

Equilibrium

Crisis Management

It is Wednesday 20th December 2017. According to my NHS records, today is my twenty-sixth birthday. I think the truth is I am nearly two years younger.

The Children's A&E waiting room at the QEU Hospital in Glasgow is crowded, as might be expected on an evening in December, a few days before Christmas. Aged fifteen, Tasha is still classified as a child. I have checked her medical records and know this is not her first visit to an A & E clinic. If my reading of the situation is accurate, it may be her last.

Tasha, officially my sister, was a late baby and has Down's Syndrome. She is also at the lowest end of the intelligence spectrum and, because of her upbringing, she is poorly socialised, easily spooked, often emotional, and very occasionally aggressive. In the company of those she knows and trusts she can be jolly and likes to laugh a lot.

She also has unstable type one diabetes.

Phoebe, her mother, who is borderline schizophrenic and a recovering alcoholic, has been taken to a closed ward at Gartnavel Hospital.

By agreement with Phoebe and our family GP Dr Khan, I had left Tasha with her mother for two days while I went off to Newcastle University for an interview. Unfortunately, my trip was longer than expected.

Phoebe, officially my mother, had failed to give Tasha her injections leading to this emergency. It appears the stress of caring for her daughter had sparked an attack and Phoebe bombed on her pills although I am still in the dark on this. There was a suggestion that alcohol was also involved. In my defence, Phoebe had been stable for several months and between us with help from Ralph and Gary, I had been coping well. Everyone said so, including Dr Kahn who had endorsed my trip.

Tasha's records show this has happened twice before. She is now confined to a wheelchair having had her right leg amputated above the knee leaving a stump which is insufficient to support a prosthetic. In a prior incident she had lost three toes from her left foot.

These events happened before I was involved.

When this latest catastrophe kicked in, I had been for an interview hoping to be accepted on Newcastle's mature students' entry programme on the remote learning *BSc (Hons) Paramedic Science* degree.

The course information claims:

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'Our intensive education and training will give you the professional knowledge and clinical assessment skills you need to become a confident, autonomous paramedic working within the emergency environment.'

I already hold papers which show I am a qualified State Enrolled Nurse. Those papers are in the name of Robert (Robin) McKelvie, Tasha's older brother.

Like me, Tasha has a light olive coloured skin, curly black hair and brown eyes. Some people take us for Italians. Her father is Pakistani but when it became obvious Tasha was a Down's Syndrome child, he abandoned his Edinburgh family, sold up his wholesale clothing empire and moved back to Pakistan.

As soon as the divorce was finalised, she changed her surname back to 'McKelvie', her maiden name. She had also changed Robin and Tasha's names back to McKelvie but due to a bureaucratic glitch, Tasha McKelvie is still in the NHS records as Natasha Jalbani.

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If you have read this chronicle so far, you may be asking who I am and how I got here.

First off, who I am not.

Although I am not British, I have passport which proves I am.

It says I am Robin McKelvie: please believe me - I do not want to be that that odious person.

I was not born in Edinburgh's posh district of Morningside although, when required, I can speak with a believable Morningside accent. From my time in Glasgow, I can produce posh accent as spoken in the best parts of Pollokshields.

In situations where it is useful, I can speak in posh BBC World Service English although occasionally this mask slips to reveal a very slight Newcastle intonation, a voicing I consider to be my natural tongue.

I am good at accents; Dr Mena said this and Dr Max too.

Question: *Why am I writing this?*

Answer: *Basically, as a record for myself, my unabridged confession, if you like. If I am able to continue on my road to freedom, no one will ever read this document. However, if I am discovered, I will have these details at my fingertips, every detail, proving I always did my best, in whatever the circumstances I have arisen. .*

I believe I am not a bad person. I try my hardest to be perfect, to live according to a strong moral code, as inculcated by Dr Mena. Although I am smart and resolute enough to face adversity, I am not a particularly brave person.

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My mental health is affected by recurring PTSD episodes. I have also suffered several bouts of near-death pneumonia attacks but I work hard at keeping fit and eating healthily.

I do not touch alcohol and I have never taken unprescribed drugs, not even paracetamol.

Those of you who have never had it tough, never been caught up in global unrest and civil/military conflicts, please try to put yourself in my position until you catch up with my life's story.

If by a fluke, anyone ever reads this, perhaps after I am dead, I hope they will be sympathetic and suspend judgement until they have read every single word which follows. Perhaps then you will accept I have done enough good works to be forgiven and deserving of a calm, peaceful life of freedom I yearn for.

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The Refugee

When I was about three or maybe four, I had two younger sisters. As a toddler, I had no idea where I was. One day my father was rounded up with all the other men in our village and shot by soldiers. This is hearsay gleaned from stories whispered by my mother. I am eternally thankful I have no direct memory of this although it is likely I have blotted it out, suppressed it.

Much later I figured out our village was a settlement of around fifty families scratching a living from poor land and our communal herd of goats in a hamlet of wooden shacks near a small township called Jabrayil. Being Kurds, we had always been reviled. When word came from above, we were cleansed. With all the other women and children, we ran away from the gunfire with only the clothes we wore and the few things we could snatch. My job was to carry a yellow plastic cannister used to carry water and to fill it whenever we found a clean source.

For a very long time we walked, hiding by day, moving only by night. Apart from fear and hunger, I remember only the yellow cannister and the constant fear of being caught and killed. One of my sisters got sick and died. We may have walked for weeks, or months or even years. I just don't know how long but throughout this entire trek I remember the foreign word 'England' being whispered repeatedly.

Early one morning, when we had settled down in a big huddle to sleep until nighttime, we were surrounded by soldiers. But they did not want to shoot us. They were kind soldiers.

They took us to a refugee camp where we had tents. We were fed tasty food and given warm clothes. Some of us boys were taken to a larger tent and taught to speak and read English and to count and sing songs about a man called Jesus who would save us. I liked the lessons because although I was almost the youngest, I was top of the class at English and I was the best singer.

Then a bad thing happened. A plane flew over and dropped bombs. One hit the tent where my mother and sister were sitting with another lady and her three daughters. When I found the spot there was nothing left of them. Just rags and blood and bits of skin and bone scattered in the dust.

I am not sure, but I think the whole camp had been wiped out. I think I was the only one left alive. The only thing which survived was the yellow plastic container I had carried from my home village. It had a picture of a palm tree on it and so I knew it was mine and the green cap was cracked.

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I was crying, standing beside the bomb crater holding my container. That was the first day of my life as an orphaned refugee. They said I was six or maybe seven years old.

I remembered the song we used to sing:

'Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam.'

I was singing this when a lady who was very tall and soft and warm kneeled and cuddled me. She told me in English that she would look after me. Then she kissed me, on my wet eyes and on my wet lips. She had minty breath and she smelled of flowers. She lifted me up and we travelled on a lorry to another camp. I fell asleep.

She took me to her tent and gave me a whole big chocolate bar all to myself. It was called a *Mars* bar.

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Looking back on this time from the point of view of an adult, I can remember only tiny bits of my life before that day of trauma. In the immediate aftermath, once I knew I had survived and was safe, my mind wiped out almost everything about my past to avoid the pain of remembering.

It is called, trauma amnesia, strongly linked to survivor's guilt.

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Rescued

The nice lady who saved me was Dr Mena.

Dr Philomena Shearer was an important person in the camp, in charge of the hospital for all boys in the camp up to the age of twelve. At Dr Mena's hospital, we treated 'boys only'.

From our section, we never saw the girls and women with small children because they were behind a corrugated steel fence which divided the camp roughly in two parts. I heard they had a separate hospital with other doctors.

Much later I would learn I was one of around fifteen hundred boys and girls. Almost all of us were orphans or classified as 'displaced'. There were many different nationalities and skin colours, many different languages.

There were no men, except for the guards.

The faces of the refugee boys I saw kept changing. As new boys arrived, old faces disappeared. I heard those who left were sent to join mothers, fathers or other family members who were already living in freedom in Germany, France, Spain, Italy and England. We never heard again from anyone who moved on to freedom.

I had no relatives and knew I would be stuck in this camp forever.

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During the first year or so, I went everywhere with Dr Mena, never more than a few feet away from her, like a puppy. All this time I was listening, learning to speak English, mimicking her, learning everything about her.

Now, instead of my yellow container (which I still had in her tent), I carried her medical bag. It was a type called a 'Gladstone Bag' and had once belonged to her father. Inside she had lots of bottles, some with different coloured pills, others with smelly liquids. The tops were difficult to open. There were rolls of bandages, rolls of sticky tape, sticking plasters. There was a sealed metal box which could only be opened by a key which was on a chain around her neck. Inside were syringes and tiny glass tubes filled with drugs. She also had lots of scissors and tweezers and metal prods, a hand-held magnifying glass and a pencil-sized torch to shine into people's eyes.

Dr Mena was from England, a place called Newcastle. She called me Thomas, sometimes Tommy or Tom, after her brother. After a while I learned from listening to her speak to

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one of the other doctors that her brother Tommy had died of meningitis when he was a baby.

That day I tried to remember what my mother and sisters had looked like, but I could not 'see' them in my head. My memory of my father was hazy except he had a beard and a turban, like all the other men in our village.

After a while, I stopped dreaming about my lost family and tried to do everything Dr Mena told me to do. Although she was always kind, she was strict, demanding. Even then, right from the first moment she took me into her life, she insisted I must do everything properly, making me re-do whatever my task was until I did it to her complete satisfaction.

Over and over, Dr Mena told me to try *always* to be 'perfect'.

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I remember the day my new life began properly.

I think I was seven. It was nearly bedtime. Dr Mena sat beside me on her bed with her arm around me, holding me tightly, stroking my hair. That first time I could not fully understand everything but over the years to come, it was a speech she repeated in various forms:

"Young man, you have had a tough time. From your records I know you have a given name although they say you have forgotten it. I think that might well be a very good thing and so I will call you 'Tommy'. I hope being called Tommy will help you forget all the bad things in your past. From now on Tommy, when we are alone together, you and I will speak only English. I want you to work hard to learn English. If I can find a way to get you back to Newcastle with me, I will do it. I have already applied to adopt you but the people in Geneva have refused. I will write again every year and hope that one day they will agree.

'Tommy, this is very important. Even if I can't achieve this adoption, you must work hard at learning English. If you can speak English fluently and if you can read and write it with good understanding, you will have a much better chance of breaking free of this dreadfully unfair refugee system. Tommy, you are a very bright boy. I want you to promise me you will do your best for me. Will you give me your promise?'

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For the next five years I was her special helper. She even got a uniform made for me. It was too big at first but later it was too small. On the sleeve it had a Red Cross on a white band just like Dr Mena's. Every night, when it was quiet, she would tell me stories to help me to get to sleep. Later, when she thought I was sleeping, she said her prayers to Jesus, asking Him to rescue me.

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When I was older, I was allowed to kneel beside her and to add my prayers to God. In my 'silent prayers' I always asked to be saved, to be taken to England and live with Dr Mena.

In the beginning, she would read to me from a children's story book, pointing at each word as she sounded it. Then, after a few sentences, we would start again. After many times, I would try to sound the words as she pointed at them. Then I had to copy these words into a writing book called a jotter, in block letters. Then she taught me cursive writing, joining the letters up to write faster.

She gave me hundreds of books which I had to read alone first and then repeat aloud to her. If I made an error, she corrected me, made me write that section out five times and then start again and read aloud from the beginning of the book.

Throughout my whole time under the care of Dr Mena, in my speech and writing she would pick up on every error of grammar and spelling:

'Tommy, I want you to try hard to be perfect in everything you do, not just for me but for yourself, for your future. So far as I can see, having 'perfect' English must offer your best chance for freedom. Look, I'll be brutally honest, no one can see into the future but surely the time must come when you escape from this oppressive and unjust system and, when that happens, you must be ready to grasp whatever opportunities come your way. That's why you must strive to be perfect.'

When I was ten, she made me sit a test paper, called 'a mock'. Later, she told me I had passed my GCSE 'O' level with an A Pass in English.

We worked harder after that and when I was eleven, I sat another longer mock test called an 'A-Level' and once again I earned an 'A' grade pass.

Using her laptop, I did two additional crash courses in A-Level Geography and Biology and in mock exams, I earned another two 'A' grade passes.

She allowed me to use her laptop to access the Internet to learn everything I could about Newcastle and Glasgow then write an essay to compare these two cities. In my first attempt, I wrote just over four thousand words. She read it aloud to me and said:

"Tommy, this is almost dreadful. You rushed this work. It's sloppy. I know your can do better. Scrap this version and write me ten thousand words. I want it back to me inside five days. Go do it, starting now."

I re-submitted and she hacked it to pieces and told me to start again and 'take more care'.

Two weeks later, at my fifth attempt, I earned an A+ pass from her.

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In the evenings, over the years sharing her tent I learned back in England she had a dog called Patch who was old now and lived with her cousin who was a farmer, keeping sheep, not goats. Her father and mother had been medical doctors who died in a yachting accident when their boat had caught fire. She said this made her an orphan like me.

Dr Mena was a good footballer. She could do all sorts of tricks and her passing and shooting were perfect. She could score goals with her head and even do scissor kicks. She was very fit and did exercises every day, stretching, push ups, sit ups squat jumps, star jumps and skipping. She did this three times a day to 'relieve stress'.

Football was in her family. She told me many different stories about her uncle who had played for a club called Glasgow Rangers. She also had a 'forty-second' cousin, a remote relative she had never met called Alan who was also a professional footballer. If she had been a boy, she might have tried harder to join a football club but they only wanted boys.

Dr Mena coached us, taught us how to play properly to the rules. She got someone to send us football strips, one set for Glasgow Rangers and one for Newcastle United. After two years I was the captain of the Rangers' team, playing as a 'creative' midfielder.

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Transfer

In 2001, when they judged I was twelve, I was re-classified as an adult and sent to a different camp for men and older boys.

The whole transfer business was managed badly. Initially I thought it was a big mistake and that it would all be sorted out and Dr Mena would rescue me. I did not get a chance to say a proper goodbye to her even though I asked both sets of guards many times.

Earlier that morning, Dr Mena had told me she was going to the main administration building to try again to persuade the Governor to support her application to adopt me. The next day there was to be an internet meeting with the Adoption Committee in Geneva, her Final Appeal because it had already been refused twice before. She wanted to take me home to England with her when her contract ended in a few weeks and she had been writing emails to them for months and months. She wrote in English and always translated her emails into French and German so that they would understand.

The last time I ever saw her was just after breakfast and she was smiling, confident that she would be successful. We prayed together and off she went. It was strange that she prayed because for the previous six months or so she had decided she no longer believed there was a Loving God. I think this was because they would not agree to her request to adopt me.

It was just before lunch hour. I was alone in Dr Mena's hut when two guards arrived and told me to collect all my personal belongings and come at once. They spoke to me in Italian which I understood a little. The official language of this camp was French but I could tell they did not understand me so I used BBC English, which annoyed them even though I could tell they understood me.

I refused to pack and told them they must get permission from Dr Mena before I would obey.

The younger one punched me in the stomach and slapped my head, making my ears buzz.

I was handcuffed and pushed and shoved all the way to the front gate, as if I was a criminal. All my football friends ran to hide in their tents, frightened they too might be punished if they said anything.

The only possession they allowed me to take was my yellow container which I had modelled into a sort of briefcase with all my pens and jotters, grammar books and dictionaries inside. They checked it and removed my Red Cross armband and the Bible which Dr Mena

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had given me. The older guard put my Swiss Army knife in his pocket. I could not say anything because, strictly speaking, possession of any kind of knife was illegal inside the refugee camp.

Outside the main gate, I was handed over to another two guards. These guards, who were Belgian, wore guns. They put new handcuffs on me and shackles on my ankles. They locked a chain around these new handcuffs and fixed me to a rail in the rear of their truck then closed the canvas cover so I could not see out.

Throughout the whole process of 'handover', I protested and asked many times to speak to Dr Mena. These new guards told me to speak only in French, also the official language used in the new camp I was taken to.

We drove for a long while and arrived at another camp, just as it turned dark. This camp was much more like a prison with barbed wire rolls at the top of the enclosing fences. Here, all the guards wore holster guns and long batons.

All the refugees and guards were men. At first, I found it a very frightening place.

At this camp, a man called Dr Max Hagmann sought me out on the first day and told me I was to be his new assistant. Dr Mena had phoned him to say I was coming and to tell me she was continuing with her fight to adopt me. She was still hopeful they would agree, even though the Governor had refused to support her. She said I must not forget to pray for myself and for her, just as she was praying for me. If we trusted in God, it would all work out.

The next day came and went. There were no other phone calls from Dr Mena. The time came when she was due to go home, back to England. She did not send me any messages.

I was all alone again, just as I had been when Dr Mena rescued me. Now she had abandoned me I decided there could not be a Loving God and that everything in the Bible about Jesus was made up, just another fable.

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I had to live in a tent with other boys. There was a man in charge of our tent who was bad to us. I do not want to remember his name. He always wore ladies' perfume. At night, at bedtime, he shaved then put on bright red lipstick and eyeshadow. He had a little hut inside our tent with his bed inside and each night he took a different boy to sleep with him as a special treat. Because I was new to the tent, I did not expect what happened when he took me into his hut. The next day I told Dr Max what had happened. He examined my bottom and put medicine on it. Dr Max was very angry.

The bad man was taken away and we were given a new man called Jorin to be in charge. After a few weeks the bad things started again but by now Jorin had discovered who

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had told on the first man and he had a knife which he held against my throat and stabbed its point in my neck just enough to make me bleed. He said if I told anyone about what he was doing to us, he would slit my throat and dump my body in the latrine pit. Luckily for me, there was one boy he liked better than anyone else and after a while he left the rest of us alone.

I missed Dr Mena very much but gradually I learned to stop thinking about her and to concentrate on helping Dr Max instead.

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Dr Max had a laptop computer and he allowed me to use it sometimes. I watched him carefully and saw how he logged on and soon, when he was away from his hut, I began to sneak inside to use the Internet. One day I put in the name 'Shearer' and discovered everything about Bobby Shearer who had played for Rangers and Alan Shearer who was playing for Newcastle United.

When I was sixteen, I was put in charge of a tent with eight younger boys in my care. One of them, a tall, strong boy called Arjan, was homosexual and tried to force other boys to sleep with him. I spoke to him, warned him I would tell the camp officers if he did not stop. After a week he asked to be moved to a different tent, claiming we were bullying him. I was questioned about this by the guards and Dr Max said it was a black mark on my record, but nothing bad happened. After Arjan was moved, my tent was always the best behaved. We had a wind-up torch and a wind-up radio and listened to English and German programmes, often late into the night. Our favourite was the BBC World Service and I used it to help the other boys to learn English. We always tried to speak 'proper' English like the presenters.

Our tent had the best football squad. I was their coach and their captain. I trained them hard, taught them to be brave. I did not allow anyone who played in my squad to smoke or take drugs. We played most days even in the height of summer when it was searing hot and in winter when it rained. We won nearly every match we ever played, even against much older opponents. Football was our life, our outlet against boredom and frustration.

All the time we were held in the refugee camps, we wanted to escape and get to a place of asylum. We talked about it all the time, but only when we were alone, never when the guards or medical carers were in hearing in case they would punish us by taking away our 'privileges', like the torch and radio or depriving us of our weekly shower and Mars bar treats. A few of our guards were not nice men and hit us for no good reason, making sure no one else saw what they were doing. I once heard Dr Max say to another doctor some guards were mentally unstable. Refugees like us who tried to escape were sent to another camp where, we heard it rumoured, people were beaten if they tried to escape a second

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time. This is hearsay. It may not be true, but we never saw any of these men or boys again.

By this stage I had good English and passable German. Dr Max had taught me a lot, especially about computers which he said were 'the future of medicine'. On his recommendation they put me into the hospital office. It was only then I discovered my records showed I had been born in 1989 (estimated) which meant I was seventeen. I learned I was Ahmed Goran, officially Kurdish, from Azerbaijan. I already knew I was Kurdish because of my mother tongue which I knew how to speak but avoided using because most of the troublemakers in the camp were Kurdish, men and boys who kept trying to recruit me. I told Dr Max who told the guards. After that I was ostracised by the Kurds, a situation which suited me well. I had never enjoyed being part of the Shia sect. Occasionally people said because of Dr Max I was a Christian. Sometimes I was spat on or people threw old shoes at me. But I taught myself not to react, just said nothing.

I already understood the whole Christian/ Jewish/ Muslim mess. After she gave up being a Christian, Dr Mena had explained it to me, telling me what she had seen in the refugee camps had forced her to become an agnostic. At her suggestion I decided to become an agnostic too even though I still felt uncomfortable because part of me still wanted to believe in a God and Jesus.

Being agnostic made life difficult at times and I tried to keep it secret.

Thankfully, mostly I was ignored and from the second year in Dr Max's camp, I was on the 'white side' of the divide because I was part of the camp administration. This gave me some status with the guards and some of the other boys and men but mostly I was shunned, left to my own company which meant I had more time to spend on Dr Max's laptop, when he was away.

