the wrong side of Clevedon Road just beyond Dorchester Avenue, with his bonnet pointing inwards, about twenty metres short of the smouldering van, his blue lights flashing but siren off, forming the bottom limit of the crime scene cordon.

Popping the Audi boot, he donned his Police Scotland all-weather viz jacket and pulled on a pair of protective gloves. Stooping, he leaned into the Audi to retrieve his weapon which he checked before slipping it into the underarm holster inside his jacket, careful to shield his actions from the hundreds of eyes surveying the scene from the vehicles on the other side of the road and overlooking houses.

Sam Thomson pulled up behind, shouting from the rolled down window of his ancient black cab:

"Hey son, thurs been anither big exploshin ower there at Kelvan Court. It's oan Radio Clyde. Some posh wuman that lives there huz phoned in tae tell thum and guess what? She says she thawt the flat that went up in flames wiz raided by four men an' a wuman drivin a white Lutin van. She sayd tae the radio guy she's been tryin tae get through tae the polis on wan-oh-wan but she wiz stacked up in a big queue, so she wiz. Bluddy typical, eh? So, there ye huv it, son. Ah've dun ma bit, eh, fur tellin' yooos, like. OK?"

Sam lifted his head and glanced over the Audi towards the Luton van.

"Hey, fur fuck's sake! Aw God, that's hellish. Ah jist cannae staund the sight o' blood. Aw fuck me! So, thur baith deed, eh?"

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"Yes. Now, please sir, leave this to me. I'm Inspector Eric Ewing. Here's my card. Ring me in an hour or so, please, I may need to take a statement of what you saw here."

Then a thought occurred. "Excuse me, you are Mr ?"

"Sam, Samuel Thomson."

"Right Sam, would you do me a big favour and go along that line of cars over there and tell them that they must NOT get out onto the roadway or they will be charged with contaminating a crime scene. Make them stay locked inside their vehicles at all costs. We believe there could be armed men in the rear of the van, but keep that to yourself, please, we don't want to panic them."

"Sure son, nae bother. Did Ah say Ah wiz in the Terries, back in the day? Ah wiz a Drill Serr-jint, so ah wiz."

Eric made his decision to try to benefit from Sam's military training:

"Thanks. Good man Sam, and once you've got that message over, come back to my car. Look in the boot, this is a pack of a hundred mini cones. They flash on and off when separated from each other. Use them to make a cordon around the van, at say about seven metres out. And don't go nearer, for your own safety. Do you think you could do that for me Sam?"

"Sure, officer. Hey, did Ah say ma cuzzin's in the polis? Wullie McMastur. Dae ye know him?"

"Yes, Willie's a good friend, we have seats together at Firhill. Oh, and Sam, put on this viz vest and take this mini megaphone. Use it to keep them in line. You're our traffic manager until my uniforms get here. It's just for ten minutes or so. I'll call Control for back-up."

"Sure son, nay bother. Ah used to dig holes in the roads fur a livin' till big Wullie got me intae taxayin. Wait till Ah tell ma Mary aboot this, she'll never believe me. Hey, son, this is no' a wind up, is it? It's no' a fulm set fur a ree-doo o' Taggart, is it?"

"No, this is for real. Right, now **Sam, go go go!**"

Eric moved back to Mari at the front of the Audi. She had a phone in each hand, speaking to both parties simultaneously. She looked pale but her jaw was set in her familiar 'can do' mode.

Eric took the opportunity and turned away and made an urgent call on his personal mobile.

His call over, Mari spoke:

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"Right, Eric, very well done with the taxi guy. I've spoken to Kate. She's organising back up. Avril is on her way from Milngavie to help here. She's bringing the contingent from Maryhill. This could be a long day, I suspect. Now, from what that taxi guy told you, there could be three men in the back of the van, quite possibly armed to the teeth. Or do you think the explosion could have killed them too? If they are still alive, they may be our best shot at cracking this case. We need to try to collar them alive. Agreed?"

"Yes Ma'am, understood. Shoot to disable, not kill, provided it's safe so to do. Now, here, best put on a viz vest and a pair of latex gloves."

"Yeah, yeah, of course. *Oh My God*, Eric, when will this nightmare stop? I keep getting flashbacks about Bryn and the guys getting blown up at Milngavie."

"Yes, Ma'am. But that can't be changed so we need to fix our minds on this situation which is right in front of us. That's our job, to deal with the present, not the past."