Using the Internet, I looked up the village of Jabrayil and found it near the Azerbaijani border with Iran.

In my records I was classified as:

Displaced, denied re-entry by Azerbaijani authorities, unsuitable for re-settlement due to ethnic origin and orientation.

Very occasionally, some men would be escorted away, laughing and shouting farewell to everyone. Those of us left behind hated anyone lucky enough to have discovered a relative in the West who had vouched for them. I knew that for me there would be no bureaucratic miracle which would suddenly pluck me out of the camp and give me a future. For Kurds from Azerbaijan such a possibility did not exist. No one wanted us. We were outcasts. From the BBC World Service, I knew I was not alone, just one of thousands trapped in refugee camp limbo.

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By listening to the soldiers and doctors and reading everything I could find, I learned we were in Greece, on the border with Albania, only about fifty kilometres from the West and freedom. If, somehow, I could escape and get outside the camp, I might be able to walk to France and get across the English Channel to find Newcastle and Dr Mena.

Occasionally we suffered minor earthquakes. Larger tremors sometimes caused damage. Perhaps if a bigger earthquake struck, it would cause enough damage to the perimeter fence that I might escape. Gradually, I became convinced that if I was to get to a country where I could claim asylum, I would need to do this by myself and I started to scheme different ways, being careful not to write anything down or share my ideas with others. Apart from the hoped for earthquake, nothing I could dream up made any real sense. Every idea seemed too risky, too futile, doomed to failure and punishment.

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Year upon year I lived every day in a dull monochrome version of life, doing what was needed to help Dr Max, hoping that somehow Dr Mena would find a way to rescue me.

Looking back, I realise now that I was suffering from depression while trying to hide this from everyone around me, especially the younger boys who depended on me for leadership.

It was from the Internet I discovered that extreme physical exercise could offer some relief and help me to sleep without suffering trauma dreams.

Three times a day and especially at night before trying for sleep, I would do around an hour of press-ups, sit-ups, star jumps, squat jumps, adding anything I could think of to tire me out. If I had been allowed to run around the perimeter of the camp, I would have done it.

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Alone again.

When his boss retired, Dr Max was recalled to Switzerland to take over from him.

The bottom of my world fell out.

I was eighteen, tall and thin with a scruffy beard.

Because of my friendship with Dr Max and my position working in the hospital office, I was regarded as a 'whitey'. Apart from a few of my footballing friends, I had no one I could share my thoughts with.

For about a year I had been sleeping in a windowless stationery cupboard in Dr Max's hut. This was a secret because he liked to play chess and he didn't have anyone else of the same standard. When the guards discovered this arrangement, I was told to move out at once, sent back to sleep in a tent with nine others.

In this tent, even though I was not the oldest, I was told I was second-in-charge to Mehmet, an older man of around fifty. I knew from his records he was being treated for depression and anxiety and soon realised he was addicted to his medication (tranquilisers). He spent a lot of time away from our tent and when he returned, he usually went directly to bed and fell asleep.

The others in this tent were Syrians, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-five. Because they knew I worked at the hospital, they resisted and resented me, ignoring my orders to clean and tidy up.

Three were brothers and the others were related to them, cousins and second cousins. This group were in touch with relatives in Germany and talked constantly about when they would be 'rescued'. To try to help them, I offered to teach them basic German and we settled to an uneasy teacher-pupil relationship. In my office, I printed worksheets for them. They were poor students and we soon agreed learning German was not for them.

After that, it was as if I did not exist. They were wrapped up in themselves, talking incessantly about their past experiences in Halabi, an Arabic dialect used in their home city of Aleppo. I soon learned not to trust them and made sure I always carried all my personal possessions with me. At the hospital, I had a good hiding place which I used for my yellow cannister and its contents. During winter, when the hospital was busier with people suffering from chest infections, bronchitis and occasionally pneumonia, I was enlisted to work at nights as an auxiliary nurse and allowed to stay in a makeshift bed in the linen cupboard.

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Gradually I distanced myself from the Syrians and although I was registered to their tent, I seldom went there.

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Now that I had lost both Dr Mena and Dr Max, I was now totally on my own, apart from some other boys I had known from the past that I played football with. I was asked to join their team. There was a group of five Kurds in this new team. Two older boys approached me, speaking Kurdish but I pretended not to understand and eventually they gave up. However, I often heard this group whispering about me, saying I was a spy for the guards.

One day during a semi-final against a team of Serbians a bad tackle caused a full-scale fight. I ran from the scene at once, turning to watch from a distance. The Serbians on the sidelines used improvised knives made from bits of plastic sheeting, slashing at the boys from my team.

When the guards arrived, they fired shots into the air and waded in with their batons.

Later, when I was on duty in the hospital, I saw that a boy from my team had been struck on his head. He was unconscious and the medics said he had a blood clot. He died during that night.

This death was hushed up as a football head injury but it was plain to see it had been caused by a baton. A guard was lucky not to be killed when he was stabbed from behind. The Serbian's knife had punctured his lung, very close to his heart.

At the investigation in front of the Governor, they said I was supposed to oversee my team. I told them I was not the team captain but the Kurds said I was and that it was me who had started the fight with a bad tackle.

I had tried to explain what I had seen but the guards denied everything. Because I was well-known as a footballer, I had another black mark against my name and told I must never play football again. After the investigation, my football team was disbanded and everyone said it was my fault the boy had died.

Without Dr Max to support me, I had lost my status. No one respected me. No one wanted to have anything to do with me. I was an outcast, shunned by everyone even though I was completely innocent.

I just went on day by day in a strange sort of limbo, doing my work in the hospital office and on the wards during busy nights, waiting for things to improve but nothing good happened.

Eventually, as my memory of Dr Max faded, I began to obsess about Dr Mena, remembering my years lying cuddled into her bosoms. Now when these images came in

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the night, I was filled with impure thoughts leading to hand relief and guilt, knowing I had sullied her memory.

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Dr Freddy

After nearly a year, a replacement for Dr Max arrived.

Dr Frederik Brunner was from Paris. He was a short, weedy man who chain-smoked smelly French cigarettes and drank gallons of black coffee which he made for himself in a large percolator. He took an instant dislike to me and banished me from the office, sending me to work full-time in the hospital tents as a nursing assistant, a fancy name for a porter and cleaner.

Dr Freddy was a lazy man who preferred to sit in front of his laptop and leave the patients to others to deal with. Because of the lack of a leader, the standards had declined and over the next few months, they dropped further. This was dangerous work because many of those in the hospital tents had infectious diseases and festering wounds. Unlike the doctors and proper nurses, we 'locals' had not had 'all the shots' to protect us.

The smell in the tents was horrible but after a while I got used to it again, wearing a mask and smearing my upper lip with *Vick*. I took very great care to use fresh latex gloves for each new task, dowsing my hands with disinfectant frequently and using a fresh disposable overall at the start of each shift.

Eventually an odd-looking woman called Beverley Norris from Geneva came to take charge in the office. She was as tall as me, flat-chested and very mannish, with a thin upper body and strong thick thighs and legs. She was a chain-smoker too, smoking long black cheroots. Behind her back everyone called her 'Mr Boris'.

It was rumoured that Dr Freddy and Mr Boris were planning to get married. Beverley was incompetent and soon all the records were mixed up. The computer system broke down and when the computer specialist came from Geneva to fix it and upgrade it, he reported someone had used the office laptop on the Internet to download porn which had imported malware. Mrs Boris spread the rumour it was me who had done this. I tried to tell Dr Freddy that I was not the only one who had used the office laptop but he would not listen to me. Although I was innocent, I was sure he had put this in my record. Everyone shunned me for a while. I think Dr Freddy and Mrs Boris were keen to get rid of me altogether. They advertised for volunteers to work in the hospital as assistants but on one came forward. After a while, the situation reverted to 'normal'.

As a punishment, they put me in the tent where people go to die, usually because they have caught an infection which did not respond to drugs. This was the most dangerous place to work but, because I had been trained by Dr Mena and Dr Max, I was ultra careful.

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Wearing a face mask constantly became a sort of disguise, a mask of anonymity, so I wore it all the time and after a few months people forgot about the computer thing and I was just the death tent porter no one wanted to know or spend time with.

Three years dragged by.

I had almost given up hope but then by a twist of fate I discovered a possible way out.

Equilibrium

Escape Route

In the hospital there were three doctors and seven nurses. The nurses came for shorter spells, usually to get trauma experience to help them progress with their careers. One day a new nurse arrived, a guy called Robin. It was early December 2014. He was on a one-year contract.

Robin said he would soon be twenty-three, which made him just over a year older than me, if my age in my records was accurate. He was from Scotland and had an odd accent. Several people remarked we could be brothers, even twins, except he had a small goatee beard and a moustache. I checked in a mirror: it was true, we were almost identical, with the same shape of face and nose, same sallow skin colour, the same dark curly hair, the same height and slim build and *almost* the same colour of brown-green eyes.

Alone in the morgue tent studying my face in the mirror thinking of these many similarities, my plan occurred to me.

Once the seed was planted, I began to figure out how it could be made to work. The key, I decided, was to befriend this new nurse and get to know as much about him as I could learn without raising suspicions.

Nurse Robin was from Scotland, from Edinburgh. I soon learned he was a Hibs fan but not a fanatic, just going to bigger games or watching them on television.

I already knew quite a bit about Scottish football from my many conversations with Dr Mena and so I knew Rangers and Celtic were the big rivals in Glasgow. I also knew Hearts and Hibernian were the main teams in Edinburgh.

Dr Mena and her father had been keen Ranger's fans, Her father was from Glasgow where he had worked for several years in a hospital called the *Southern General*, near the shipyards. Dr Mena had travelled with him to Ibrox stadium many times including rail trips from Newcastle to watch Rangers playing Celtic and to Edinburgh to watch their team play Hearts and Hibernian.

Robin was a shy, introverted person with many, many personal issues and disgusting habits. He was a smoker, rolling his own mixed with cannabis with the habit of spitting indiscriminately, unforgivable in a person with medical training. He would often blow his nose into his hand and then wipe it on his trouser leg. When he was high, he let slip various snippets which made me realise he was hiding secrets but he was clever enough to conceal them from me for a long time. Looking back on this period, I realise now maybe he was slightly damaged, probably mildly psychotic, maybe borderline schizophrenic.

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Looking back on those months, I now realise his intermittent aggressive behaviour and nasty remarks were some sort of defence mechanism, a way of diverting a conversation away from a sore or sensitive topic.

Everyone else avoided him but because of my plan, I stuck with it and gradually he loosened up and began to tell me about his life in Edinburgh, his mother and sister and his Pakistani father.

Robin was very bitter about his father even though this man had given his mother a big house and car and a large amount of money when he divorced her. His father wanted Robin to move to Pakistan to join his business over there, but Robin had refused, time after time.

Even though he was obviously half-Pakistani, Robin was racist and hated 'foreigners' as he called them. His mantra was: "These people should stay in their own country." He seemed to miss the point that as refugees we had nowhere to go. He often ended his rants with ..."but you're different Tommy." And to be fair, sometimes he seemed embarrassed, but he kept making remarks like . . ."and no wonder we hate them, they're animals, you know. They don't have the same values as British people. Back home, the whole place is over-run with them. I can never understand why Mum got married to him. You know something, Tommy, he stole my grandfather's business from him. Mum told me Grampa, God Rest his Soul, should never have agreed to the merger even though his business was struggling. But the smooth-talking Pakistani bastard persuaded Grampa into giving him a discount on the value of the business. He said this would be Mum's dowry, otherwise she would never have found someone to marry her because she has a history of mental illness."

Gradually, over many tellings, I built up a fair picture of Robin's background.

He had had a private education at a preparatory school called *Ardvreck* before moving to *Morrison's Academy* for his senior years. Both schools were in a place called *Crieff*, miles from Edinburgh. His father sent him to these boarding schools because his mother was often too ill to look after him and had many spells in hospital. Robin's father chose *Morrison's* because he had been sent there aged twelve from Bradford where his parents had settled when they first came to Britain. At *Morrison's*, Robin's father had been captain of the cricket team and had got five A-Levels before going on to Edinburgh University to study Accountancy.

Robin had hated these schools. Because he was not sporty, he had been bullied. He left aged eighteen with no A-Levels, just a Higher in History and six poor Standard Grades.

After *Morrison's*, Robin had moved back home to the mansion in Morningside called *Redcroft*. His disabled sister was six years old and still wearing nappies. His father had sold out his business and had gone back to Pakistan. His only relative was his mother's

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older sister. She had lived abroad for years and came to visit Edinburgh for a holiday to test out her notion of moving back to live with her sister. However, Aunt Hilary had lasted only a month at *Redcroft* before moving back to Australia where she owned an antiques business, importing memorabilia from the UK and Europe, items which she retailed from her large shop. There were no other near relatives. On questioning him, as if casually, I discovered he had never met this aunt.

According to Robin, the whole of *Redcroft* smelled of pee. His mother, he always referred to her as 'Mother', now she was no longer controlled by her abusive Pakistani husband, had taken to heavy drinking. His sister Tasha had Down's Syndrome. A series of day nurses and carers came in to help. They were from an agency. Most only lasted a few weeks. One girl, Rachel, who was slightly older than Robin, stayed longer. She was a born-again Christian. The pair went out a few times to see movies and for meals and coffees but she wanted to be his 'sister', not his girlfriend. Rachel had made nursing sound interesting and encouraged him to enrol at *Glasgow Caledonian University* where she had trained.

Robin saw the benefit of escaping from the confines of the family home. He enrolled at *GCU* and got a student flat. Rebecca, Rachel's younger sister was in the same year group. According to Robin, Becca was a fun-time girl, promiscuous, a partygoer who passed her exams easily because she was very bright. Because Robin was caught up in this lifestyle, he failed his second year and had to redo it. Becca helped him get organised and he passed but when she graduated and moved back to Edinburgh on her first placement, Robin was on his own again. He failed his third year but by then Becca had moved back to *Glasgow* to work in mental health. She had helped him to swot up for his re-sits and eventually he passed his course and became a fledgling nurse.

To avoid going back to *Redcroft* and being forced into the role of caring for his Mother and Tasha, he took a job in *Perth Royal Infirmary* where he lasted only a year - his contract was not renewed. On the staff room notice board he saw a flyer offering internships in refugee camps with *Médecins Sans Frontières*. He applied online and after an interview in London and inoculations, he had arrived at our camp.

It took me a while to discover he was a morphine addict. He was very careful and secretive about it, but eventually I discovered his injection kit and his stash. His stuff was medical quality, almost certainly stolen.

A lot of what junior nurses do in a refugee hospital is boring, especially at nights when it is just routine checking, making sure the patients are comfortable, administering painkillers and sometimes morphine which, of course, must be signed off by the supervising doctor.

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I made sure I was always on duty with Robin because I was working on my plan. This was easy, no one else wanted to work with him. You must understand, please, I was desperate. Here was Robin who had fudged every chance life had given him, sponged off his mother and yet refused to help her or his sister and now he was shirking his duties and not caring for our patients.

I waited, watched the calendar, counting down, scheming. Eventually the night arrived. It was Robin's last shift and he was due to leave for London the next day to collect his sign-off papers from the agency. He had no plans for the immediate future and would probably go directly to Ibiza which was a good place to chill and meet girls.

It was a quiet night. Several of our patients in the Isolation Unit were in final decline, which, when you are experienced, is easy to spot. To ease their exit and hoping she would be able to get a good night's sleep, the supervising doctor had authorised six phials of morphine in advance. She would complete any necessary paperwork in the morning before the shift change. This was contrary to established protocol but was common practice.

As expected, Robin stole two of the phials and noted in the log he had dispensed them.

At around three in the morning, a patient expired. We did the checks together and Nurse Robin completed the paperwork for the doctor to sign off later. We got the gurney and moved the corpse to the morgue tent. As Robin leaned forward to cover the face with a sheet, I stabbed at him with a syringe of morphine. I had aimed at his anus and got close. He slumped forward. He was failing fast but to make sure I revealed his backside and injected a second fatal dose.

The rest of the plan worked like clockwork. I retrieved the stolen phials of morphine from Robin, stripped him, which is not easy to do, then shaved off his beard and moustache leaving a scruffy stubble. I stripped out of my clothes and put them on him, again not easy. The final act was to put my face mask on him. Wearing his clothes, I put on a fresh mask, checking with a mirror to be sure it covered my goatee beard and moustache which I had grown in secret over the last few weeks, always hidden behind my face mask.

I was now Nurse Robin McKelvie and he was now 'Nurse Tommy' noted in the records as the unwanted Kurdish refugee with no future who had committed suicide or had overdosed by accident. As I would soon learn, no one really cared which way 'Tommy' had died.

I moved Robin's corpse to the corner of the morgue tent and arranged him, making it look like he had stumbled. I placed the empty syringe and the two empty phials under his body.

It was time to do the rounds again and I did this quickly, checking that my patients for a final time to be sure they were comfortable, settled.

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I entered his cabin, locking the door behind me and retrieved his personal effects from his lockbox. I had visited this lockbox before, several times, checking details, memorising, convincing myself I could pass for the face on the passport, noting again his D.O.B was 20th December 1991, making him a year older than me, officially at any rate. I was able to do this because, while pretending not to look, I had seen him open it and knew the four-digit code was 1-3-1-4. Now, as a final check, I held his passport side by side with my face in a mirror and studied it for several minutes to re-assure myself once again I could pass for him.

I removed his wallet, mobile phone, travel documents and airline tickets and a toilet bag containing drugs and his smoking kit and laid them out on his bed.

I then reset the code on the lockbox and closed it, making it virtually impossible to re-open. It would probably have to be scrapped. This was done deliberately. Robin was known to be contrary and vindictive so this would be seen as a final petty act of rebellion. It was because of this he had been assigned to permanent nightshifts in the isolation tent with the patients expected to die. Like 'Nurse Tommy', Robin McKelvie was also an outcast.

I now had seven hundred pounds Sterling, three hundred and sixty Euros, some small Sterling coins and a bank card. From the wallet, there was also a driver's licence.

I checked his locker and packed all his clothes and personal items into his large rucksack, checking carefully there were no hidden drugs or illicit goods.

I took his supply of tobacco, roll-up kit and cannabis and flushed everything away in the staff toilet.

At this stage I did not know what lay ahead and, in my desperation, in case I might need to 'delay' or kill someone else, I kept two phials from his stash and hid them inside his toothbrush carrier tube and packed it down with a small piece of chewed paper. I used his Swiss Army knife to cut the bottom section of my own toothbrush and placed it on top. It worked. Looking back, I realise this was a crazy risk to have taken.

There were four hard porn magazines and Robin's syringe and remaining stolen phials of morphine. I wrapped these items in a towel and took them to my tent, sneaking in quietly to avoid disturbing the others. I hid the syringe and morphine phials in my yellow plastic container which had travelled with me from my home village and contained my most precious artefacts, items I knew I had to sacrifice now I was embarked on a new life. I put the porn magazines in a pillowcase and stuffed it under my mattress.

Back in the isolation ward, I checked on the other patients. Two were near their end and I injected them with an 'easing' dose, waited until they were dead and completed the paperwork in a fair copy of Nurse Robin's untidy scrawl.

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As dawn approach I felt my heartbeat race. Outside, well away from the tent I powered up his Samsung mobile phone and used the same four digits to activate it, 1-3-1-4. It worked! I smiled and shut it down, hopeful this code would also work on his credit and bank cards. I checked my new Rolex watch. It was six-thirty-three, time to wake the doctor and mention my concern that Tommy had been missing for an hour without explanation.

Three hours later, the matter had been settled. The troublesome Tommy had overdosed. His stash of stolen drugs and hard porn was found. The consensus was - "Good Riddance!".

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A UK Citizen

Later that evening I landed at Heathrow Airport. I was now using my Edinburgh/Morningside accent, mimicking Robin. After a long nervous wait, I passed through Border Control without challenge and collected Robin's tatty rucksack from the carousel. According to their records Robert McKelvie was now back home in the UK.

It was Tuesday 8th December 2015 and to those around me I was a UK Citizen with a passport, a driver's licence and bank cards to prove it.

Using my cash, I took a taxi to the hotel where the nursing agency had reserved a room for me.

I had seen many versions of London online but the reality was overwhelming. From the taxi, seeing the vast number of people, cars, buses, lorries, the noise and flashing lights was frightening, and I began to wonder if I could keep up the sham, given how little I really knew of the West.

I was relieved to get into the hotel which seemed safer than being outside with people pushing past, all rushing to get somewhere else, free to go wherever they wanted.

Once inside my room, I locked the door and emptied everything out of Robin's luggage to examine it, laying it out on the bed and floor. Time after time I checked his passport photograph and driving licence mug shots against my reflection in a mirror and eventually decided that the match was good but not perfect: my eyes were slightly wider apart, my ears slightly smaller. Although my hair was the same colour, dark brown almost black, like my eyes, Robin's small image in the passport showed a man with longer hair. However, the main issue was that my eyes did not match his, not exactly.

Surely people who knew me well would notice these differences, spot me as a fake.

Locked in my room with the busy world of London outside, I tried to think ahead about what would happen next. In the camp, nearly everything was predictable: here, everything seemed chaotic, strange, new, scary. I felt the recurring dread of loneliness now mixed with guilt.

I tried to imagine Dr Mena and Dr Max and found my memory of them was vague, faded, even though they were the two most important people in my life. But I knew if I saw them in the street, I would recognise them immediately.

What if I met people who knew Robin well, like Rachel and her sister Rebecca?

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My worry was I had no idea what Rebecca and Rachel looked like. This scared me but I knew I must take the risk of going to *Redcroft* and doing what I could to help Robin's mother and sister, if they would accept me. This was the deal I had made with myself, payment for taking Robin's life, taking his place.

Then I remembered Robin's phone and spent a while trawling through snippets of his life. He had only a few photographs, all girls, unnamed. In one, two pretty girls posing with their arms around each other were blowing kisses to the camera. I decided they must be Rachel and Rebecca. In Edinburgh, I would try to avoid them.

I saw Robin's mother and sister as the real challenge. If they rejected me and reported me to the authorities, I would be forced to run, to make a new life in hiding as an illegal immigrant although I had only vague ideas of how this could be done.

What I did know was having cash would be vital as credit cards and bank cards could be cancelled. Perhaps this is why I spent a long time counting and touching the money I now had. In the camps refugees were not supposed to need money as everything was provided. It existed, of course, US dollars and Euros being the preferred currency. I had only ever possessed around twenty Euros in coins, never paper money. The taxi from the airport to the hotel had cost £35 and the man had been reluctant to give me change from two twenties, demanding a tip and calling me a "smelly Scotch bastard" when I refused. I began to worry how much things cost and what would happen to me when Robin's money was used up: I resolved to be very careful with it.

I was hungry and ate all the complementary fruit in the bowl, drank both bottles of water, ate the biscuits and drank all the tea. I took nothing from the minibar because the notice inside the door said the cost of items consumed would be added to my bill.

I showered for well over an hour under very hot water shampooing my hair and soaping myself repeatedly. In fact, I might have showered for several hours, I lost track of time at that point. In my old life, showers were a luxury, allowed only once a week for refugees and twice a week for staff. Later, lying on the bed wrapped in the hotel's complimentary bathrobe, I realised that I smelled perfumed, reminding me of my years sleeping with Dr Mena.

I sniffed my clothes, the ones I had inherited with my new life as Robin. They were indeed smelly, the smell of the camp. Although they were loud and garish these were the best clothes I had ever owned and the idea of just throwing them away seemed wrong, impossible.

I separated out all the items that could be readily hand washed and used the liquid hand soap provided and ran the bath until it was half full. Keeping the water running warm, I trampled the clothes in small batches, watching the dirty water seep away down the drain.

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Repeating this process until the water running to the drain end was clean, I began a second phase of rinsing each item in clean running water then wringing every item vigorously before spreading the damp clothes around the room and turning the air conditioning to maximum to dry them overnight.

Putting on a pair of damp underpants I went through a limited version of my Dr Mena exercise routine, keeping the noise level down by avoiding the squat jumps. I had deliberately left my skipping ropes behind, in my yellow container.

Wrapped in my complimentary fluffy dressing gown, I sat up in bed and watched television for six hours straight, including a football match between Manchester United and Manchester City and the post-match analysis with Alan Shearer and others. Hearing him speak made me think of Dr Mena. When she rescued me, I was about seven and she had been about my age now, say twenty-two or twenty-three, which would make her about thirty-eight or thirty-nine.

Was she still in a refugee camp somewhere else or back in Newcastle?

Would she recognise me in my new-look self, a grown man and dressed in modern clothes.?

I had grown taller and filled out quite a bit since I last saw her. I thought it might be nice to make contact but knew this was impossible as it would almost certainly raise questions I could not answer and reveal me as an imposter.

Back in the second camp, under the protection of Dr Max, while I was growing through puberty, I had fantasised about the nights I had snuggled into her breasts and she would stroke my neck and kiss me, usually on my forehead but sometimes even on the lips, pressing so hard it made me feel dizzy, in a nice way.

At this point I switched out the lights and slipped under the duvet to enjoy a long, slow session of hand relief, my first time ever as a free man with a prospect of eventually finding a nice wife, someone like Dr Mena.

Early the next morning at check-out, I was scammed by Kevin, the friendly night porter who suggested I pay by cash, saying if I did so, he would reduce the bill from £120 to £100. As a result, I had no receipt.

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First Moves

Early the next morning I left the hotel carrying my rucksack. At about six o'clock, I put Robin's RBS bank card in an ATM and used 1-3-1-4. I almost shouted out for joy when it worked! I had just over twenty-thousand pounds on deposit. I could hardly believe it.

The screen offered a view of recent transactions. From this, I learned my account was supported by a regular top-up of £2,500 from Mrs Phoebe McKelvie's account and eleven recent monthly deposits of £2,800 from the nursing agency. There had been no withdrawals except a £23 payment per month paid to *Vodafone*.

My instinct was to try to withdraw everything but I knew from reading stuff on the Internet while in the camp this was not allowed, that there was a daily limit. I tried for £300 to see if it would work. Seconds later the card popped out followed by the cash. It occurred to me I was now a fraudster as well as an imposter. Under strict Islamic law I could have my right hand amputated at the wrist.

For the rest of the day when I saw a policeman or a police car, I shied away, feeling guilty, expecting an accusative shout telling me to stop, lie down and stretch my arms and legs in a star shape, the procedure used in the camp.

Having all this money worried me, assuming I could get it. I had no idea how much things would cost. Was this enough to help me get a good education? Other questions crowded in on me and I felt as if my head was about to explode so I sat in a coffee shop for ages, trying to settle on a plan for my life. All I really knew about was being a nursing assistant. Would I be able to become a fully trained nurse, like the real Robin? Although I would soon have Robin's qualifications which he had said were held by the nursing agency during his contract, I had no actual experience of working in the British NHS and knew this lack of competence would be spotted immediately.

It was then Robin's mobile phone rang. At the third ring I answered my first ever phone call as Robin, speaking quietly, saying:

'Yes?'

A woman's voice asked if I was Nurse Robert McKelvie and if so, would I please come to sign off at the agency and collect my 'completion bonus' and 'testimonial certificate'. She said she would text me her new address as the agency had moved to new offices a few months ago.

Unsure how to use the public transport system, I took a taxi to Reading. I made sure to agree the fare beforehand and the driver said: "Fifty-five quid, 'cludin' mee tip, mate!".

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Mrs Malden was a nice friendly, older lady and offered me a coffee and a *Twix* biscuit, which I accepted. As she directed, I read the paperwork, thanked her and signed off all their forms using my best imitation of Robin's untidy scrawl copied and practised from his passport and driver's licence. She gave me a letter detailing the dates and type of experience I had gained during my six months at the refugee camp and, while I watched, she remitted the bonus money of £3,000 to my account then generated a P45 certificate showing that my tax for my period of employment with the agency had been fully paid.

I told her about the hotel scam and although she was sympathetic, there was nothing she could do without a receipt. I asked about the taxi fares and again, she needed receipts which I did not have. For my return to London, she advised I catch a bus to *Hayes and Harling Tube Station* and use the underground from there. She said there was a nearer station at West Drayton but those train services were poor because a new line was being built to Reading.

What amazed me was she did not ask for my passport or driver's licence to prove my identity. Right from the minute I arrived she 'assumed' I was Robin McKelvie, because that was who she was expecting.

The agency were keen to sign me up for a further stint but I politely refused the list of posts they had on offer and made my escape. Leaving their offices, I saw a store called *PC World* and after a long time talking to a salesgirl, I bought a good quality laptop, one which came with a complimentary rucksack, a simple black one, medium sized with a padded pocket for the laptop. This *Dell* was the latest upgrade of the model Dr Max had owned. The girl loaded it up with standard software packages, included free for a year. I told her my old laptop had been stolen and that I didn't want to use my old *Googlemail* account anymore. The truth was I did not want to get into email dialogue with any of Robin's contacts although there was less than twenty of those on his phone.

The girl set me up with a *Hotmail* account using my Robin McKelvie details and his mother's home address in Edinburgh. It occurred to me later this was an odd thing to do because I had no one to email.

I paid with Robin's bank debit card and watched in trepidation while the sale went through without a hitch.

Before leaving, with the *Dell* inside my new padded rucksack, I managed to re-arrange the contents of Robin's larger rucksack to stow it so that I did not have two to carry.

I was now getting used to being Nurse Robin McKelvie and decided to try to use public transport, copying what other people were doing, asking for help, saying I was visiting from Edinburgh. As time went by that first morning I gradually relaxed into my role,

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realising that like Mrs Malden, people generally were happy to accept what you told them about yourself.

My next stop was the British Library. I was working to a plan I had been hatching for months. I followed Mrs Malden's advice and headed back to Central London. It was my first time using the London Underground which everyone called the *Tube*. Being on the underground railway system was the scariest thing I had ever experienced. I sat rigid for the first few stops until I realised that everyone else was completely relaxed. A nice elderly lady opposite me smiled and I smiled back. When she rose to leave at the next stop, she said: 'bye-bye', honey child'.

After she disembarked, I rose and stood at the sliding doors with the rucksack between my legs, studying the confusing diagram of different coloured *Tube* lines, watching the moving display signs and listening to the driver call out the stations, checking as we slowed to a stop that the train was where he said we were. I spotted St Pancras on the diagram and worked out how to change lines to get there. I got lost a few times and it took me nearly three hours to get to the British Library but during that period I became more confident, realising that the *Tube* was a fantastic piece of engineering.

Exiting to the surface, I bought fruit and water in a *Tesco* supermarket, spending ages looking at prices. This helped settle me. Provided I kept getting the monthly support from 'my mother' I judged I should be able to afford to eat enough without running out of money. If I was allowed to stay at *Redcroft*, maybe my monthly allowance from Mrs Phoebe McKelvie would be stopped. This was a worry.

I was now working to a plan I had been hatching for months.

I spent the afternoon in the British Library hooked to their Wi-Fi router, getting acquainted with the software on my new laptop. The *Google* search engine led me to the archive at Register House in Edinburgh where I was able to check my birth certificate and family details. I checked but could not find 'my aunt', Robin's mother's sister Hilary, the one Robin had mentioned, from Australia. Perhaps she had not been born in the UK?

Using *Google*, Dr Mena had been easy to find with her early career summarised on the website of the *Royal Liverpool University Hospital*. Until then I had not known she had been an obstetrician before deciding to commit herself to *Médecins Sans Frontières*, serving in various locations before returning to the UK when her contract came to an end at the camp where I last saw her, before I was forced to move to the adult camp under Dr Max. This is where her trail ended. After that time, there were no further entries, no further details about her on *Google*. I tried *Facebook*, again drawing a blank and decided leave this search meanwhile, to look again later.

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I discovered Robin's *Facebook* account but did not have his password and so I was locked out. Later, I realised this was probably a good thing as I did not want to rejuvenate an ongoing social media profile.

After the meeting in Reading and my experience at the hotel at Paddington, it dawned on me that to avoid being scrutinised closely it was a good idea to phone ahead to agree a time and the name of the person you hoped to meet, using this approach as a way of 'proving' who you are when you arrive.

I trekked around and found myself outside a three-star hotel in a row of similar hotels. I picked the brightest looking one, standing outside it, phoning ahead to ask for a room, agreeing to pay £48 cash on arrival. This proved a bad choice. The whole place was downmarket, seedy, the room grubby. The Wi-Fi was poor and there was no complimentary fruit or tea and biscuits. This downmarket hotel was a complete contrast from the previous hotel.

In particular, the door lock was a simple mortice type. I checked using my lockpicks, a legacy from the refugee camp. The door offered minimal security.

I had smuggled these lockpicks with me inside their leather carry bag by hiding it in the lining at the bottom of Robin's kit bag. Thinking back on this, I realised later like the morphine phials, this had also been a crazy risk because of modern airport scanners looking for anything suspicious. Fearing I might be searched if stopped by the police, I flushed these phials away during a visit to a coffee shop WC.

I first got hold of these lock picks when I was living in Dr Mena's tent. I traded fifty *Mars* bars accumulated from my Dr Mena treats over many months. The man was a maintenance technician; I think he was from Slovenia. Some people said he was 'hiding' in the camps from the FSB (the successor to the KGB). The deal was he would show me how to use them. He had a bunch of locks in a *Nike* sports bag. Over many weeks, I practised repeatedly on every lock until confident I could open any non-electronic lock I came across. He had a better set of picks which he showed me. These were not for sale at any price.

I was very nervous about leaving my expensive laptop and all my important documents in an unknown and potentially unsafe location. I repacked everything into Robin's large rucksack and went out into the darkness to look for a place to eat. Everywhere nearby was a fast-food burger place of sorts. Like Dr Mena I am a vegetarian. Eventually I found a *McDonald's* which served a 'fresh salad' meal. This was another expensive mistake as it was tasteless. Rejecting one small mouthful which tasted mildly of chlorine, I left.

Frustrated and hungry, I set off again and after a while I saw signs for Euston Station. Reading the departure board, I decided to catch the all-night train to *Glasgow*. Worried about the possibility of being robbed if I should fall asleep, I booked a sleeper cabin on

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a late departure and bought fruit and water before boarding. On the train I tried to login to the promised onboard Wi-Fi without success. Tired but feeling safe and prosperous, I drifted off to dream of my new life now unfolding.

I wakened when the train juddered several times as it crawled into *Glasgow Central Station*.

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Fitting In

From a kiosk, I bought a vegetarian sausage roll, three bananas, bottled water, a coffee and croissant and a newspaper then sat in the concourse to enjoy a simple breakfast with people swirling past, arriving and departing as the day picked up pace. The sausage roll was greasy, disgusting, instantly rejected.

Once again, a sudden rush of euphoria swelled up inside me and I found myself smiling and giggling: I was free! My plan had worked! I closed my eyes and began to daydream.

I was rich enough to go anywhere I wanted. Start a new life anywhere in the World. I had a passport and driver's licence and nursing qualifications. I had a laptop and phone and cash in my pocket and more in the bank. I would find a place to upgrade Robin's nursing qualifications, try for a degree and make a new life here in the UK.

Or, to escape my dubious past, I might emigrate to Canada or Australia and start my new life properly, somewhere where that previous version of Robin was unknown.

As the station announcer boomed out his message on the broadcast system, the sad face of Dr Mena appeared, shaking her head. She was gone in a flash.

I knew what this meant: I had given a promise, both to myself and to her. I must pay for Robin's life by helping his mother and sister, as a good son and brother should.

In my plan, this would be my new life for the foreseeable future but only when I was fully prepared, fully ready in my mind to face what was ahead when I went 'home' to Redcroft. However, I must first become acclimatised to being a normal UK citizen and since I knew Robin had spent time in Glasgow and from my knowledge of the city from my essay for Dr Mena, this was a good place to start.

Looking around, I studied those sitting and standing nearby. The young men of around my own age seemed almost familiar until I realised that, dressed in Robin's clothes, I was just like many of them, that I was fitting in. This made me feel good, gave me a boost and, oddly, less lonely.

The Daily Record was my first ever newspaper. There was a speculative article about the resurgence of Rangers describing their recent win over Hibernian and analysing their recent run of form with a prediction they would trounce arch-rivals Celtic in the forthcoming New Year's derby day match. After a while, I settled to read the local news and plan my next moves, checking in the advertisements for cheap accommodation, to get a feel for costs.

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From the newspaper stand I bought a street map of *Glasgow* and studied it. My plan was to visit *Ibrox Stadium* as my first stop. From my phone I knew there were tours available. After that I planned to visit *Glasgow Caledonian University* and attempt to track down all the old haunts which Robin had revealed during our long, boring, late-night sessions with him in the isolation tent when I had forced myself to stay alert to his ramblings. I felt it was important to see these places in physical reality and try to embed them in my memory to reinforce my understanding of my inherited life.

But first I needed somewhere to stay. Not a hotel. Using my phone, I found a four-star B&B recommended by *TripAdvisor*, located in Strathbungo which, from my map was an area easily reached from Central Station by taking a local train to Pollokshields West Station. I called ahead, spoke to a polite elderly lady and booked myself for three nights as a single in a double room agreeing to pay cash on arrival at around 4:00 pm.

I packed everything important into the small laptop rucksack, found the left luggage office and stowed Robin's large rucksack, paying for the rest of the day.

I set out to explore the streets around the station. I was unused to reading physical maps and was soon lost but *Glasgow* seemed less frightening than London. Some people smiled and I smiled back. I was listening eagerly to their conversations, trying to tune in to the local dialect. I asked where to find the *Tube* to *Ibrox Stadium* and was told it was called the '*Subway*', in *Glasgow*. I was directed to Buchanan Street. The *Ibrox Stadium* tours did not start until late morning.

I had time to explore, perhaps find some hot edible vegetarian food. At both camps, there were many flocks of hens kept for eggs and for their meat. Although Dr Mena and I did not eat meat of any kind, we did eat eggs, usually boiled or cooked as omelettes from fresh, provided we saw them in their shells, before cooking.

Even though most of the shops in Buchanan Street were still closed, this pedestrianised street was busy with window shoppers, mainly older women, mostly singles with a few in groups of two or three, only a very few with husbands. When I looked in their direction, some smiled, others looked away but most just ignored me, their thoughts far away.

To everyone around me I was not an illegal refugee, just another shopper out to buy Christmas presents.

When this thought took hold, I felt the tension ease from my body and a smile form on my face. I was free. I was free. I could do exactly what I wanted to do, any time, go anywhere. I had money. I could buy things. I was just like everyone around me. It seemed unbelievable that a few days ago I was a prisoner, a nobody, a person with no rights, no money and very few possessions. My mind was soaring, as if I had taken some drug to make me high.

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Speakers played Christmas music and I remembered Dr Mena getting a small Christmas tree for our tent and giving me presents and sweets on Christmas mornings such as football shirts, trainers, boots and special socks with inbuilt shin pads. My best present ever was a Swiss Army knife, the one the guard had stolen.

Passing a shop which was just opening, I spotted a display of Swiss Army Knives where I bought myself a huge knife with twenty-three functions. It came with a complimentary chain to attach it to my belt. In some ways it was a bad choice because it was too heavy for my trouser pocket. Instead, I stowed it in my rucksack, attaching the chain to a toggle in the front pouch to make it easily accessible.

Leaving the knife shop, my phone buzzed and an automated voice invited me to visit my nearest store to upgrade my phone, offering special 'early Christmas discounts' to existing customers. Directly across from me, I saw a *Vodafone* shop, just opening. I was their first customer. Daryl the manager was very patient, leaving me to browse for a while before offering advice. He confirmed my choice of *iPhone* model was included in the 'special Christmas offers'. and went online to prepare my new contract for an *iPhone*, the latest model. While he was filling out the form, he asked if I was still living at the *GCU* residences, I confirmed this as another way of covering my tracks.

He then asked if I would be interested in a new *iPad*, available on special complementary rental under a promotion due to expire later that day. The rental deal would last three years. In the camp I had seen *iPads* on *YouTube* but I had never held one. Immediately I had it in my hands, I knew I must have it.

Without asking, Daryl transferred my contacts to both devices. Later, I realised I should have asked him to issue me with a new telephone number; if I had done so, it might have saved me from avoidable trouble.

Christmas had come early for the new Robin McKelvie. I now had a powerful full-function Dell laptop, a top of the range *iPhone* and an *iPad* with Wi Fi capability, with 256 GB storage on both devices.

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Acclimatisation

Mrs McKillop who was the owner, ran the B&B with her sister Mrs Mackay. Both were small, dumpy smiling chatty widows with identical curly grey hair. They were lovely, motherly ladies. They had six double rooms, all en suite. Everything was to the highest standard, including a small wall mounted TV with a cable service and good Wi-Fi. If there was a downside, my attic bedroom and bathroom were small, cramped.

The communal breakfasts were tasty, with a variety of veggie-based omelettes to order, scrambled eggs, boiled eggs, crunchy wholegrain toast and creamy butter. The coffee was the best I had ever tasted. There was also a selection of fruit juices, a choice of yogurt flavours, fresh fruit salad, bananas, apples, oranges and peaches.

They offered to provide me with a lunch pack of vegetarian sandwiches, fruit and a flask of coffee, with a small extra charge to be added to my bill. As it was a quiet time of year, they were happy to extend my stay at a small reduction and we went forward on a day-by-day basis.

The other guests usually stayed for a single night, two at most. Many were from overseas, ticking off their hit lists, visiting the Burrell Museum and Kelvingrove Art Gallery and determined to ride on the *Subway*, nicknamed the 'Clockwork Orange', usually taking full circuits on both the inner and outer circles.

I explained to the sisters I was looking for self-catering accommodation which I could use as a temporary office, My cover story was I was visiting Glasgow researching vegetarian restaurants for a publisher who was planning a supplement for a health magazine. They said they check with church friends nearby who might be able to help, adding they would be pleased to recommend me as an ideal tenant.