"Yes, Eric, thanks. That's a very good reminder. Did I say I sent Kate a snap of the front of the van from my phone, so she has the registration. I told her what the taxi driver said about Radio Clyde and she confirmed she had read this on a *Tweet*. Although our personal phones are functioning normally, it seems the entire police comms network is disrupted, another system overload. But Kate's on the case, trying to cut through the chaos and she hopes to get us back-up here *pronto, pronto*. I've asked for an ART for back-up through the formal channels, but who knows if any of them will be willing to attend, given what happened at Milngavie. At best, I suspect they will drag their heels. And . . ."

"Ma'am, may I make a suggestion? If Comms are down, should I give Willie McMaster a ring to his personal mobile and remind him he owes you one?"

"Oh, the thing with Avril? Yes, why not. As ART Commander for the West of Scotland, he has the authority to act independently since clearly lives are in danger."

"Yes, apart from us and Sam the taxi driver, there are a few hundred others over there in those cars who are also in the firing line, potentially."

"Do it, Eric. Do it now."

"Actually, Ma'am, apologies, but I've already done it. Willie is rounding up his guys as we speak."

"*Well done Eric Ewing.*"

Eric ducked his head in acknowledgement.

"Do you have your weapon with you?"

"Ma'am, I'm already wearing it."

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"You have my authority to use it."

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Mari and Eric stood in silence, well clear of the rear of the van, relieved the tailgate door was secured by a heavy padlock. Less reassuringly, the roller shutter was rusty, flimsy in places.

Sam Thomson was now standing at the top of the hill, fifty metres behind them, where he had driven his taxi and parked it with its hazards flashing, slewed transversely across the road to prevent oncoming vehicles approaching the scene of the incident from the direction of *Great Western Road*. From time to time, he barked into the megaphone to scold any drivers or passengers who dared to open their doors to take selfies with the van in the backdrop.

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From the inner pocket of his viz jacket, Eric took a handful of plastic Flexicuffs, part of a kit received during his six-month secondment to the Met Police Drugs and Terrorist Unit, completed a few months earlier, ahead of his recent promotion and his appointment to serve under *CS Minto* as her mobile PA. Surreptitiously, he eased his weapon out and held it by his side.

The stand-off scene was attracting a growing audience. Below, at the foot of the hill, beside the corpses of *Jacky* and *Mitzie*, was a crowd of elderly dog-walkers waiting for an ambulance. At the crest of the hill close to *Sam Thomson*, was a larger crowd of teenage boys dressed in assorted football kits. These youngsters had been playing a bounce game of five-asides at the pitches near to *Cleveden High School*.

About twenty others, pedestrians, a mix of old and young including a few mothers with pushchairs, were standing at the edge of the cordon of mini cones, staring at the wrecked front of the van, subdued by the ghastly sight. *Mari* wished they would disperse for their own safety but did not want to cause panic or speculation by advising them of the likelihood the *Luton* van contained three potentially violent drugs heist suspects. Given what she knew of the usual behaviour of onlookers in these situations, anything she or *Eric* might say would be immediately shared on their social media accounts.

"Eric, holster your weapon meanwhile. And put those cuffs out of sight, please. Given what happened at *Milngavie*, I don't intend to escalate this situation. Did I say I asked *Kate* to send the RN Bomb Disposal guys from *Faslane* to support us here? We must wait them out until we get the full team in place. If they had intended to blow themselves up, I suspect they would have done so already."

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"Ma'am, as you said, they may be injured but hopefully not badly. At a minimum, they must be traumatised. May I suggest we try to find out? If they are injured and need help, we could use that to our advantage."

"Eric, this is a containment operation but if they try to escape, then the game changes. I agree, but if they are injured, it would be galling if they bled to death in there."

You think we should try to speak to them? We might need to source a Serbian translator, unless that's another of your hidden skills?"

"Well, actually Ma'am, I do have an idea."

"Yes?"

"I have a high-tech stethoscope in my inside pocket. It's from the Met course. I might be able to hear them from the side panel."

"Eric Ewing, you never cease to amaze me. Right, let's go, we'll do it together."

Standing at the nearside of the van, hidden from the traffic and most of the onlookers, Eric listened, his eyes closed, concentrating. The voices were muffled, harsh, angry, speaking a language he did not comprehend. One deeper grumble was dominant, two other male voices higher pitched, sounding cowed, afraid.

Closer to the van, he saw the siding was split and twisted near the lower corner where the upright met the horizontal kerb of the rear door. Holding his mobile phone against the small crack he began recording with his earbud in place and using the *Google Translate App* set to 'detect language'.

After a few false starts and a delay, the App displayed - '*Serbian to English*'.

Eric read the App translation on his phone screen with Mari reading it alongside him:

"Listen, we must take a chance. Those two bastards in the front must be dead, Šta? Keep quiet and listen to me, this is a hijack. Whoever it is, Sergio Grazioni or Angie Simpson, they know they must kill us too, Šta? They must think we know too much."