When prompted, I called the number Mrs McKillop gave me and made an appointment to view what turned out to be a large high-ceilinged room with a small kitchen area with a generous bathroom, located on the second floor in modernised stone fronted terraced house. The décor was bright, pastel, floral and the whole house smelled deliciously of lavender polish.

Mr Murdo Maclean and his wife Flora were in their fifties and lived in the basement. Only non-smokers were allowed. There was good Wi-Fi. There were three other rooms, two occupied by older ladies who were out 'at business' all day, Mrs Maclean advised. The other flat located on the entry level was vacant, currently being upgraded by Mr Maclean who had been a shipyard joiner. The house was centrally heated and my flat was warm.

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This building was also in Strathbungo, but nearer a main thoroughfare called Kilmarnock Road and nearer to a public access area called Queen's Park where I could do my exercises and go for runs, build up my fitness. With the train to Glasgow Central nearby, I also had a wide choice of buses to take me into the city centre, which everyone called 'the town' or just 'town', never 'the city'.

The Macleans were an energetic, dedicated couple who, as part of the rental, cleaned my accommodation every day, perhaps to check up on me, to see I was not trashing the place. For a small extra charge, Mrs Maclean offered to do washing and ironing.

Later, comparing with students I met at GCU I learned I was paying less than if I was in student accommodation run by the University. After two bad hotel experiences, I had now been lucky twice. The house felt cosy, safe and I began to sleep soundly, sometimes for ten hours at a stretch.

During my probationary week as a new tenant, I walked all over the central area of Glasgow, getting my bearings. I then paid cash for a further one-month period. In making this agreement, I was conscious I was putting off travelling to Redcroft, afraid I might be exposed as a fraud by Pheobe and Tasha, forced to go on the run.

Here in Glasgow, in Strathbungo, with the Macleans, I felt safe.

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Moving around Glasgow, getting to know the best places to eat, fitting in with the rhythm of the city, checking out Robin's old haunts, I became more secure in my new identity. I bought new clothes and dumped every bit of Robin's original clothing in a charity shop collection container. I now felt 'Western' but in my own style with more conservative smart casual clothes, the sort worn by the GCU lecturers, not the students.

I went back to Ibrox Stadium a second time and took the tour of the Trophy Room and asked about Bobby Shearer, learning about his exploits as 'Captain Cutlass', one of the most famous captains of Rangers FC.

At GCU, although the students were on their Christmas break, it was still busy. Many of the students were from overseas. On the first day I was in the library with my laptop fired up but could not connect to the Wi-Fi service. A smiley Asian girl was just about to leave a PC terminal and I explained I had lost my log-on details. She kindly logged me back onto the PC as herself. She was a slow typist and, while watching her fingers, I noted her username and password on a scrap of paper to use again later. I realised that this subterfuge was verging on mild paranoia, done because I was still worried somehow the camp authorities would discover the corpse of Tommy in the refugee camp was Nurse Robin McKelvie and somehow use the Internet to track me down.

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These waves of anxiety kept surging at me for many months to come before they eventually faded and I accepted I was free, provided I did not slip up.

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I spent the rest of December and most of January roaming around *Glasgow*, practicing the accent, getting comfortable with my new self, watching other peoples' eyes to try to detect any suspicions that they saw I was not Robin McKelvie. When I engaged with the students at *GCU*, I encouraged them to do most of the talking, soaking up everything they said, as I had done with Robin.

One day, after watching Rangers at Ibrox, I walked as part of the crowds through an area of huge houses. I swung towards the biggest houses and onto quiet streets, noting their names. Later from my map, I learned I had been in the western part of Pollokshields, where the richest people in *Glasgow* lived. The next day, a Sunday, I went to Pollokshields again and spent hours wandering around, looking into driveways with three and four upmarket cars parked outside three-car garages.

How rich did you need to be to buy a house like this?

I was at an entrance, imagining myself cruising up the driveway when a car horn peeped. I turned to see a sallow-skinned man not unlike me with an attractive white girl sitting beside him. He was in a large black *Porsche*. I waved an apology and stepped aside. He accelerated right up to the steps of the grand door. As they got out and while the man was looking the other way, the girl waved to me and blew a kiss. I felt strangely happy.

I continued to watch, wondering:

Does she know me?

Does she know Robin McKelvie?

As the couple moved towards the door, a white-haired man in a uniform opened it and welcomed them in.

What was this place?

A private club?

Someone's private home, someone who had a butler.

Later that afternoon, I went online and saw this young man's face again. He was a footballer who played for Rangers FC. I realised I had watched him play at Ibrox the day before.

The following day, Monday, I was back in Pollokshields roaming around. I walked past the same house several times then walked on, checking out other similar houses nearby,

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stopping and studying each in turn. After a while I realised that every single house was different, each individually designed by the original owners over a hundred years earlier.

For a reason I cannot explain the whole notion of one day living in Pollokshields took hold of me. Perhaps it was the memory of the footballer in his *Porsche* and his pretty girlfriend. I had studied his website online. He was two years younger than me, from Morocco, from a poor family. Through his footballing skills he had made it here in the West, all quite legitimately. This somehow felt very unfair. Dr Mena had said many times over I was 'a natural talent'. I felt convinced that three or four years earlier I had been as good as him and perhaps even better but had been denied the chance to prove myself because I was a Kurd from Azerbaijan, locked up in a refugee camp.

This hurt festered and I could feel rage building fuelled by jealousy of his position, his fancy car and his pretty girlfriend. Hot tears of resentment and frustration spilled onto my cheeks.

Although I was not in my jogging clothes, I was wearing trainers. I began to run, slowly at first until I picked up pace. The act of running reminded me that after years of restrictions I was free at last, living in Scotland, passing the houses of the richest people in Glasgow, wearing a rucksack containing my new identity, my new wealth and, that if I should choose, I could go wherever I wanted to go, anywhere in the world, even Morocco.

As Dr Mena had taught me when I knew I had to confess I was wrong, I said aloud:

It is not the Moroccan's fault that I was born in the wrong place.

As I ran on, faster and faster, the resentment faded away.

I lost track of where I was. I slowed to a walk.

In the distance I saw four scruffy men outside the main door of a huge mansion. The door was wide open. The two younger ones had ponytails and beards. The older ones had grey stubble on their faces. They were wearing identical jogging suits, grey, dirty, splashed with paint. They were wearing dirty trainers.

I kept walking, pretending not to look at them.

The premises looked run down and the garden was overgrown, a wilderness. There was an older model Jaguar parked in front of an disintegrating garage. The car was a pale blue, rusting, tyres deflated. The garage roof was missing.

The builders had two white vans, dented, unwashed, rusting. There were random piles of bricks, sand, gravel, bags of cement and other heaps of materials scattered around.

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The men were standing about, smoking, spitting, joking, drinking beer from cans, not working. They looked disorganised, chaotic. Since coming to Glasgow I had learned a phrase which suited:

They were chancers.

As I passed, they glowered at me. One of the younger men made a rude sign and said something in a low voice. They all laughed. Despising them, I looked ahead and walked on.

The next few houses on both sides of the road also looked run down, needing attention. A few hundred yards further on I reached another quite different construction site. This was a much larger house, the largest I had seen in Pollokshields, three times or more bigger than the one where I had seen the footballer and the *Porsche* girl.

I stopped at the edge of the pavement and looked up the driveway to see a large squad of men and women working with a purpose. I counted roughly fifty individuals all wearing light blue overalls, yellow viz vests, heavy boots, yellow safety helmets, translucent goggles and yellow gloves.

The place was a hive of activity.

A sign proclaimed:

Under Development by Pam Wright Projects

There was a picture of an attractive smiling woman with her motto underneath:

Wright First Time!

Every Time!

A second huge board with artwork explained *Dunrobin Castle* was being converted into seven luxury flats. A small white car swung past me and slowed as it moved up the drive to stop outside a *Portakabin*. As the woman passed our eyes met. Her face lit up into a beaming smile and she waved. This encounter lasted less than a second but I felt as if she had recognised me, like the *Porsche* girl.

From the photograph on the hoarding, I realised she was Pam Wright. I judged her to be about thirty-five, maybe younger. Although she was completely different in appearance, she immediately reminded me of Dr Mena. Later, when Pam Wright became a central pivot in my life, I would discover she was several years older, almost the same age as Dr Mena.

I watched her get out of the car, look back, then turn and move to the nearest group, her *iPad* screen already bright.

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Her smile had the same effect as the day before when the *Porsche* girl had waved and blown me a kiss. Pam Wright's smile made me feel wanted and reminded me again that I was free to re-make my life in any mould I might choose. I was still young enough to become anything I wanted to be.

I must stop my story here to stress something very important:

Until I walked out of the refugee camp and into the taxi which took me to Athens Airport, for nearly twenty years from the age of about four I had always lived inside a fence of some kind, never allowed to leave. It was only when I got to the concourse at Glasgow Central Station, I had first fully grasped I could go almost anywhere I wanted to go and, provided I did not cause trouble, no one would question my right to roam.

Over the weeks which followed, as I looked around at the faces at GCU, or in shops or on buses or on the Subway, I realised these people did not understand how lucky they were. Like Robin, they took their fortunate lives for granted. Perhaps, like Robin, they thought they 'fully deserved' everything they already had or even that they 'deserved more', that it should be 'given to them, for nothing, without having to earn it'. Maybe these people would never be able to understand what it was like to be someone like me, trapped in a refugee camp with almost no hope of gaining freedom.

Perhaps the most amazing thing for me was the realisation that a great many of the faces around me in London and in Glasgow were not white but coloured, from ebony black to 'olive-almost-white' like me, like the Moroccan footballer.

I can remember another time this reality sank in. I was in the refectory at GCU and saw that I fitted in, that I was just like everyone else around me. I knew at that very moment that everything would work out and that provided I was careful, I would have a successful future.

As I watched Pam Wright moving from group to group, I renewed my promise to myself. I must try to become the 'good son and brother' which Robin had failed to be. Whatever this took, I would do it, give it my best shot of being 'a perfect son and brother'. Only in this way could I justify my freedom and perhaps, somehow, find a way to make a life of my own, find a nice girl, marry her and have a family, a normal life.

I turned away and started to jog, hoping to reach a street I recognised and find my way back to Strathbungo.

It was time to take my next big step.

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Going Home

Eventually I felt safe enough to head for Edinburgh.

Using my *iPhone*, I booked an affordable Bed and Breakfast single room for a month. My en-suite room was part of a large bungalow in Corstorphine near the Zoo. My cover story was that I worked for an agency who did research for film locations to fit the scripts producers and directors were trying to develop. My role was to inspect possible locations and estimate approximate costs.

My landlady's eyes became impatient as I trotted out my story; she had no real interest in why I was in Edinburgh. I could have told her I was there to study plants at the Botanical Gardens, fossils at museums, or the mating rituals of Giant Pandas at the Zoo. All she wanted from me was my cash payment in advance and an assurance I would not smoke in her house, even though I had already told her several times over on the phone I had never smoked.

For the first week I wandered on foot with my smaller rucksack containing all my vital possessions, still reluctant to leave anything important in an unsecured location. Each day followed a pattern. I would walk first to Morningside and saunter slowly past the house where I knew Robin's 'Mother' Phoebe McKelvie' and his sister Tasha lived. *Redcroft* was not unlike the sad ruin I had seen in Glasgow, in Pollokshields, the one with the four slovenly men outside.

Redcroft was the largest house in the area, a huge, towering, crumbling red sandstone building with leaking gutters surrounded by an immense jungle of a garden which sloped quite steeply upwards to a public access road which looped around the property. The entrance gates, high and ornate, black paint flaking, leaning inwards on their damaged hinges, were jammed closed but not locked. From this entry, muddy tyre tracks ran down a bumpy path to the back of the house where the garage and garden shed were located.

Robin's family home emanated an off-putting air of dismal failure, of sadness.

Above this upper loop road there was a small park, circled by rhododendron bushes which had grown into tall trees. A notice on the personnel gate said it was for "Residents Only" but, like *Redcroft*, the park was also neglected, its lawns overgrown, its wooden seats vandalised, the whole area littered with cigarette ends and squashed coffee cups, visited regularly by the girls from a nursery who used it to meet during their breaks to smoke and chat to each other while tapping on their mobile phones.

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Interspersed with these ritual visits which I was using to build up a picture of the activity at *Redcroft*, I wandered around Edinburgh picking out the places Robin had told me about, building up a mental map, comparing it with the pocket street map I had bought at Waverley Station. On one of these rambles, I discovered a great place called *Hendersons* vegan restaurant in Thistle Street. It became a favourite lunch stop, timing my visit for around two o'clock, after the midday rush. It was at *Hendersons* I had my first scare, my first encounter with someone from Robin's past.

I had my laptop open and my head down when a smallish, curvy, attractive girl with dyed blonde hair bowed up and sat across from me.

'Hiya Robbie. *Hey*, you look *great*. Was it horrible? When did you get back?'

Treading water and trying not to panic, I smiled and said, "Oh, sorry, I was miles away."

In my confusion, I used my *Glasgow* accent, not my posh *Morningside* inflection which I had been practising by listening to people at bus stops and in supermarkets. My favourite place for this was the *National Portrait Gallery* with its excellent coffee shop.

'Hey, you are Robbie McKelvie, right? It's me, Rache, from Calley. Ah, it's the hair, right? Blondie strikes back. Kinda retro, eh?'

I immediately reverted to my *Morningside* accent:

'Yeah, I like it, blonde suits you Rachel. Sorry, I've been temping in *Glasgow* since I got back. You know me, I pick up twangs very easily. *And how are you? And how is Rebecca? Are you still working at the New Edinburgh Royal Infirmary?'*

The crisis passed, and Rache was off on a bubbly monologue, bringing me up to date with her life, discovering Rebecca was working in *Glasgow* at *Gartnavel Royal Hospital* in a ward which specialised in serious mental health issues.

Rachel showed me a picture of Rebecca on her mobile and right from that second, I was smitten. Although Rache was attractive, Becca was a stunning girl, taller, slimmer than Rachel. 'Athletic' was the word which sprang to mind. As Rachel bumbled on, I learned neither sister had a steady boyfriend, 'yet', this said with a slight 'come-on' smile from Rachel who reminded me several times over to call her Rache.

I studied the image of Becca again, perhaps for longer than I should have done because eventually Rache kicked my shin and grabbed her phone back with a quip:

'Hoy, Robbie, that's enough, right? Hey, remember me, eh, the good sister, the one who has always looked after you, prayed for you, rescued you, not the pretty one who led you into sin and depravity.'

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We laughed and the conversation swung away to films and the posher clubs and pubs Rache went to now she was no longer a student.

However, as I listened to Rachel, my mind was already off on a strange direction. Could Becca have been the girl from the *Porsche* who had waved and blown me a kiss. Had Becca and I been lovers? The whole idea began to excite me. But it also worried me. If we had been lovers, Becca would know at once that I was not Robin who had been rather poorly endowed in the penis department, a fact I had learned when I was changing him into my clothes in the morgue tent. He also had a tattoo of a Saltire on each of his buttocks, something I had no intention of replicating.

Over the space of two hours and several more coffees, I listened to Rache's stories about life in the NHS and how the care system in Scotland was 'losing the plot'. Rache was thinking of moving to New Zealand. This storyline came with a long exposition of how wonderful New Zealand is, second-hand information from a work colleague who had had a contract there for two years before being forced to return after only five months when her father had a stroke.

Eventually, when her mobile phone pinged, Rache made her apologies, explaining she had to leave to meet a boy from work who was coming with her to an *Alpha* course at her church. Without having to ask, she explained about the *Alpha* course by taking out her fancy *Apple* laptop and bringing up her slide show. I was more interested in the laptop than her gobbledegook presentation and she caught me looking away through the window at the shop across the road which sold new and second-hand computers. I was wondering how much it would cost to upgrade my heavy *Dell* to her light-weight version when she suddenly slammed the lid shut, stood up and fished a card from her handbag with her name and mobile number on it. She was an *Alpha Counsellor*, the card stated. I tried to apologise but she was angry and I worried she had decided I was not actually Robin then it struck me she had been 'pitching' with her presentation, trying to 'convert' me to her version of Christianity.

Before she left me, she hugged me, pressing into me fiercely, stretching up on her toes to give me a sloppy kiss on my half-open mouth - my first ever mouth to mouth kiss as an adult male - quite unlike my memory of Dr Mena's occasional fierce kisses which still filled my erotic dreams.

Then Rachel was gone, trotting off on her high clumpy boots with a call over her shoulder: 'Hey, Robin, now yer home, keep in touch, eh?'

I paid for our extra coffees and walked out onto the street in a haze of euphoria. If I could convince Rachel, maybe I could convince Robin's mother and sister too. As I walked away, I realised I must avoid Hendersons in future in case Rachel or Rebecca might turn up.

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Although the thought of meeting 'Becca' was alluring, it was too much of a risk.

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Reconnoitre

For the next two weeks, on dry days, dressed in several layers of warm clothing and with a flask of coffee provided by my landlady, I watched *Redcroft* from early morning to early evening, mainly from above, from the park, hidden among the rhododendrons, using pocket binoculars I had bought in a charity shop. I was wary of attracting attention to myself and to keep warm, I moved around, walking the circuit of the loop road, wearing different jackets and caps, all charity shop cast offs. I did not want to be reported to the police as a prowler, a voyeur.

Except for occasional dog walkers, I had the run-down park to myself as I pretended to count the birds which came to feed on the seeds I scattered for them. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon when I heard the chatter of the nursery girls, I left and went to a nearby café to use its toilet and have a snack. To avoid contact with others, mostly elderly ladies, I always opened my laptop even though there was no Wi-Fi.

It did not take long to establish the daily routine for *Redcroft*.

Every morning between eight and nine o'clock, the first car arrived with two occupants both dressed in pale blue nurse uniforms. All four car doors had pink lettering stating: *Edinburgh Home Support Care Services*. The woman was a bold driver, recklessly bumping down the rough track and slewing into tight U-Turn to point back up the hill. The driver was a hard-faced, grey-haired woman with caked on make-up and bright red lipstick. Her assistant was about my age, I judged, a little taller than me, painfully thin with dark hair, dark eyes and a dark brown complexion, almost black. These two women wore tailored trousers and jacket uniforms in dark purple with yellow *EHSCS* lettering on the front patch pocket of their jackets.

The older one was bossy, bad-tempered and ordered the younger one to unload the cleaning equipment and carry it to the back door while she lit a cigarette, stabbed at her mobile phone and began an argumentative discussion with the person on the other end. When they entered the house, I noted the time. About an hour later the dark-skinned girl carried two or sometimes three blue bin bags and stacked them against the wall near the overgrown track which led from the upper part of the garden, from the main gates. By her manner, her body language, it was clear this younger woman was cowed, submissive.

Most days, shortly after the first car, a second small white car arrived, identical, with the same lettering. This one parked near the front gates and the occupants walked down the rough track, unwilling to risk a skid. . Over time I learned there was a fleet of these

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white cars all with two women dressed as nurses in pale blue uniforms with *EHSCS* stencilled in pink across the back.

On some days, not every day, other *EHSCS* small cars arrived and pairs of women in blue uniforms entered and then left after about an hour. I got the impression that the older, grey-haired lady might be their boss, using *Redcroft* as her office or operations centre.

Occasionally the personnel changed but the constant was the tall, thin dark-skinned girl who arrived first every day with her boss.

Overhearing, I learned the girls name was *Astur* and that her boss was "Mrs M".

Every day, seven days a week, always about three o'clock in the afternoon, a small flatbed truck arrived. It also bore the *ECSHS* logo on both doors, entering the grounds through the main gates from the loop road. Driving slowly, it reversed down the steep slope and stopped just outside a second back entry door. This door looked as if it was no longer in use because it was partially overgrown with ivy and the paint was peeling.

Two women wearing dark green *ECSHS* uniforms unloaded red bin bags and stacked them beside the back door then knocked loudly.

The dark-skinned girl *Astur* opened the door and handed them around a dozen bright green bin bags, neatly folded into parcels, each with a tie-on, reusable plastic label. These green parcels were stacked neatly inside the large cabin of the truck. In return, *Astur* accepted a roughly similar number of red bags and closed the door. There was seldom any conversation between them and the women from the truck never entered the building. The two truck women then threw the refuse bags into the rear flatbed section and drove away.

Later, I would discover the original laundry in the basement area of *Redcroft* had been upgraded to incorporate two large commercial clothes-washing machines, a huge tumble drier, a commercial ironing machine and a large ironing table with a steam iron. The incoming red bags contained soiled garments, the green bags held washed and ironed bedding and personal items while the green and blue bags contained soiled disposable nappies and other refuse from *Redcroft*.

The truck women rotated, not always working in the same pairs. I counted around fifty different individuals. While concealed in the overgrown bushes inside the *Redcroft* garden, I learned from their grumbles these women resented being allocated this bin collection duty, learning they were taxi drivers and that 'doing the bins' meant they were losing out on 'tip money'.

Each day I studied this same, rigid routine. It seemed like a well-organised operation.

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Without fail the visiting *EHSCS* women entered by the rear door. After a few days I made sure I was there ahead of them. I hid in the garden shed beside the garage where I could watch and listen. The key for the rear door was inside a lockbox opened by pressing a keypad code. Listening to their twang as they spoke to 'Control' on their mobile phones, I learned the code was:

"fower-three-fower-three" (4-3-4-3)

Sometimes I heard them chant 5-4-5-4 or 6-5-6-5, these numbers repeat from listening to 'Control'.

While it was helpful to have these codes, it was not essential. When the care team had left for the day, I had already eased this lock open using my lockpicks and with a little practice, I could do this in seconds, quicker than opening the lockbox to gain access to the *Yale* key. One night, in complete darkness and working by feel alone without my headtorch, I had used my lockpicks to open the front door and the other side door which, I would discover later, had once been a coal cellar converted to a boiler room.

However, I had not tried to push open the actual doors, fearing they might be alarmed. To be sure it was safe to enter, I knew I must do this while the *ECSHS* care team were inside, a notion which frightened me. The alternative was to take a risk go in after the care team had left, usually between five and six o'clock in the evening and, if I set off an audible alarm, run for it. A second niggling worry was any internal alarm system might not be audible to me but could, somehow, alert people at 'Control'. If so, I could end up being trapped inside, arrested, discovered then deported; or a worse fate if the camp authorities had discovered my crime.

So, I watched and waited, trying to build up my courage to make the next move.

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On most days, the *EHSCS* people were gone by six o'clock. In the shed, I occasionally waited, checking to find out if anyone returned, sitting on an old folding chair. Eventually I concluded that there were no such return visits, that there was a window of opportunity from about 6:00 pm to around 8:00 am when Phoebe and Tasha were in the house alone.

While I waited, I used my lock picks to get into the garage. There was a very old silver *Mercedes* which appeared to be in good condition but sitting on soft, partly deflated tyres. The key was in the ignition and I turned it to 'ON' but the battery was dead. At Dr Max's camp, I had driven a small *Renault 6* which had been converted to an ambulance cum hearse but my driving had only ever been inside the camp. There was also a modern red sports car, a *Honda 2000*. Had this been Robin's car? Again, the key was in the ignition. Switched to 'ON', the mileage read 11,353 miles but the battery was "Good". Checking under the bonnet, I saw the battery was connected to a trickle charger.

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There was one other regular visitor to *Redcroft* who was not part of the *ECSHS* team. Every second or third day at around seven o'clock, a *Tesco* delivery driver carried in several boxes of food. He parked at the loop road and carried these boxes down the overgrown driveway, approaching the house by the grand stone stairway to the front door. I was nearby, hidden in the centre of a tall, dense rhododendron.

It was always the same small, thin, balding man. Making several trips, he stacked them until he had all three or four boxes in place. Only then did he pull on the brass knob, waiting, humming tunelessly to himself while vaping, sending up great clouds of sweet-scented mist. His was always the same song, "Delilah". Dr Max had had a cat called Delilah when he was a child and he often hummed this song under his breath when he was concentrating on his laptop, writing reports.

After a long delay, the door opened and the delivery driver carried the boxes inside. The hallway was dimly lit and beside him I saw a large lady wearing a flowery dressing gown who, I reasoned, must be Phoebe McKelvie. The door closed and there was another delay until the door opened when the man stepped back outside edging the empty boxes ahead of him using a foot and the door closed behind him with a loud slam. The man remained in the doorway checking the cash in his hand before removing several notes which he slipped into his pocket with a smirk on his face before putting the bulk of the money into an envelope which he sealed and carried with the empty boxes to his van. It seemed that either he had been paid cash with a good tip included, or perhaps he was overcharging, showing a false bill.

Another time as I walked past while he was unloading, I saw one of the boxes was filled with bottles of Gin and Vodka and large bottles of Diet Coke and Diet Tonic Water. A second box held several 200 pack cartons of cigarettes and boxes of *Roses* chocolates. Another contained a batch of frozen ready meals and tubs of ice cream in various flavours. Yet another box was filled to overflowing with bags of crisps, strips of *Twix* biscuits and packets of Hobnobs.

I saw no evidence of raw vegetables, fresh fruit, no sign of anything which required preparation or cooking.

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Intrusion

Three weeks into my surveillance, I felt compelled to make my move.

I had found a shop which provided nurses' clothing and bought myself a set of pale blue coveralls. I found a print shop and had a fair copy of *EHSCS* added in pink letters.

That night, just after the *Tesco* driver left, I changed in the shed where I left my rucksack well-hidden. My passport, wallet, most of my cash hoard and other personal items were hidden in the attic space of Mrs Blaney's Corstorphine bungalow, a space she had not visited for years, by the evidence of spiders' webs and dust.

I entered the rear door of 'my family home' and eased it closed quietly behind me and set the slider to 'lock' the Yale from the inside. To prevent anyone from attempting entry, I had taken the key from the lockbox, adding it to the lockpick bag suspended on the cord around my neck. Technically, I was now also a burglar. With my back against the door, I was standing in complete darkness, my heart pounding, my hands sweaty, my breath coming in short gulps. Wearing trainers, I was ready to run if an alarm sounded.

There were distant sounds from televisions upstairs but down here, in the basement, it was dark and warm with a familiar whiff of urine and faeces. Using a tiny medical torch, I scanned the door for alarm contacts. None. Reaching up, I tried to move a rusty slip bolt into its keeper. I could not get it to move. Checking I found there was a similar bolt and keeper lower down, also rusted solid. Later, during my prowling, I would learn these vintage security bolts were fitted inside every external door and some internal ones as well.

I was carrying a battered Gladstone bag bought on the spur of the moment from an Oxfam shop. This was a sentimental purchase, reminding me of Dr Mena's, the one I had carried for her when acting as her assistant, given by her father when she enrolled at medical school, following in his footsteps. It contained several packets of disposable medical gloves and face masks, packets of sterile wipes and man-size tissues, a small bottle of *Dettol*, a jar of *Vick* and a can of *Olbas* (eucalyptus) oil. I also had a large-size white forensic investigator's coverall boilersuit with a hood, a packet of overshoes, a head torch and a fancy hand-held lantern with an adjustable focussing lens.

In a canvas bag to stop them rattling, I had several dozen keys which I had sorted into bunches by shape and size, tied with string. These were from a bric-a-brac cum

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memorabilia shop, bought from a wrinkled and stooped elderly woman wearing a bright purple wig, a long black gown and red sandals. This eccentric had assured me:

"Aye, thees ur defann-ite-ly genew-inn Edambra anteeks, son."

My hope was that among these keys I would find matches for any locks I discovered, saving me time. This idea had come from a visit to the *Georgian House* during my period wandering around Edinburgh, trying to get acquainted with it and from studying a display case at *The Museum of Scotland*. I had used the links from the NLS information system to examine the drawings for *Redcroft*, from the archived records lodged by the Builder with the local authority when the house was built in 1873, using my phone to take photographs of these blueprints, sketches which I had studied carefully.

For ages I stood in a small lobby leading from the back door, listening at the internal lobby door, before opening it slightly to check that it led to a set of stairs leading up into the main part of the house. My heart rate returned to normal as I got used to the creaks and groans of the old house and the clicks and dull hammer-like thuds from the heating system.

Under my nurse's uniform, I was wearing my new lightweight elasticated activity trousers and a black polo-necked shirt. If I had to escape suddenly, I could stuff the nurse's outfit into my Gladstone bag and race off into the night on my Nike trainers.

My iPhone vibrated on silent, making me jump. I checked the long text. It was Rachel, inviting me to meet her at Hendersons' Vegan café the next day. She had landed a new job in a GP practice and wanted to celebrate, adding this was the sort of nursing she had always wanted to do. I accepted with a simple:

"Yes, thanks. Busy, got to rush."

I smiled, this was my first ever text message, sent by 'the new Robin', the one now standing inside *Redcroft* hoping to find a way to help his mother and sister, replacing the old Robin who had shirked these responsibilities. This desire to atone for my crime, filled me with a renewed determination to succeed.

Becoming acclimatised, I moved forward into the darkness and eased open the door of what turned out to be a kitchen which looked decades old. I sniffed and caught a smell I knew well - sewage masked by disinfectant. Perhaps the drains were blocked? Continuing by torchlight, I explored the other basement rooms which had been the servants' quarters. The house was overheated, humid, unaired, fetid. There was another odd smell which I learned later came from the spores of dry and wet rot.

I found the door I wanted, identified from the hum of the pumps and the 'whoomf' of a boiler igniting. A key from my bunches opened the mortice lock easily. Using my headtorch, I stepped inside and locked the door behind me. Ahead was an outer door,

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once used for loading coal, probably the door used by specialist technician when servicing the heating system and its controls. From the outside it was partly obscured by the refuse bins. I had tested this door and knew its mortice opened easily from outside but had not risked pulling it open in case it was alarmed. The room was packed with equipment, difficult to negotiate. I risked switching on the overhead light and took a few photographs with my phone, switched to 'silent'.

There was a row of three identical gas-fired boilers with linked flues. Later, on *YouTube*, I learned these were called *modular boilers*. A huge hot water storage cylinder was crammed into one corner with lots of pipes, valves, pumps and controls. I eased my way through to check the external door, pleased the slip bolts top and bottom were closed and well-oiled. On the floor beside this door there was a large can of WD 40. I shook it: almost full. On a hook there was a mortice key. It opened the lock easily. I checked for alarm contacts. None. I pushed the door: it opened easily. I relocked it, set the slip bolts and replaced the key on its hook.

I now had a bolt hole, a place where I could hide and, if required, use as an emergency escape route.

Back in the basement area, I scanned around with my lantern torch, recalling what we had been told by the guide at the *Georgian House*, trying to imagine it bustling with servants answering summons from the upstairs rooms and constantly carrying coal to the upper levels to keep the house warm and habitable. Eventually I realised I must force myself to leave its apparent safety to climb the creaky narrow servants' stairs which led to the ground floor level with its main entrance door.

I eased open the door at the top of the stairway.

The area ahead was dimly lit by light spilling from above. I could hear two competing TV programmes. I slipped on my head torch and put on disposable gloves and a face mask which I had sprayed inside with *Olbas* oil. I left the mask dangling around my neck, the vapours rising to fill my nostrils. In my plan, if I suddenly met either Phoebe or Tasha, I would pull up my mask to hide my face and hope they might accept me as a carer returned to check up on them.

Switching off my head torch, I set my lantern to a narrow beam and minimum strength. Moving slowly, spooked at first by creaking floorboards, I began to explore the ground floor level. There were three enormous sitting rooms, a dining room and a butler's pantry with a dumb waiter, recognised from the *Georgian House* visit. Off the wide rectangular foyer, I found a large cloakroom and a separate room with a WC and washbasin with ornate brass taps, brightly polished, glistening in the torchlight. I checked the inside of the wide entry door which I had seen from the rhododendron tree while watching the

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delivery driver. I checked the slip bolts and after a struggle, was able to ease them across.

I revisited the dining room where there was an acrid stench of stale tobacco smoke coming from three cut glass ashtrays overflowing with cigarette ends revealing a variety of lipstick colours. The fullest ashtray was placed at the end of a large mahogany dining table at the carved wooden seat furthest from the door. The stubs in this one had bright red lipstick marks, the colour used by the grey-haired boss lady.

On the table, there was a scattering of playing cards, a *Monopoly* box and another called *Trivial Pursuits*, both games Dr Mena and I had enjoyed. On the ornate walnut sideboard there was a large plastic tray with an electric kettle, a box of teabags, a jar of instant coffee and a set of three mugs in pastel colours.

Apart from the dining room, which was grubby, littered with wrappers from biscuits and dropped paper tissues, the floors elsewhere were clean, surfaces dusted and shining with floor polish. It seemed to me these other rooms were seldom used, if at all.

Standing in the centre of the foyer, I scanned the décor which was old and dull with peeling wallpaper and mouldy patches in the ceiling corners. At far end of the foyer furthest from the front door I saw the first few treads of a staircase. As I walked towards it, I saw an oval spiral to serve the two upper floors.

A modern lift with glass sides all round was located near to this stairwell. Its dim ceiling lamp provided the only illumination. I set my hand torch to spotlight and shone it upwards, adjusting the strength. Out of the gloom, I could see the wooden bannisters had been butchered to make openings for the lift at each of the two upper levels. High above the centre of the stairway there was a large domed rooflight. Later, in daylight, I discovered this flooded the entire two-storey stairwell with sunlight.

I crept up the stairs. The carpet on the treads was threadbare, ripped in places, a trip hazard. At the first-floor landing, I stopped and listened, then moved to stand nearer. Behind this door, a TV was playing an episode of *EastEnders*, the programme favoured by Mrs Blaney, my landlady. Above the sound of the closing title tune, a slurred voice said:

"Watch oot, hen, he's efter yer munney. Dinnae be lettin' him inside yer knickars, whittevar ye dae, eh?"

The TV fell silent. With my ear against the door, I heard a bottle clink, a groan and then footsteps moving towards me. I retreated into the shadows as light spilled onto the landing. Phoebe McKelvie was about my height, (1.8 metres or 5' 10"). By my estimate she was more than twice my weight, probably around 150 kilogrammes or twenty-three stones. From the second floor TV, the sound of a football match was now more evident. Phoebe shuffled forwards to the bannister and using it for support, swayed along to the

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lift, stepped inside and pressed a button. The folding door closed. Climbing slowly, the lift hummed up to the second floor. I heard Phoebe leave the lift and make her way along the corridor directly above me, muttering to herself quietly. The noise of the football match increased momentarily then diminished when the door slammed shut behind her. Seconds later the TV was switched off.

I assumed this was where Tasha was located.

I skipped along to sneak a look through the open door. It was a large bedroom with dominated by a huge wall-hung plasma screen and a double door stand-alone fridge. There was a microwave oven on a modern kitchen cupboard and sink unit with a dishrack stacked with clean plates with dirties in the basin.

I moved back to another hiding place with a good view into Phoebe's room. About ten minutes passed. Light spilled from Tasha's room meaning her bedroom door was open. I heard Phoebe returning to the lift. This time it descended to the ground floor. Staying in shadow, I scuttled across the corridor and risked a look over the banister. I watched her rooting in the *Tesco* boxes. She returned to the lift cradling two bottles of Vodka and a large bottle of Coke, pressing them against her bosom. In her right hand she had two ready meals and three large packets of crisps. She re-emerged from the lift at the first floor.

I saw her front on for the first time. Her long face was bloated; her skin had an unhealthy yellowish tinge and there were traces of dark purple make-up around her bleary eyes. Her grey-blond hair was matted, greasy, needing washed. She was wearing a floral dressing gown which was dirty, grubby, badly stained. She shuffled into her room, singing to herself, mournfully, wildly out of tune: *"Only the lonely"* by Roy Orbison, leaving her door open.

When I could hear she was busy, I eased myself along the corridor to a better vantage point and watched her from the shadows. She stood at the kitchen unit and filled a pint tumbler, half Vodka, half Coke. She drank it in three long pulls then re-filled the tumbler, once again with a half and half mixture. This time she sipped only a little.

Using reading glasses which dangled around her neck, she checked the instructions then popped a ready meal into the microwave. She then shuffled across to a side door and entered. I moved again still hidden and saw this second door was half-open revealing an en-suite shower room. Although I could not see her, I heard her pee and poo, grunting and sighing. In my previous life in the camps, dysentery outbreaks were frequent and based on this experience, I judged she was suffering from very loose bowels. A rife stench wafted across, mixing with the aroma of lasagne from the microwave.

Phoebe groaned, cursed, flushed the WC and then reappeared and stood in the en suite doorway, swaying, her eyes closed. I had not heard her wash her hands.

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The microwave pinged.

From upstairs, the sound of the TV screeched a pop music programme.

Back at the kitchen unit Phoebe decanted the lasagne onto a plastic plate which had deep sides, like a large soup plate, then stabbed a plastic fork into the pile of pasta. She rooted in a blue *Tesco* box near the unit and found a large bag of popcorn. With the dish and popcorn balanced on a small tray she carried it slowly back to the lift. I retreated along the corridor and kneeled in a dark corner. Using the lift, Phoebe delivered the tray upstairs to Tasha. I moved passed the lift and climbed the stairs to the second landing, straining to pick out their conversation. I chose a dark corner and watched and listened. I only had a partial view.

When Phoebe turned off the TV, Tasha complained, wailing in a high-pitched voice:

"Ah want tellay, Mammay. Ah want telay."

"No, hen, eat yer dennar first and then ye kin huv the tellay again. . C'mon, ma wee darlin'. Eat yer dennar fur yer Mammay."

There was a crash which brought a sharp. Angry response from Phoebe:

"Right. Fuckit! Ye can fuckin' sit there a' night in yer ain mess, so ye kin as fur a' Ah kerr, ya ungratefall wee shite."

Tasha began to screech and wail loudly to which Phoebe retorted:

"An' nae mer fuckin' tellay eethur fur you, madam. No' until ye learn sum mannars."

As she left the room, Phoebe switched off the light. Tasha's wail grew louder until the door closed leaving her in darkness after which her voice reduced to a whimper followed by an eery silence broken by Phoebe's wheezy mutterings which I could not follow.

When I heard Phoebe's door slam shut, I scuttled downstairs to kneel at its keyhole.

Leaning with her bottom against the kitchen unit, Phoebe downed the remainder of her pint of Vodka and Coke and prepared another half and half which she sipped. After checking the second ready meal label, she popped it in the microwave then fiddled in her dressing gown pocket for a packet of cigarettes, lit one and took a long, hungry drag followed by a large swig from her glass. When the cigarette was finished, she shuffled across to her reclining TV watching chair and turned on the TV without sound. Carrying her glass in her left hand, she stubbed out her cigarette into an ashtray which stood free-standing a pedestal stand beside her chair. This device had a press-top to allow the stub end to drop out of sight.

The microwave pinged but Phoebe was already moving quickly towards the en-suite bathroom for a further explosive session on the WC. Minutes passed then she was back

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in view, shuffling to the kitchen unit this time forgetting to flush which meant her stench mixed with the aroma of spicy chicken korma from the microwave.

Before dispensing her meal, she downed the remains of her drink and prepared another, draining the Vodka bottle before opening another to increase the strength to around eighty percent Vodka which she topped up with Coke, holding onto the worktop and leaning forwards, sipping to stop it overflowing.

With her food decanted into a second deep bowl-plate as used for Tasha, she placed it on a side table at her chair, organised her drink beside it and returned with two large family-sized bags of crisps which she dropped onto the floor close to her food table. Cursing, she realised the bathroom door was open, rose, shuffled across and slammed it shut. Returning to the kitchen unit, she prepared a second pint of high-strength Vodka and Coke, placing it on the side table beside her first.

Settled, with her feet and legs supported on the automated recliner, she blipped on the TV sound, searched for the programme she wanted and treated herself to another long pull at her drink. With the food bowl on her a huge bosom, she shovelled the curry away with a spoon washing it down with the remainder of her first pint of strong Vodka-Coke. Lighting another cigarette, she adjusted the chair to a recline position and pulling up a packet of crisps, she munched and smoked simultaneously, shoving the crisps into her mouth by the handful. With the first bag empty, she lit another cigarette and started with the second bag while sipping from her second pint.

The quiz programme was followed by a nature programme, set in Canada but by this stage, Phoebe was snoring, lost in an alcohol induced sleep coma.

My knees were aching. I stood upright to rub them and felt a presence. Turning, I saw a pair of green eyes staring at me from the bannister. It was a large whitish cat. Robin had talked of Prince, a neutered Siamese, a recent birthday present from him to Tasha. I stepped closer and the cat stunned the cat me by leaping, landing on my chest, purring loudly. Cuddling and grinning, I wondered:

Did Prince also think I was Robin?

Although Dr Mena had told me she was not really a cat person, she had always kept a house cat in her accommodation unit to scare away vermin, not just mice and rats which were always a problem in the camp, but snakes, scorpions and spiders all of which she hated. Our tame strays were always male, chosen to avoid the responsibility of rearing a litter of kittens. I put the animal down and he scurried off into the darkness.

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Feeling secure in the belief that Phoebe was now set on course for a night of boozing, snoozing and defecating, using my head torch and hand torch together I set off to

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explore the house, moving quietly from room to room, opening drawers, checking everything, opening doors, stepping inside, switching on lights, taking photographs with my phone.

In what I took to be Robin's bedroom I saw a photograph of Robin and Tasha with a footballer in a Hibs track suit. She would be about three, I thought, dressed in a Hibs strip with a full-sized football at her feet, grinning in wide-eyed wonderment. The background was a large park with goal posts. Robin was muffled in a Hibs scarf with a Hibs toorie on his head. The caption on the back said:

"Tasha's Birthday Treat with her hero Ian Murray at the Hibernian training ground."