"But Vlado, we don't know anything, not really."

"They will torture us."

"Maybe it's the Police? Šta?"

"No Aleks, no. If it was the police, there would be sirens."

"We could try to kick out the back door and make a run for it. We could try to get home."

"Home? But how the hell do find our way home when we have no idea where we are? Šta?"

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"We could do it if we had a phone."

"Look, Tomás, you know we don't have a phone, so why mention it? We have **nothing**, we are naked just like the pigmy woman in there. If the two in the front are dead, good riddance. **Šta?**

"Yes, me too brother, I agree, we should have never come here to Scotland to work for that bastard Zivko Marković."

"At least now that bitch Marta is dead, she cannot blow our feet off, can she?"

"Who knows if she is dead? Who cares. Bastards."

"If they were not dead, we would hear them shouting."

"Are you sure we are alone, Vlado? **Šta?**"

"Yes, I say those bastards are dead. We **are** alone against the hijackers. We have to resist them, for our honour, even with just our bare hands. And pull yourself together Tomás, stop weeping like a baby. And you too, Andreas, stiffen up, man. Trust me, I, Vlado Rasković will get us out of here. We must stick together. **No Tomás! No smoking. Can't you smell the fuel? And remember, . . .**"

Eric backed away out of earshot to discuss this new information with Mari:

"So, what do you think, Eric?"

"Three men, one dominant. Underlings, not the main players. Unarmed, no phones. Possible third person, captive. Is she Franca Vitelli? The description fits. Have they abducted her from Kelvin Court? And who is Sergio Grazioni? Where does he fit in?"

"Eric, good analysis. I agree. So, we wait it out. Ping that information from your phone to Kate and then ring her and tell her we need a second secure lockdown room at The Nuffield under Magnus for Ms Franca Vitelli. Tell Kate we also need a lockdown back-up squad for her and a restraining suit in a small size."

The men in the van decided to make their move and began thumping at the inside of the roller shutter door causing it to bulge and break free of its mountings at the rear inside edge near to where Eric had been standing.

In the distance a siren began to sound. Mari whispered to Eric who set his Google Translate App for 'English to Serbian' and pressed to record.

CS Mari Minto stepped closer to the van and thumped the offside panel with the flat of her gloved hand then stooped and shouted into the small gap in the panneling:

"This is the Police. Vlado Rasković and Tomás and Andreas, you are surrounded by armed officers. You will be taken into custody and treated fairly in accordance with

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the laws of Scotland. Both of your colleagues from the driver's cabin are dead, killed by an explosion. I repeat, Zivko Marković is dead. You are on your own now. Stand back from the door and stay silent. You may NOT smoke. Only because it is unsafe. Later, you may be allowed to smoke, but only if you cooperate."

The kicking and banging at the shutter door ceased.

With the App set to play on maximum volume, Eric stepped closer and held his phone at the gap in the siding and pressed PLAY.

The App repeated Mari's message in Serbian.

The deeper voice of Vlado rumbled:

"Yoos sure-ah to us the beetch Marta is too dead?"

"Yes, both occupants from the front cabin are dead."

"Онда можемо кући. **Šta?**"

Eric showed the translation to Mari:

"Then we can go home. Yes?"

Mari ignored this and asked:

"Is the woman Franca Vitelli with you?"

"**Šta.**"

"Is she alive?"

There was no reply.

"**Is Franca Vitelli alive?**"

"**NE!** No, I check-ed. She dead. Too much drug off Marta. How you say, повраћати?"

Eric whispered: "Vomit."

Two unmarked people carriers arrived at the end of Dorchester Avenue, no flashing lights, no sirens.

In silence, Willie McMaster and two teams of ten armed officers in protective gear spilled out, moving quickly at a crouching run to surround the Luton van, weapons focused on the rear shutter door.

"**Vlado, do you know the numbers for the padlock?**"

"**Šta.** But yoos say no to shoot us, for sure? **Šta?**"

A is for Artemis

"Vlado and Tomás and Andreas I promise we shall not shoot unless you try to run."

Eric transmitted this in Serbian. After a brief round of whispering, the reply came:

"OK. Kod je šest, osam, cetiri, sedam, dva, devet."

Eric showed Mari the translation - 'six, eight, four, seven, two, nine'.

A is for Artemis

Washup Review

The final review took place at Gartcosh Crime Campus six weeks after the long two days in May when Operation Artemis had successfully tackled the events described above.