From her records, I knew she would be sixteen and estimated this photograph had probably been taken in February 2003, when Robin had been twelve. He looked happy, with a genuine smile on his face, a sight I had never witnessed. Guilt flooded back but I fought it down, promising myself anew I would be a better brother to Tasha than he had been.

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By midnight I was back outside Phoebe's bedroom door.

During this first reconnoitre, I had used my *iPhone* camera to snap information of interest. Key to my plan was Phoebe McKelvie's solicitor's name and address and the name and address for their GP Doctor and other hospital contacts and what I could glean of their medical records, which from my cursory examination, looked as if they were both failing badly.

Putting my ear to Phoebe's door I heard the re-assuring sound of her snoring. I looked through the keyhole. The overhead light was still on, the plasma screen black, the reclining chair empty. I eased the door open and slid my head through the gap to scan the room. The stench was a ripe, meaty flavour with hints of curry spices. Phoebe was in a large double bed, on her back. Her dressing gown was on the floor, just visible under the discarded duvet. She was naked apart from a bra. I would learn later she had long ago given up wearing anything else under her dressing gown. The idea came to me she looked like a large, crumpled lump of dough which had been spilled onto the bed. She was lying on a plastic sheet. The area between her thighs was stained with a paste of reddish-brown.

The pedestal ashtray was by the bed, near to her outstretched right hand and I noticed for the first time the stand also had a circular shelf under the ashtray for her cigarette packet and lighter.

Beside the kitchen unit there was a second discarded plate and a second ready-meal carton - chicken broccoli with goat's cheese. Two empty Vodka bottles lay on the floor

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beside a blue *Tesco* storage box with six crumpled crisp packets and two discarded cigarette packets.

I pulled back my head and closed the door. Using just the hand torch, I made my way upstairs to Tasha's room and put my ear to the door. Silence. Prince rubbed himself against my legs then stood up and scratched at the door, asking to get in. I switched off my torch, cracked the door open and he slid in.

Tasha's voice said:

"Prince, c'mon in ah-side me darlin'. Who's a good boy-ay?"

I eased the door shut, even though I wanted to go in and tidy up the expected mess. In particular, I was anxious to make sure she had been given her medications but decided against this, reasoning if I did so, I might scare her and possibly spoil my chance to make friends with her under better circumstances.

With the germ of a plan working in my mind, I decided to withdraw from *Redcroft* and go back to my B & B.

To make my plan work, to be sure it went well, I would need to put all the pieces of this jigsaw in place very carefully.

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Discovery

The next day, I was at Hendersons' for a late brunch. I had expected Rachel by one o'clock but she was late, with no email or text to explain why.

Using my *iPhone* hooked into their free Wi-Fi, I browsed the web searching for a shop which supplied medical equipment and pharmaceutical supplies. Based on what I had seen at *Redcroft*, I had felt inadequate without access to my usual medical emergency kit. I sent my list of requirements to several of the most likely suppliers, asking for prices for the list of items I needed. After a disappointing list of refusals and nil responses, I found a pharmacy in London which responded semi-positively to my initial enquiry.

Using photographs of Robin's qualifications and passport stored on my phone, I claimed I was stocking up for a trip to a refugee camp in Turkey. After an exchange of emails quoting Robin's recent experience and sending images of the Reading agency letters, I managed to persuade them to sell me almost everything on my list.

This included a small supply of insulin and an injection kit. As I had expected, morphine was off limits, but I was allowed a 30-pack of 500 mg co-codamol capsules and a box containing 200 tabs of 1,000 mg of extra-strength paracetamol. Against these items in the order form, I ticked the box agreeing these medicines would not be used in the UK or the EU. The other items were routine and were added to my order without challenge.

The final item I asked for was a large-size field rucksack, with two compartments, the lower section to hold the equipment and the supplies I had bought, the upper section intended for emergency food rations but which I knew would suit my laptop and other personal items. I paid over the phone with Robin's credit card, including the premium for an overnight delivery to my B&B address at Corstorphine.

When Rachel arrived, she was distracted by a form she had received by special delivery from the GP surgery she was joining. I was relieved this was not the practice where the McKelvie family were registered. I listened and helped her answer the questionnaire and then, after a quick sandwich and a coffee, she was off to deliver it by hand to her new employers.

By late-afternoon I was outside *Redcroft*, waiting for the *EHSCS* nurses and cleaners to depart. Tonight, I promised myself I would be bolder.

As they left, I heard the older woman, the smart-looking one, tell the tall, thin girl to wait behind. I eased open the shed door to eavesdrop.

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"Astur, Ah need you on the night, for that auld biddie Watson oot at Dalkeith, OK? Here's the key fur the pick-up truck, OK? Make sure she's fed and bathed afore nine and tucked up nice and tight 'cos her son's coming ower frae Kirkcaldy tae pay her a wee visit on his way to his job it Torness Powarr Stayshun, OK?"

"But, Mrs M, I've . . ."

"NAW, Astur. Dinnae stert that stuff again. Just dae it noo hen, ur ye know whit'll happen tae ye, right?"

"Yes, Mrs M. Thank you, Mrs M."

After the woman drove off, the girl Astur waited a few minutes, sobbing quietly and blowing her nose then trudged up to the side gate and slipped through.

I now understood why there were only three mugs in the dining room. Astur was an outcast, as I had been during my time in the camp under Dr Freddy.

I waited for ten minutes and then let myself into the house, repeating my previous approach, slipping the key from the lockbox into my neck cord bag, checking the boiler room slip bolts were in still place then slipping the front door bolts across.

The mealtime sequence played out as before. This time when Phoebe delivered Tasha's food, the feeding process seemed to go better. When her mother departed with the dirty plate, the teenager was allowed to watch television with the sound turned down to almost inaudible.

When they were both settled to their TV programmes, I went on the prowl again, this time making a discovery which would prove crucially important during the months ahead, altering my initial plan.

The firesafe was hidden in the room next along the corridor from Phoebe's bedroom. The door to this room was secured by two locks, the original mortice type, easily opened with a key from one of my bunches and a more modern Chubb lock which had defeated me on the previous evening. This lock proved to be my most difficult challenge: initially I thought it would defeat me again but now that I felt more relaxed, I managed to open it after fifteen minutes of trying. I reasoned that if this room was important enough to have a special lock, it must contain important secrets.

Now inside with the slider down on the Chubb and the mortice re-locked, I risked switching on the overhead light. The lamp was very dim. I switched on my headtorch and the dome bulb of the lantern, setting it to full strength. There were no windows. The room was hot and stuffy, heated by a large, old-fashioned radiator, part of an earlier heating system. There was a faint hint of old cigarette smoke. The room was dominated

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by two enormous antique wardrobes filled with women's clothing. It took me a while to work out these items had been Phoebe's, worn when she was younger and slimmer.

After a rummage, I turned my attention to the bookcase which filled the wall opposite the entry door. It was huge, filling the entire length of the wall. I reckoned it had been made off site and assembled in place, too large to fit through the access door.

It was fashioned from very dark wood with open fronted, upper shelves reaching almost to the ceiling, crammed with books old and new, a random mixture. The lower, deeper section comprised four cupboards fronted by an opaque dark green leaded glass doors secured by simple mortice locks, easily defeated. Three of these cupboards were genuine, housing what appeared to be antique books. However, the right-hand door concealed an old-fashioned safe hidden behind a panel depicting the spines of dummy books, cleverly painted to look realistic. This panel, mounted on clips, was easily removed to reveal the front of an old fashioned safe.

Its door had an oval shaped brass label with black enamel lettering:

Manufactured by Chubb, Fireproof to 1500 Fahrenheit

In appearance, the lock on the safe looked like a simple mortice. However, it was not a mortice. For the best part of an hour, I tried my lockpicks. In desperation, I tried every likely key from my hoard. None worked. Then I remembered Dr Max's key trick. Slipping my arm into the space between the back of the safe and the wall, I found its triangular-shaped 'double' mortice key attached by a length of cord dangling from a self-adhesive plastic hook on the panelling at the back of the cupboard.

Inside the safe I found Phoebe's bank cards, her cheque-book, statements, cash amounting to £35,000 comprising rolls of twenty-pound notes bound with rubber bands, each worth £1,000. There was also a large amount of jewellery most of which looked cheap, gaudy and probably of little value. In time I would learn although this jewellery looked cheap, if offered in the right market, it would prove to be valuable.

There were documents for both cars and duplicate sets of car keys, the *Mercedes* registered to Phoebe, the *Honda* to Robin.

There was a family photograph album in which Robin and his parents featured in various locations, mostly around Scotland, from the captions. There were dozens of photographs of 'me' at my boarding schools, these featuring Phoebe, the proud smiling mother, with Robin the unhappy, truculent tall thin child and later as the mop-headed teenager defying the request to "smile please". There were no photographs of Tasha in this album.

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Among the jumble of documents, mostly receipts and paid bills, I found a well-used buff coloured filing folder, held closed by a large sized brown elastic band. It held a batch of papers from *Crawford & Co*, Phoebe's solicitors. On top was a photocopy of a hand-written letter written in a foreign language. Stapled behind was a typed memo:

This letter was delivered by hand to Mrs Pheobe McKelvie three months ago.

We understand it was originally posted to a cousin in Bradford who sent one of his sons to deliver it to *Redcroft*, by hand. At the door, the Asian youth asked her name, thrust the letter into her hands and fled.

The letter is signed by Gunjat Jalbani but was written by her Uncle Haji Javed.

Our agent in Baluchistan has spoken to Haji Javed who is a local businessman of good standing in the township of Barkhan and a leading member of his Mosque. Javed has assured our agent the contents of this letter represent Gunjat's 'true witness' of a conversation overheard during a business meeting with his closest associates, the ones she has listed within the document. Haji Javed considers these men to be gangsters.

The gist of Gunjat's story is that Akif hired a group of assassins to tamper with Asian's car to make it crash and explode, causing his death. After this murder, he then forced himself on Gunjat and made her marry him, saying if she did not agree, he would arrange for her three sons and two daughters to be burned alive in a house fire. He also threatened to murder Gunjat's father and brothers if they objected to his takeover of Arsan's business.

By this means, Gunjat asserts that Akif Jalbani has stolen Arsan's business from her father and brothers who have since been sacked.

The letter lists the names of the assassins.

In essence this letter is a heartfelt plea from Gunjat Jalbani begging Phoebe to 'do something to deliver justice in the UK'.

Reading the sheaf of accompanying letters from *Crawford and Co*, it became clear Phoebe's solicitors had used Gunjat's letter to extract a 'sizeable' divorce settlement from Akif Jalbani while securing Gunjat's safe passage from Karachi, allowing her and her children to move to Barkhan to live under the protection of Haji Javed.

There was no document which I could find which detailed this 'sizeable' settlement.

Setting them out on the floor in sequence, I photographed everything with my *iPhone*.

I then re-counted the cash twice, intending to make a detailed listing when I got back to Corstorphine. I checked again and it seemed likely Phoebe used only cash and cheques.

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However, aware she must have Chubb and mortice keys for this room hidden somewhere, I resolved to monitor the safe contents closely, to be sure none of the *EHSCS* women were stealing money from her cash hoard.

The fact I had so easily managed to find the key to the firesafe worried me. The only good thing about it from a security point of view was with the removable bookcase section in place, the safe would be well hidden from any casual inspection.

As I returned the contents, trying to replace everything as I had found it, I realised I should have photographed the layout first. This could not be remedied so I must hope my intrusion would not be detected.

Locking the safe, I decided to leave the odd-looking key on its string but before I did so, I took several photos, hoping to find a duplicate now I knew what to look for.

Just as I was leaving the room, I went back, opened the safe again and took snapshots of all the bank statements. Dr Max had taught me how to use *Excel* spreadsheets to make lists of costs and expenditures and do basic book-keeping. I needed to understand how this large house could be afforded by Phoebe who did not work but could afford to employ four 'servants' who, it seemed, attended every day of the year.

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Babsie

The next day I went to the National Library of Scotland (NLS) and asked to join, hoping to get access to their 'free Wi-Fi', as advertised. After a detailed guided tour of the services on offer from 'Ms Barbara Taylor, Customer Relations', I realised the power which was now at my fingertips. Through the NLS records and its many interlinks, I had access to a global archive of information, most of it free, some at modest cost. All I wanted to find out about was probably out there for me to track down, provided I could learn to master the NLS system.

Although she looked much younger, almost girlish, I learned later Barbara was thirty-five. I could sense at once she was a very nice person, slightly overweight but not fat, with small breasts and sturdy legs. She was about a head shorter than me with shoulder length curly brown hair and a long, slim face with large blue eyes, widely spaced, giving her a permanently startled appearance. She smiled a lot, revealing small, widely spaced teeth set in prominent pink gums. In some odd way, she reminded me of Dr Mena, not in appearance or stature but in her evident goodness and her tactile behaviour, resting her hand on mine, or reaching out to push me gently in the chest, to emphasise a point.

Just as I was about to move away from the desk after the tour, she said:

'Robin, the coffee shop here is absolutely pure dire but I didn't say that, eh? I usually hae my lunch at a nice wee place called *Grizelda's*. It's a veggie kinda place.'

I nodded, relieved it was not a burger bar.

'Great, but ye'd never find it so why no' wait for me outside at wan a'clock and I'll show you were it is, eh? Oh, Robin, an' I'm Babsie, right?'

She beamed another huge grin, with a quiet snort, like a horse or donkey, pushed me again in the chest. In the camps we had heard Western women were more forward than in Islamic countries but I had not expected to be 'picked up' so openly.

I smiled back and said:

"Eh, yes, one o'clock then. At the main door, over there?"

She nodded enthusiastically and leaned forward and punched my arm softly.

I got myself set up in a quiet corner and, armed with my laptop and a pad and pen to note details, I was soon powering through the analysis of Phoebe's bank statements from the last five years.

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I went online and using Phoebe's personal details, signed her up for online banking. I had expected this to be more difficult but it worked without a hitch. This gave me direct access to everything the bank knew of her, her profile, all incomings and outgoings, direct debits, standing orders, insurances, gas, electricity, telephone and other sundries including payments to a small bunch of local charities.

It was a relief to discover Mrs Phoebe McKelvie was financially stable although her wealth was in slow decline, supported by an international bank transfer from Pakistan in the amount of £120,000 deposited annually on the date of Tasha's birthday, 13th February. The payments were tagged 'Akif Jalbani (Personal Account)'.

From Phoebe's account the principal outflow was to *EHSCS* who were receiving £1200 per week (£62,400 per year). Once a year, usually on or near her own birthday on 10 November, Phoebe withdrew a cash sum of £50,000. This explained the rolls of £20 notes in the firesafe and the *Tesco* cash payments to the delivery driver.

There were standing orders for council charges and a television licence, cable and telephone services, insurances, external window cleaning, gardening (!) and other items amounting to just over £1,000 per month, all of which were creeping upwards year by year. For the previous year, February to late January total withdrawals were £126,434 excluding the standing order payments to me of £2,500 per month as Robin McKelvie. The current balance in his RBS account was £39, 513.

With the cash in the safe Phoebe had about £74, 000 available in cash.

At this stage I assigned the jewellery a nominal value of £3,000.

I found a website which offered to buy cars cash. The Honda was worth around £12,500. The Mercedes was classified as 'vintage'. For a model in 'mint condition' might be worth around £100,000 and so might be worth restoring before selling.

This meant, if all her assets were turned to cash, Phoebe McKelvie might be worth around £195,000 plus the value in the house. For her sake and Tasha's, I hoped she did own it. The grand mansion opposite, on the other upper side of the run-down park area was smaller but in better condition with a smart garden and was being advertised at offers over £900,000.

I had become so absorbed in these calculations I had forgotten the time. Someone sat beside me and sighed. It was Ms Barbara Taylor, Babsie, her trademark grin on her face.

'HiYa! All work and no play makes Robin a dull boy. C'mon, shut that down and come to Grizelda's and I'll treat you to lunch. I'm finished for the day 'cos I only work here three mornings a week. I'm too busy writing my third blockbuster novel. My deadline is in two months but I fancy a day off. We could go to the pictures, eh? D'ya want to come back to mine first, drop off your rucksack, eh?'

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Looking back, I realise what made me agree to her suggestion was loneliness. Although I am naturally quite a solitary person, there had always been a few people around to talk to. Down through the years only a handful had been closer friends but in the dominantly male environment of the camps my only close contact with a female had been with Dr Mena.

That evening, after the cinema, as we walked towards her flat to collect my rucksack, I was very nervous. Babsie had been punching my arm and sometimes grabbing me around the waist and pulling me against her. It was having a disturbing effect. She hauled me over into a doorway and kissed me hard, pushing herself against me. I'm sure she must have felt my erection.

Back walking again after our long kissing session, she diverted us to pass a late-night pharmacy. I waited outside while she went in for 'something essential'. I was soon to discover she had purchased a box of ten Durex.

At the flat, when I turned to leave, she blocked my way and took hold of my face, stood on her toes and pulled me down onto her lips and, still kissing, eased me backwards into her bedroom and pushed me onto her bed.

It just went on from there.

We made love very inexpertly. It was my first time, but I had watched a few soft porn videos in the camp and a steamy romantic film in the hotel that night in London after the football matches, so I knew what was expected of me.

Afterwards she sobbed for a few minutes and when I tried to kiss away her tears like the man had done in the London film, she stopped, smiled and whispered:

"No, it's OK. They're tears o' happiness, Robin. I ken it's mad, but I fancied you from the minute I saw you comin' through the library door this mornin' and I said to myself. "Get real, Babsie, ye'll never get a braw laddie like that intae yer bed. And yet, Robin, here ye are, eh? Look, I ken ye'll no want tae marry me or any o' that stuff. But don't just ditch me right aff, please, eh? I'm happy just tae have you like this, eh? Nae strings attached, like yon couple in yon film the night, just as sex buddies, eh? That's why I took ye to see it, eh? So, whit do ye say, Robin, eh? Are ye up for it?"

As she said this, her hand move and fondled me, making me hard again. Giggling, she rolled onto her back and her hand slid downwards, cajoling.

'Are ye ready to go again, lover boy?'

'Yes, Babsie. Yes please.'

'Let me check, mmm, and so are you, eh? Here, let me help wi' the Durex this time, eh? Keep ourselves safe as houses.'

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The second and third times were better. I had not expected Babsie to be so noisy, calling out, squealing, screeching, sobbing and swearing. I wondered if this was normal. In the porn movie at the camp, the girl had just moaned saying "Yes, Yes, Yes" over and over, occasionally licking her lips.

We took a break and Babsie made us mugs of tea and slices of cheesy toasties while sitting naked at her small kitchen table. I had never had brown sauce on roasted cheese before and found I liked it.

The fourth time we made love was slower, less noisy. Whispering to each other, we managed to make our climaxes come at the same time, as the couple had done earlier in the sex buddy film.

Afterwards Babsie cried again, snuggling into me under her duvet which smelled of lavender. Within a few minutes, we both fell asleep. It was five o'clock and still dark when I slipped away leaving Babsie snoring gently.

Mrs Blaney had given me a key to let myself in and out as I pleased. A sticky note fixed to my bedroom door reminded me she had gone off for a week with a friend on a bus tour and so I had the free run of her house. Unfortunately, there was no Wi-Fi but my mobile phone worked sufficiently well for my purpose and I used her dining room table as my layout space.

It was then I noticed my parcel from the London pharmacy, in the corner. I opened it and checked. Everything was there, as ordered. However, the rucksack was a bright green colour, not the black one I had ordered. I rang the London shop to complain but they hung up on me, twice. I looked online and found an outlet at Hermiston Gate Retail Park which stocked the same model in black. I rang them to explain my predicament then sent them a photo of the green version, unopened, still in its plastic wrapping. They rang back and agreed to an exchange on payment of a re-stocking fee of £15 in cash, if my green rucksack passed inspection. I checked on *Google Maps*; the shop was just under three miles away, about fifty minutes on foot.

The exchange went without a hitch. While there, I saw a large kit-bag-on-wheels, a ruggedised version as used by the emergency services for mountain rescue work. It was on 'special offer' and I bought one to replace Robin's tatty rucksack now too small for my expanded wardrobe of clothes.

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Wrong Move

The next day I decided to take another risk. It was a wrong move and many times over I have wished I could undo this decision.

My phone-based research revealed *Crawford & Co* solicitors had been merged with another firm to form *Carruthers & Crawford (C&C)* based at *The Gyle Business Park*, a place I had passed through on my way to the rucksack shop.

The *Scotsman* newspaper obituary column advised Roderick Crawford had died aged sixty-three of Motor Neurone Disease midway through a merger with rivals *Carruthers*. A more recent article advised his widow had eventually agreed to a settlement, this arrangement completed only three months earlier, allowing the new firm to sell both premises in the city centre and move to 'modern fit-for-purpose accommodation'.

I called *C&C* giving my name as Robert, son of Mrs Phoebe McKelvie of *Redcroft, Morningside* and asked to speak to the solicitor in charge of her affairs. The receptionist took a note of my mobile number and promised to call back soon. I waited, sitting in a coffee shop directly across from the reflective glass office block where *Carruthers & Crawford* occupied two floors.

The combined firm had ten Partners and fifteen Associates. There was a CV and photograph on their website of Mr Vincent Sanderson, Senior Partner with a quote:

"At *C&C* we are a traditional firm practising family law, striving to give our Clients throughout the UK and beyond, the best and most comprehensive service modern technology can deliver. But, at our core, we are a *people first* business."

I was hoping none of them had met me before but even if they had I would try to tough it out. After about half an hour, my phone rang.

'Yes, Robin McKelvie?'

'Mr McKelvie, Tom Sanderson here, I'm an Associate here at *C&C*. Sorry about the miniscule delay. How can I help?'

I would learn later from the social columnist writing in the online version of the *Scotsman* that Tom was a "Fettes' College boy", the adopted son of Mr Vincent Sanderson. This article also informed that Tom and his fiancée Melany Marshall, also a solicitor, had recently been appointed directly as Associates, leapfrogging the more senior lawyers at the firm.

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I explained to Tom Sanderson I had been overseas and had only recently returned to find my mother suffering from another bout of depression. Fibbing, I said she had asked me to make contact to discuss matters relating to the on-going care of my disabled sister.

Tom Sanderson expressed his insincere concern, asked me to be patient while he checked his electronic diary, found me a half-hour slot at 2.15 pm and advised this would be charged at £350 per hour or part thereof. He then asked who would be paying for the consultation and any ongoing support required. I said I would be happy to transfer the money from my mother's account as she had authorised me to operate her finances. This information was received warmly with: "Top-rate!"

During our meeting I fished for information about what documents C&C held on Phoebe's behalf, explaining 'Mother is vague at present'.

'Top-rate Tom' happily provided me with a read-back from my mother's thick file.

Two years earlier, in the immediate wake of the finality of her divorce, she had instructed Roderick Crawford to name me in her Will as her sole benefactor with Power of Attorney to act on her behalf if she became unwell 'physically and or mentally incapable'.

Top-rate Tom then flashed a copy of these documents which showed 'my signature' in Robin's untidy scrawl.

A codicil also stated that Robert (Robin) McKelvie, was jointly and severally with my mother the Legal Guardian of Natasha Jalbani aka Tasha McKelvie and that I had been registered with the NHS and Social Services Department as her principal registered carer and responsible adult.

I explained to Tom my mother's copies of these documents and details of her divorce settlement had been mislaid and asked if a copy might be provided.

'Of course, Robin, old boy. Not a problem. I'll just buzz in the delectable Deirdre from Office Services to do that for you. There will be a small additional charge I'm afraid since I assume you will wish these copy docs to be notarised in the usual way. I'll leave Dee to sort out the admin. Now, Robin, our witching hour is upon us, and I'm booked wall-to-wall for the rest of the day.'

A dumpty young woman about my age with pink hair and thick, black Goth make-up knocked the glass door and stuck her head in, peered at me through thick pink-tinted, pink-rimmed glasses and smiled.

'Ah, here is Dee now. Robin, old chap, please wait in reception while I brief her.'

I checked my phone timer: our face-to-face meeting had lasted twelve minutes.

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Tom rose, shook my hand, waited until I was outside, closed the door and gave Dee her instructions. Seconds later he waltzed past me and trotted along the corridor to his next meeting, or so I thought.

As with Mrs Malden in Reading, I noted again that he had not thought to check who I was, where I lived nor had he asked for contact details to prove I was who I was pretending to be. I reasoned that if we had met before, he would have mentioned it.

When Deirdre spoke, she surprised me. Her accent was proper English with only a very slight Edinburgh twang.

'Hello again, Robin. I'm Dee. I took your call earlier when I was on reception, covering the lunch period. How did it go with our new whizz kid?'

'Fine, thanks. Mr Sanderson was very helpful, on the ball.'

"Yes, our young Mr Tom is a nice chap, I suppose, just a wee bit free with his hands on my bum. *Prat*. He has no idea. Misses all the signs. Yes, Top-rate Tom is more than a wee bit dim. Fortunately, my stepsister Mel is smart enough for both of them. And yes, your description of Tom as 'on the ball' is a good one. He's off now to 'squeeze in a few holes at Gullane before the light fails', or so Mel told me earlier. I had to cajole him into fitting you into his otherwise blank diary and do all the leg work finding your mother's file. You've been his only fee-earner today. In fact, his only fee earner in the last two weeks. If it wasn't for Mel, he would get the heave, even though he's family."

'Yes, Tom seems so certain of himself, doesn't he.'

'But that's private education for you. Mel's got it too, but in her case by the scholarship route. Naturally gifted, she is very bright and has stunning looks to match her giant ego. Then there is me, poor old Dee, the ugly duckling sister who went to Napier and got a degree in 'Legal Office Administration'. But, hey, mustn't grumble too much, the money here is good, better than at *Crawford's*.'

'Yes, well done Deirdre. And thank you very much for making sure Tom saw me today.'

'This copying will take about twenty-minutes. Would you like a coffee, while you wait.'

"Yes, thanks.'

'OK, take a seat back in the meeting room and I'll organise everything. By the way, it's normal for these walk-in meetings to be paid for immediately, preferably by Bank Debit card. Would that be alright? We have a machine at Reception, you can pay Lisa on the way out, OK?'

'Sure, no worries.'

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A tall slim, dark-haired girl wearing a purple overall delivered a silver tray with a large cafetière of strong black coffee and a plate of shortbread petticoats. In halting English, she offered to pour. I shook my head, smiled and she retreated, her face suddenly red, embarrassed.

Dee returned with a folder and set out the notarised documents for me to check.

She then gave me a flimsy print-out of the invoice for me to approve in the amount of £285 plus VAT for the copy documents and another for £350 plus VAT for the consultation. Both invoices were over-stamped in red lettering:

For Immediate Payment

'We require an address for the receipted invoice. Will I send it to Morningside or to Leith?'

'Leith?'

I saw her smirk, reached for my phone and fiddled with it.

'Zahra, my girlfriend, our Catering Manager, says you are definitely the guy who spent the night with Babsie. We were at that sex buddies film too. Zahra was dead keen to see it. I couldn't stand it and we fell out half-way through. I went home ahead of her. She watched it right to the end then trailed the two of you back to our close. We live directly above Babsie.'

'Interesting. Edinburgh is a small world, I suppose.'

'Robin, a wee word of warning, friend to friend. Babsie is our best mate so don't you dare break her heart or you'll have me down on you. I warn you, fair and square. If you hurt her, I'll break both your arms. That's not a joke. I'm a tenth Dan Karate expert.'

This was warfare. I had been here before with Dr Freddy and Mrs Boris and had learned my lessons. I stood, gathered the papers and put them in my small rucksack, slung it over my shoulders. With my phone in one hand and both invoices in the other I stared at her, lifted my phone and replayed the recording of her threat.

'Well, Dee, thanks for the fair warning, friend to friend. Ms Taylor and I have a clear understanding regarding our relationship. As a client of this firm, I absolutely forbid you to discuss my personal affairs with Ms Taylor, or for that matter with Zahra or even Mel or Tom. This conversation ends here. If you dare to threaten me again, I will report you to Mr Vincent Sanderson. This conversation about my personal life ends here and now, are we agreed?'

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'OK, agreed. I was out of order Mr McKelvie, I apologise. Right then, professional face only from now on. May I assume you wish me to use the Morningside address for billing purposes?'

'Yes please, Miss Deirdre, that would be ideal. However, as I have already agreed with Mr Tom Sanderson this work is to be billed to my mother, I intend to settle these invoices by electronic transfer from her account. Shall I use the bank details on this invoice? So, if I can connect my laptop to your Wi-Fi, please and I'll make these transfers now, if that is acceptable?'

'Whatever. Use the 'C&C Guests" network. Collect your receipted invoices from Lisa at Reception and save on postage. Nice meeting you, **not!** Cheerio Robin McKelvie. **Forever!**'

She scribbled this password on an invoice and left.

I went online, transferred the amount due from Phoebe's account and logged off.

Zahra returned to collect the tray and wipe the table. Although I was certain I had not seen her before, she did seem somehow familiar. As before she avoided eye contact but there was something odd about her, something I thought I should have recognised.

'Zahra, may I ask where you are from?'

'No, thanks to you.' Then added, hissing, 'No, **maya!**' Then she was gone.

Standing well away from the building, I looked back at the C&C office, trying to pick out the meeting room where I had been but because of the reflective glass, this proved impossible. Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw Dee and Zahra standing in the smokers' shelter, puffing away, watching me.

Although I had achieved everything I had hoped for, I began to worry something could go wrong.

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Forthwith

Back at the small dining table in the kitchen of Mrs Blaney's bungalow, jittery from too much coffee, I made a mug of tea and read slowly through the notarised documents.

Phoebe owned the house.

The divorce settlement involved a run-off period during which an annual fixed sum of £120,000 would be paid on 13 February each year until Natasha's death. A certificate of comfort noted this was free of tax at the point of receipt and that this had been approved by the regulatory authorities in the UK and in Pakistan and lodged at Phoebe's bank. Normally I accessed Phoebe's online account through my laptop but as there was no Wi-Fi at Mrs Blaney's so I went online using my phone, looking back at the records from previous years, checking payments received, noting them on a pad, confirming that Akif Jalbani had kept his side of the bargain.

My phone rang. It was Babsie. I heard traffic noise. She was standing near a busy street.

Although I had her number, she did not have mine.

She would have obtained it from the details I lodged with the NLS. Babsie must be outside the library.

Because of the incident with Dee and Zahra, I decided to end our friendship at once. I said I was very sorry adding I could not continue to meet with her due to pressing family commitments. Babsie started to sob and I felt very guilty. I think she probably misunderstood this meant I was already married or engaged but by the time that notion occurred, the call had ended.

A few minutes later, my phone rang again and this time it was Dee.

"I fucking warned you, McKelvie. Our pal Babsie is dead. I was there when she phoned you. She just dropped her phone, turned off the pavement and walked out in front of a bus. When I find you McKelvie, your dead too!"

I was stunned, frozen.

On autopilot, I switched off my phone and removed the SIM card. Online I had learned mobile phones in the UK could be 'tracked'. As a precaution, I had become accustomed to switching my phone off. The website had recommended removing the battery but my new iPhone had a sealed battery to make it more dust and watertight. Hopefully Dee would never find out I had been living here with Mrs Blaney.

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For hours I sat stock still. I could not believe the lovely warm-hearted girl I had slept with was dead. To avoid a messy conflict with Deirdre, I began to think perhaps I should abandon my plan to save Robin's mother and sister, cut and run, make a new life somewhere else.

I did not sleep well, tossing and turning. Suddenly the thing that had been bothering me about Zahra came back. Her eyes. She had avoided looking at me. The glimpse I did get was now etched on my retina. Her pupils had been dilated, high on something. And the odd aggression from Dee, her tinted spectacles. Had she been high as well?

They were dope fiends, addicted.

The memory of that long ago day returned:

I was standing at the door to Dr Max's office. I think I was about thirteen or fourteen.

High on something odd, screaming obscenities at the top of their voices, two ordinary men I knew well ran across the yard and attacked a guard, one of the nice guards, a gently spoken man called Callum, from England.

Abdul, the leader, slashed at Callum's throat. Blood spurted as he fell, already dead. Abdul and Maned kept hacking at his head with home-made machetes until it fell off. Abdul kicked it away and they both kept hacking at the rest of his body, ignoring the shouts from the other guards running towards them. When the attackers turned to face the challenge, the guards shot them.

Three men dead inside a few minutes, caused by mind-altering drugs.

When high, would Dee be bold enough look for me at Redcroft? Would she attack my mother or sister if she could not find me?

And what about the EHSCS care team?

How many more innocent people might die because of me?

It was this sense of dread which forced my hand.

I must get to Redcroft as soon as possible.

I leapt out of bed, showered and shaved around the edges leaving a stubble of the sort that Robin had favoured. I packed my new kit bag, carefully checking I had stowed everything I owned. I retrieved my small rucksack and stowed the items I had stashed in Mrs Blaney's attic.

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Resisting the surges of panic which assailed me, I tried to work methodically but as quickly as I could, I stripped my bed, washed and dried my sheets using the tumble drier, re-made the bed, vacuumed, washed and dried dishes, re-stacked them in the cupboard, and emptied the rubbish bins into a black plastic bin bag beside Robin's old rucksack. Irritated by my impulse purchase, I added the shabby Gladstone bag, an impractical item, much too small for my purpose.

Standing in her hallway beside Mrs Blaney's answering machine, I phoned her B & B contact number and left a message explaining I had been sent to Birmingham on a new research project, thanked her for her hospitality during my stay, adding I would recommend her to my colleagues. Following my routine, I switched off my phone and removed the SIM card to my neck pouch and put the phone on my rucksack.

I locked up and dropped the key through her letterbox.

Wearing my new field rucksack and trailing my new kit-bag-on-wheels, I set off walking quickly through the darkness towards the city centre, my mind tumbling through what had happened over the last few days.

Spotting a half-full a builder's skip, I threw in the plastic bin bag.

All connection with Mrs Blaney's B&B at Corstorphine was now severed.

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I checked my watch: 22:53.

Increasing my pace, I moved on to the next stage of my revised plan.

On the commercial edge of Morningside, about half a mile from *Redcroft*, I found an all-night coffee place with free Wi-Fi. Sipping a double-shot unsweetened black Americano, I used my laptop to send a priority email to *EHSCS* to cancel the contract for both nursing and cleaning services.

In a tersely worded script which I revised and honed several times to get the wording just right, I stressed it was important their home visits cease 'forthwith', including those scheduled for later today, adding I intended to cancel our standing order 'forthwith'.

I added, I was a registered NHS nurse and that in consultation with my mother, we had decided on an alternative strategy for the care of my sister Tasha. I also stressed I was my sister's 'Legal Guardian', her registered 'NHS carer' and listed with Social Services as her 'responsible adult', should they wish to check this with Mr Tom Caruthers at *Caruthers & Crawford*, our family solicitors.

I stopped short of thanking them for their services but added I would settle their account 'forthwith' to cover the four-week notice period set out in their contract adding

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that provided they rendered a detailed statement of their charges I would settle any other charges due, stating I considered a sum of £200 as 'fair and reasonable' for the cleaning equipment and other materials stored at *Redcroft*, items which I wished to retain.

After a final review and before sending this email, I ticked the box requesting their mailing system to notify me that my instructions had been 'received' and again when the email was 'opened'.

A few minutes later, I was amazed when both these acknowledgements were notified, followed by an equally terse reply:

Mr Robert McKelvie,

We agree that £200 is 'fair and reasonable'.

We do not envisage any further charges.

On receipt of your promised payment, we will void this contract, 'forthwith'.

M Marshall, CEO.

Even at this early hour, Mrs Marshall was awake and alert enough to attend to the *ECHCS* mailbox.

I logged on to Phoebe's bank and settled the amounts due by bank transfer, relieved that I did not have to endure a face-to-face confrontation with the hard-faced Mrs M.

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Dead End

Now crouched in shadows, outside the garage with the kit bag locked securely in the boot of the *Honda*, its key hidden under the floor mat of the *Mercedes*, I was dressed in black jogging clothing, wearing running shoes, with my medical kit and important personal items in my field rucksack.

The first item on my agenda was to enter *Redcroft* then lock myself inside.

I checked my watch: 02:12.

After a long anxious period of staring up at the windows, seeing a dim flickering light from Phoebe's room and darkness at Tasha's, I stepped forward and entered the code, opened the lockbox, retrieved the Yale key, altered the code to 5555 and clicked it closed, leaving it empty. Once inside, with the Yale locked, I engaged the slider to prevent anyone opening it from outside with a second key. I put the Yale key in my neck pouch.

I checked the boiler room to be sure the door to outside was locked, the slip bolts in place. This time I left the internal door unlocked. Taking the can of WD 40, I returned to the back door and dosed the slip bolts and got them moving but after a struggle, I gave up. The door was skewed on its hinges, the bolts and keepers out of line.

Moving slowly, I climbed the stairs and crept along to the front door, checked it was locked, applied WD 40 then slid the top and bottom bolts into place.

So far as I could tell, I was safely locked inside, alone with Phoebe, Tasha and Prince but still the memory of Dee and Zahra and the buzzing feeling at the nape of my neck warned me I was in danger but re-assured that if things went badly, I had my bolt hole and escape route using the boiler room.

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I checked my watch: 02:49.

Over the next half hour or so, I crept around the house, on high alert, going from room to room, with my head torch on minimum setting, occasionally using my lantern torch to check in every corner to be sure I was alone, worried that Dee and Zahra might be hiding, ready to ambush me.

A soft, high, keening sound led me to the room with the firesafe. Listening outside the door, I thought the Siamese cat had somehow got himself trapped inside. The door was locked. I used my lockpick on the Chubb and, now that I was proficient, it opened the

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easily. I had expected Prince to scamper out and waited. The sound from inside stopped. Nothing but absolute darkness. I could smell blood. My hands were shaking.

Staying in the corridor, I swung the door fully open. The scene revealed by the lantern torch took my breath away. I am used to death but not violent death, not executions.

Deirdre and Zahra were both dead, both shot in the head and chest, covered in blood. The safe was open but at first glance the contents looked undisturbed. My first take was that Phoebe had caught them trying to steal her money and had shot them. My training kicked in. Although I was sure they were dead, I stepped forward into the room to check their pulses. Moving forward I switched my head torch to full beam, an action which may have saved my life.

As I leaned forward to check Dee, I heard a small squeal and whipped round towards it. Something detected by my subconscious caused me to throw myself to one side. Just after feeling a violent tug at my rucksack, I heard the familiar 'phut' of a silenced bullet. Later I would discover my laptop had taken the bullet and had probably saved my life. I reckon the bright flash of the head torch must have affected my assailant's aim. I have been shot at several times in the past, mostly by drunken soldiers playing 'night games', amusing themselves by firing at the feet of refugees walking to the latrine tents.

A female voice began to wail and screech in a language I did not recognise. I aimed my torch towards the source and saw Astur sitting in the corner of the room where she had been hidden by the door. With her back to the wall, hugging her knees, she stared at me wide-eyed as she rattled her plea at me.

'No shoot! No shoot!'

Although I knew who she was, to her I was a complete stranger unseen behind a bright light.

A large pistol lay on the floor in front of her feet beside a small kitchen knife. I scrabbled towards her on my hands and knees, grabbed the gun and swept the knife away. I eased the slider to 'safe' then released the ammunition cassette. It was empty. Her single shot at me had been her last bullet.

The weapon was unmistakable, a Maxim 9 incorporating a built-in silencer, a large, bulky gun which took 9 mm Glock ammunition. Dr Max had been given one as a present by a soldier returning to Germany at the end of his tour. He had kept it in his lock-box but I had been allowed to hold it a few times and had learned on the grapevine how powerful and popular it was with ordinary soldiers because it was a weapon favoured by special forces.

Kneeling before the girl I saw she was bleeding from a slash wound to her left bicep, a deep cut producing a steady seep of blood.

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'Hi, my name is Robin McKelvie. I do **not** want to hurt you. Please believe me.'

Slipping into my role as a nurse, I unzipped the lower section of my rucksack, moving the torch to illuminate the contents.

Her head jerked up and stared at my face. Her fear turned to a small smile.

'You is Tasha brother?' You is Robbie?

'Yes, I'm Tasha's brother.'

'I see you photo. Is you footballer?'

'This might hurt a little.'

I applied a tourniquet, wiped her wound dry then sprayed it with antibiotic powder.

'Why you go way, no look to after her? **You her brother! You bad, Mr Robbie!**

'ASTUR! Stop, please. What has happened here? Why did you shoot at me? Did you kill those two girls?'

Her eyes rolled upwards, her head fell forwards and she slumped sideways, unconscious.

I closed the door and engaged the slider on the Chubb to prevent anyone opening it from outside. I turned on the dim overhead light.

I arranged Astur in the recovery position, checked her throat mouth was clear, that she had not swallowed her tongue. Her pulse was weak but stable, her blood pressure nearly normal if a little on the low side. Blood loss had been minimal. Shock often kicks in when the patient feels safe. I completed the wound dressing and removed the tourniquet, checked the wound had stopped bleeding.

I needed to check for other damage. She was in a loose-fitting blue track suit with a red tee-shirt underneath. I eased her out of her clothing, feeling uncomfortable: all my previous patients had been male. In bra and pants only, I saw she was rake thin, very underweight for her height and build.

I counted twenty-three bruises, eleven recent, others older. Someone had been beating this girl on a regular basis. She was wearing a small silver crucifix around her neck but no other jewellery, no obvious tattoos. Reassuringly, I found no tell-tale track marks from injections.

I eased her gently into her clothing and arranged her again in the recovery position.