This meeting was attended by ACC Malcolm Napier who had just announced his early retirement, effective from 31 July putting an end to his ambition to become a Chief Constable. Officially, Napier was still on sick leave. Rumours suggested that he has been invited to become Head of Corporate Security at Ibrox.

In private, at a one-to-one meeting for which no minutes were kept, Napier had been severely reprimanded by the Chief Constable for his remarks on camera at his disastrous impromptu interview at Crossveggate. A video was reviewed showing his performance, his slurred words and the bizarre content of his 'oration'.

In a cover-up exercise, Police Scotland had issued a press statement explaining on that day ACC Napier had suffered a slight mini stroke believed to have been caused by the extreme pressure of events surrounding the ongoing drugs war massacres at that time.

Inspector Gordon Gray, Napier's long-serving PA had also been invited to resign after the discovery that he had been accessing the Project Artemis files without authority and passing live operational information to his brother-in-law Derek McAndrew, a freelance journalist who was covering the events surrounding the massacres at Bridge of Weir and Milngavie. Deeper probing had revealed that Gray and McAndrew were part of a group of golfers who, during regular 'boys alone' holidays in Portugal had been cheating on their spouses, attending a nearby spa cum brothel reserved for special guests of the hotel who had paid a 'spa premium membership'.

With her finger poised over the start button of the digital recorder, Inspector Ibbotson called the meeting to order. When silence was achieved, she pressed firmly and the digital display flashed : *Recording*.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Inspector Evelyn Ibbotson deployed from Grampian area to chair this meeting. Please state your names for the record.

"ACC Malcolm Napier."

"Myself, Inspector James Hambleton, previously PA to ACC Napier,

"Chief Superintendent Marissa Minto.

"Inspector Kate Mackenzie, PA to CS Minto.

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"Inspector Eric Ewing, Deputy PA to CS Minto.

"DS Emma Vernon. As agreed, I shall also present written testimony from my colleague PC Elaine Chisholm who is on compassionate leave recovering from the injuries she sustained following the attack on her car and the trauma which followed."

"Ibbotson speaking:

"We are also pleased to welcome our new colleague, Mr Kenneth Dawson who has recently joined Police Scotland as a Senior Computer Scientist in the Technical Services Team here at Gartcosh. For the record, Mr Dawson is CS Minto's brother-in-law.

"We have two silent observers today whose names must not appear on the record and will be listed simply as "Home Office Visitors."

"And finally, we welcome Dottore Marco Artusi from our Italian colleagues from the *Guardia di Finance*, jointly representing their *Gruppo Operativo Antidroga (GOA): Counter-narcotics Group*, and their *Gruppo Anticrimine Tecnologico (GAT): Counter-cybercrime Group*. For those who do not know, Dottore Artusi is a Visiting Professor at Glasgow University. He also claims Scottish ancestors and is an expert on Robert Burns.

"Over to you, Assistant Chief Constable."

Malcom Napier, a shrunken version of his former blustering self, read from a prepared script, created for him by DCI Kareth Paterson, senior PA for Sir James McFarlane, Chief Constable, Police Scotland:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am obliged, *err-em-ah*, to remind you that what is discussed here today must not leave this room and that Inspector Ibbotson's report, once approved by all parties, will be sealed.

"I further remind you that the purpose of this meeting is not to allocate blame but to try to comprehend, *err-em-ah*, how the events of Wednesday 14 May and Thursday 15 May impacted on everyone involved, and to learn any lessons for the future.

"Our Chief Constable has promised that, *err-em-ah*, whatever is agreed here today will be bullet-pointed, costed and funded and the required monies ring-fenced.

"It is clear we need to deploy drones, long overdue. We also need to increase our computer security and surveillance measures.

"Improved training, *err-em-ah*, from top to bottom will be vital. False barriers caused by rigid hierarchies must be dismantled and reformed to encourage better teamwork.

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"The imperative is to act swiftly, *err-em-ah*, and prepare this schedule of actions by 31 December, or earlier. DCI Paterson will hold a watching brief and act as project monitor, reporting, *err-em-ah*, directly to Sir James.

"The Home Office in London and the Scottish Government at Holyrood, *err-em-ah*, have agreed a fifty-fifty support package to cover this work ongoing during a fifteen-month crash programme supported by monies to fund new equipment and training and, *err-em-ah*, to embed these, *err-em-ah*, protocols and to instil a new ethos in all members of this force.

"Sadly, I must leave now as I have an urgent appointment with my cardiologist.

"I therefor invite CS Mari Minto and her colleagues to give us their *PowerPoint* presentation but, *err-em-ah*, before I do so, may I offer her my sincere thanks for her work in resolving the tangled web of this debacle and wish her fair winds when she takes over from me as ACC West of Scotland area on 1 August."