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Working more quickly, I checked Dee and Zahra and confirmed they were dead, but only recently as rigor mortis was absent. I started with Dee removing her bum bag. Drugs had

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been a serious problem in the refugee camps, purchased with sex favours from the worst of our guards. They were wearing tight-fitting black pants and polo shirts, identical outfits. I used my surgical scissors to cut them out of their clothing, standard practice when dealing with dead bodies at the camp. I checked both corpses for track marks.

My guess was correct. On Zahra's thighs, upper arms and between her toes I found tell-tale tiny bruises, needle marks. In her pant pocket I found the Chubb key, nothing else. I tested it then added it to my neck pouch. The pouch was now bulging, heavy.

One oddity, so small I almost missed it, was a miniscule tattoo on Zahra's left bicep, a tiny black and red Swastika with the number 1013 inscribed underneath.

I emptied the contents of Dee's bum bag onto the shelf front of the bookcase. There was a car key with a remote fob displaying a VW logo. I put it in a zipped pouch inside the top section of my rucksack.

In an inner Velcro-ed pocket of the bum bag, I had found twists of snorting cocaine and pills in various colours. The credit card purse held a driving licence card for Deirdre-Ann Foyle Marshall, her bank debit card, three credit cards, a Tesco loyalty card and fifty-five pounds in tens and fives. I reloaded these items into the purse and zipped it into my rucksack beside her car key.

Forcing myself to complete the unpleasant part of my investigation, I returned to the corpses, now dressed only in their underwear. I started with Dee. She did not have a bra. A huge red and black swastika tattoo covered her entire back. She wore large pinkie rings, right and left. The right stone was a pentagon shape, shiny red. The left stone was a matching pentagon, shiny black. She had not worn these rings at our meeting at C&C.

Dee did not have a bra. Turned onto her back, I saw her breasts had been surgically reduced, a neat professional procedure. She had rings in her nipples and a stud in her tongue. This stud had not been evident at C&C.

She wore elasticated black sueded pants incorporating a huge dark red penis, expensively made, highly realistic. It was semi-erect, made of a rigid but pliable plastic material, circumcised with oversized glans and detailed raised veining on the shaft, a work of art. At the base of the penis there was a heavy red scrotum, wrinkled with bulging testicles. Above the scrotum, the pants were decorated with fake pubic hair, a hand-sewn addition made of thick, shiny black cord. With the dildo pants removed, her pubic hair was shaved.

(Much later, online in the Dark Web, I learned that the scrotum when squeezed would cause the penis to achieve a full erection.)

Zahra wore flimsy red frilly knickers and a black lacy bra. Her pubic hair was shaved. She wore no jewellery, had no piercings or studs, no other tattoos. Apart from the Chubb key, her only possessions were five unmarked sachets of what I assumed was higher-

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grade cooking heroin in sealed foil packs hidden in an inner pocket sealed by a Velcro flap. I added these foil packs to my rucksack for later disposal.

It was this find which made me re-check Dee's pockets, first by feel, squeezing gently, expecting drugs. What I found in the matching pocket of Dee's trousers was a 164 GB pen-drive attached by a long thin braid sewn onto the Velcro flap. Sensing it must be important, I added the pen-drive to my neck cord pouch.

Perhaps if I had missed this pen-drive, my new life might have taken a less frightening path.

Finally, I completed the action I had been putting off. I checked their private parts for drugs or other secrets. Apart from noticeable bruising inside Zahra's rectum, I found no other hidden drugs or secreted items.

I turned my attention to the firesafe, comparing what I could see before me with my earlier *iPhone* snapshots. Everything was just as I had left it. Leaving detailed checking until later, I locked the safe, retaining the key.

My neck pouch was overloaded. I used Dee's bum bag to share the load, leaving only the lock picks and safe key in my neck pouch. Thinking how carefully Dee had hidden the pen-drive, it was probably of great value or importance. I moved it to my neck pouch. As an afterthought, delving into my rucksack, I found my mobile phone with its battery and moved it to the bum bag where it would be easier to access.

The thought flashed:

Dee must have brought a mobile phone!

After a lengthy search, I found it on the floor against the wall near the right-hand wardrobe where it had landed when Astur shot Dee. It was locked, the screen blank. Afraid it could be used to lead someone to *Redcroft*, I shut it down and removed the SIM card before putting both items in my rucksack. I searched every inch of the floor for a possible second phone for Zahra without success.

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My focus changed to Tasha and Phoebe but before leaving, I checked on Astur again. Her pulse was steady and her blood pressure back up to normal. As a further precaution, I removed her shoes and socks and ran a Biro across each of her naked insteps in turn. No reaction. Copying a method used for refugees being punished by confinement, I took her shoes and socks and opened a wardrobe intending to stow them under a pile of clothes. Doing this, I found a rigid unmarked cardboard box containing six full cartons of bullets for the Maxim, sixty rounds. I reloaded the cassette, engaged safe mode, reopened the firesafe and placed the Maxim inside. There was not enough space for the ammunition

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box which I buried in the back right corner of the other wardrobe under a pile of shoe boxes.

With the firesafe relocked, and the safe key back in my neck pouch, I stood in the centre of the room using both torches on full power, and slowly swivelled around, checking, checking, checking to be sure I had not missed anything.

A thought occurred and I went back to Astur. Feeling gently, I searched her clothing. In the left-hand pocket of her trousers, I found a Yale key which looked like the one for the basement access door. In the right hand-pocket, I found two single pound notes and a few coins. I was tempted to remove these items but I put them back.

If Astur came back to consciousness she might escape or hide. Almost certainly she would know this house far better than I did. Reluctantly I used cable ties from my rucksack to hobble her legs and wrists, swivelled her round, arranging her in the recovery position with her face pointed away from the corpses then used a 'rope' of joined up cable ties to anchor her ankles to the radiator.

I switched off the overhead light plunging the room into darkness then pulled the door closed behind me listening for the re-assuring click as the Chubb engaged. Using the Chubb key, I double locked the door.

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I stood in the corridor, my back resting against the door to the firesafe room, trying desperately to quell the familiar rising surge of fear. Closing my eyes, I tried to block the nightmarish images of Robin, Babsie, Dee and Zarah as they morphed and merged into one horrible, ugly, contorted mass of writhing, naked, blood-covered legs and arms and dead-eyed faces.

Once more the terrified voice from my past screamed:

"Run, Tommy. Run now!"

But I could not run, could not move, trapped by a dreadful heavy tiredness.

Survival and self-preservation kicked in.

I fought back, forcing myself to take deep breaths, double inhaling then triple exhaling to clear my body of spent air and carbon dioxide, using a long-established routine taught to me by Dr Mena to banish my nightmares. As the oxygen flooded my system, my mind began to function rationally, telling me even though the situation was temporarily contained, it was far from resolved. Involving the police would expose me to discovery.

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As the fear receded, my jittery body caught up with my psyche. Engulfed by the cloying warmth of the surrounding darkness I was shivering and sweating profusely. To me this was reassuring, a signal that the worst of the trauma attack had passed.

From what I had seen, I was certain Astur was innocent, that she had shot them in self-defence.

My mind began to race ahead, seeking solutions.

Astur could drive.

We would need a car.

I had Dee's car keys.

We would need a place for the bodies. . . .

Purring loudly, Prince rubbed himself against my legs, bringing me back to the present.

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Safety First

I was outside Pheobe's room. There was no sound from inside.

A dim light filtered down into the stairwell from the rooflight. The house was silent, apart from the clicking and groaning of the radiators and pipes of the central heating system. Perhaps I was being irrational, but I felt sure I was now safe inside *Redcroft*. This brought with it a feeling of calm. My motives were good. I was here to care for my 'mother and sister' but I knew this would not be enough to protect me if the police became involved.

Babsie's face shimmered into view, red-eyed, real tears. My mind slewed. Guilt for my part in her suicide welled up as it had been doing since Dee's threatening phone call. My own tears fell. This was in part a reaction to the near miss bullet which Astur had fired at me. The last time I had allowed myself to cry was when the bombs fell on my mother and baby sister. As tide of guilt ebbed and, as in the past, the imperative for self-preservation took over.

I sniffed away my tears and forced myself to act.

I checked the luminous hands of my watch: 07:05. If Mrs M and her *EHSCS* people had not received the cancellation email, they would be arriving soon. At maximum, I had two hours until that challenge. I set an alarm to remind me to check for anyone trying to gain entry at the rear or other doors.

I felt no emotion for Dee and Zahra, except relief.

I had no real idea of what to do about their corpses. The main thing would be to dispose of them quickly and remove all evidence in case someone decided to come to *Redcroft* looking for them.

The problem was Astur.

Although it looked as if she had shot the other two in self-defence, maybe there had been someone else involved who also had a key for the firesafe room and had left Astur to take the blame. I just could not figure out what had happened. Even though I knew nothing about Astur, I felt she was a good person, trustworthy but clearly vulnerable, as the marks of her beatings proved. I had no idea what to do about her. I could not keep her here against her will. If she left, where would she go and who would she tell?

From my overheard conversation while I was listening from the shed, Astur was controlled in some way by Mrs M, her *EHSCS* supervisor.

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Was Astur an illegal immigrant?

Robin had told me many times "these illegals are everywhere. It's called 'the black economy', Tommy, pun intended." To Robin this had been a favourite joke and it was clear he did not see I found it offensive.

The only thing I felt sure about was that Astur would be willing to go along with my idea of disposing of the dead bodies if she had shot them, even in self-defence. From my inspection, at least there was no evidence that she was using injectable drugs and I had found no hidden drugs on her person.

After running several other notions of what had transpired between Astur, Dee and Zahra I decided to let it go. I would try to find out from Astur later. All I was certain of was I could not inform the police, believing if they became involved, my true identity would be discovered.

Prince stood on his hind legs, reaching up, clawing into my trousers. I scooped him up and he nuzzled into me reminding me my immediate priority must be Tasha and Phoebe, in that order.

Whispering, I said:

"Yes, Prince, I get it. Let's go and see how Tasha is, eh?"

The cat scampered ahead and disappeared into the gloom.

My first stop was Robin's old room. I raked through his Hibs paraphernalia, put on a toorie and a scarf and took one of each for Tasha. Carrying my medical rucksack like a bag, I walked along the corridor and put my ear to Tasha's door. The television was at low on what sounded like a shopping channel. Prince was waiting for me, as if he knew his role in advance so I cracked open the door and let him in. The overhead light was on. I scanned the room. Tasha was sitting up in bed. Seconds later I heard the squeals of delight as Prince leapt up onto her. I pulled down my face mask, slipped in, closed the door quietly and crossed to stand directly in front of the television and face my biggest test yet.

'Robbie! Robbie! Look Prince, it's Robbie.'

'Tasha, what do we sing?', I said.

And off she went singing at the top of her voice with all the words correct.

"Glory, Glory to the Hibeas. . ."

Placing a toorie on her head and wrapping a scarf around her neck, I joined in, words memorised from singing along but much more quietly with Robin months earlier, the night he had tipped over into a stupor from overdosing, the night I discovered he was injecting

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stolen morphine. When he eventually fell asleep, I had carried him from the isolation ward and tucked him into bed in his hut. I then revealed his secret by opening his lock box using the 1-3-1-4 code I had seen him use. Inside, I had discovered his personal syringe and stash of morphine phials.

I reckoned I had passed my first test with Tasha.

Assuming the role of her nurse, I read Tasha's chart, checked her blood sugar, blood pressure, pulse and temperature while she cooed and bubbled nonsense at me and Prince. I then stripped her, removed her soiled nappy and washed her thoroughly. Following the protocol I had studied on *YouTube*, I checked her finger stumps and toes for signs of gangrene, always a problem for diabetics. When she was neat and tidy, wearing a new nappy and a Hibs shirt, I gave her two paracetamols dissolved in a small glass of diet coke and placed a fresh cartridge into the holder of her Continuous Subcutaneous Insulin Infusion (CSII) pump, a system designed to monitor and respond to her daily insulin needs.

From her pile of storybooks, we chose her favourite, *The Gruffalo's Child*, which I read to her until she slipped over into a restful sleep. With the duvet tucked around her, I put the restraining bands in place to be sure she did not fall out of bed. Working quickly, I cleaned the room as best I could by picking up spilled popcorn and crisps and wiping up spilled food. The carpet was badly stained and I promised myself I would replace it soon with the with easy clean linoleum tiles, as Mrs Blaney had in her kitchen.

My watch vibrated. 09:00. From Tasha's bedroom window I watched and waited to see if the *EHSCS* nurses would arrive. During my previous surveillance I had noted they were a little random.

By 9:45, I concluded my 'cancellation of contract' email had had the desired effect.

It was now time to face my next test.

I listened outside Phoebe's room. The TV volume was high with lots of fake clapping, maybe a quiz show. I eased her door open. The smell was vile, a mixture of human faeces, urine, spilled alcohol, decaying food and stale tobacco smoke. I applied a smear of *Vick* and sprayed *Olbas* oil inside my mask and fixed it in place. I scanned the room. Phoebe was sitting with her back to me, her head slumped forward, asleep or dozing. Her mobile phone was lying on the floor beside the ashtray stand. Dropping to my hands and knees, I crept forward to retrieve it.

Back in the corridor, I tapped the mobile to life. It was a *Samsung*, the same make and model as Robin's before I replaced it with my *iPhone*. Thankfully, it was not code protected. I scrolled through the call log. There were no incoming calls; all were outgoing,

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to *Tesco*, each about five minutes duration, repeated every few days, presumably to order food and alcohol.

I checked her emails. Over the last six months of records held on the system, the only important emails were from *Stimpson's Medical Centre and Pharmacy*. Each was identical, the latest email advising her prescriptions had been dispensed and would be delivered to *Redcroft* her by courier.

The next delivery was due tomorrow, Friday, at about 5.00 pm. Checking back, this was a pattern for third Friday of each month.

Attached were separate PDFs of both prescriptions:

Natasha Jalbani's list of medications were:

- **NovoRapid PumpCart** (insulin cartridges), at 10 Units (daily/Basal)
- **NovoRapin PenFill** (insulin cartridges) at 10 Units (as required by patient needs)
- **Co Codamol** at 3 by 30 tabs/500mg blister packs
- **ZeroDerm** ointment/soap substitute at 1 by 500g jar
- **Tea Tree Oil** (medical grade) at 2 by 250ml jars.

Phoebe McKelvie's prescription list showed:

- **Prozac** at 3 by 20mg per day ***
- **Nardil** at 3 by 30 mg per day ***
- **Restoril** at 1 by 30mg per day ***
- **Kanga** double incontinence pants at 3 by 20-piece packs (female/large)
- **Sudocrem** ointment at 2 by 100g jars
- **Sterile Wipes** at 4 by 50-piece packs

***: **Do Not Exceed daily dosage.**

These medications must be signed for by the undernoted or his/her authorised representative:

Signature required at delivery: **Mrs Phoebe McKelvie.**

Using my *iPhone*, I checked these medications on the Internet and concluded both Phoebe and Tasha had serious medical issues.

The *Prozac* and *Nardil* were familiar, used to treat depression and much sought after by refugees at the camp although we usually gave cheaper generic substitutes.

Restoril was unfamiliar. *Google* advised it was used as an anti-anxiety drug often prescribed to help patients sleep easier and for longer.

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From my *YouTube* research following what I had observed on my previous visit, I had already formed a view that Phoebe's weight and alcohol consumption were major aggravating factors combined with a diet of ready-meals and junk food was highly detrimental to both mother and daughter. In the camps, diarrhoea caused by dysentery and poor food hygiene related to meat eating was a major killer, the main reason I had adopted a vegetarian diet, like Dr Max and Dr Mena.

I could not put it off any longer.

I disabled both phones by removing their batteries, took a deep breath, adjusted my mask to a snug fit and re-entered the room as Robin McKelvie, son of Phoebe, recently returned from doing good works in a refugee camp in *Greece*, determined to turn over a new leaf and be a dutiful son and brother. If I succeeded, I would establish myself as a credible substitute for the person whose life I had stolen. Running in parallel with this script was the imperative to get this first phase over with quickly and get to the firesafe room to deal with Astur and the problem of the two corpses.

I delved into my rucksack, found the disposable coverall boilersuits, surgical gloves and overshoes. What lay ahead would be a messy business and there was a slight risk that Phoebe was harbouring something nasty in her bowels. Safety first: the motto which had kept me alive in the camps.

Easing the remote control from Phoebe's nicotine-stained fingers I shut the TV down and stared at the inebriated woman before me. I knew she was fifty-six. Compared to Mrs Blaney who was sixty-two, Phoebe McKelvie looked at least twenty-years older, worn out. She was unrecognisable as the attractive woman I had seen in the photograph album from the safe, standing beside a young Robin in his school uniform.

Her face and stomach were bloated, her hair long, stringy, greyed and greasy, eyebrows bushy, eye sockets dark, skin yellowed with compressed rolls of fat under her chin. Her long, empty breasts hung loosely, stretching down by her sides.

I had imagined this moment for months, planning to be polite and friendly, perhaps even apologetic but faced with this self-indulgent wreck of a woman, I decided instead I would be aloof, almost offhand, in keeping with the real Robin's persona, believing this is how he would have spoken in this situation.

In a loud voice, I said:

'Mother, it's Robin. I'm home again.'

Phoebe's head jerked up and she stared at me through bleary eyes, hauled herself upright and leaned back. This had the effect of causing her dressing gown to fall open from the waist. I glanced downwards and as expected, she was naked. During her drunken coma she had soiled herself, probably more than once.

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'Robin? Is that really you, Robin? Oh Robin, ma wee darlin', I'm sey sorry about whit a said tae ye that day, afore ye left for Afghanistan. Evar since, I've kept thinkin' ye must be deed. Ye dinnae even send me a wee text, son. Bit ne'er mind, eh? Yer hame tae yer auld mammy 'n that's a' thit mettars, eh, Robin-son?'

'Yes, Mother, that's all that matters. The past is behind us and now we must go forward and make the best of the future. Now, can you stand up for me and we'll get you through to the bathroom and get you cleaned up. Ready? One. Two. Three and **UP!** Yes, up you get. That's it, grab my arms. **Up** we go. **UP!** Good. Now, take your time. Off we go.'

'Is Astur no' comin' the day, Robin, is she? She's a nice lassie, Robin. No like they other wans, the fuckin' cheeky bastards. I tried to git rid o' them but they said you'd signed them up fur us. Did ye, Robin, eh? Did ye? Naw? Bit mind ye, Astur's a nice lassie. A nice, nice lassie. She's the kind o' wee lassie ye shed be efter fur yersell, son.'

In this way Phoebe's chatter continued, the conversation of a lonely old woman, her repeated sentences coursing around the same track until I no longer heard what she was saying and concentrated on processing her as quickly as possible. The essence of what she repeated could be summed up as: Astur was a "wee angel", the others were "fuckin' bastards".

Despite my best efforts it took more time that I had envisaged. Eventually, I got Phoebe settled in bed wearing incontinence knickers and a fresh nightdress. Knowing I needed time without disruption, I medicated her into a deep sleep. I then gave the bedroom and bathroom a quick, superficial clean, promising myself I would do more as soon as I had time. Part of the smell I discovered was Prince's toilet tray and a bowl of mouldy food both of which I flushed away in the WC. I wiped surfaces with hygiene wipes soaked in Dettol and bagged all her soiled clothing, bed-linen and other rubbish into four large thick blue plastic EHSCS disposal bags. Finally, I stripped of my coverall and added it to the last bag. Unsure how I would deal with them, I stowed them in the basement, near to the boiler room.

Back at Tasha's room, she was fast asleep with Prince curled up on her pillow.

It was 13:18.

Outside the firesafe room, I put my ear to the door and listened. I could hear Astur weeping softly. I had heard this sort of mournful, piteous grieving many times over the years. Despair like this was often the final stage before suicide.

I unlocked the door, eased it open, stepped in, closing it softly behind me. I switched on the overhead light. Astur twisted her head round and screeched at me like a wild animal. She had been trying to free herself by hauling at the rope of cable-ties, succeeding in

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partially dislodging the radiator from the wall, drawing blood in the process from both her wrists and ankles.

'STOP! Astur. Please, Astur, stop! Please, stop. I only secured you for your own good. Honestly.'

From the bloodstains on the carpet I saw she had been desperately trying to reach the kitchen knife which was just out of reach, hard against the dark corner. I reached down, grabbed it and moved towards her to cut the cable ties.

She screeched again issuing a long plea in a language which I did not understand.

I put the knife in my rucksack and took out my scissors.

'Astur, I'm going to set you free. I had to do this, to check on my mother and Tasha.'

She began to wail, punching at me, swiping the scissors away.

'STOP! Astur, let me help you, please.'

She sank back and curled into a ball. I kneeled beside her and snipped her free.

'Good. Thanks. There we are.'

She sat up and shuffled away on her bottom, back to the corner where she had been hiding when she shot at me.

'Astur, please, I'm sorry about binding you up, really sorry. Now, let me check you over. Let me check your arm, let me bandage those other wounds.'

I moved closer, dragging my field rucksack.

'Mr Robbie, you work Mrs M?'

'No, no. No, never. Now, look what a mess you've made of yourself. First. Let me see your knife wound. Yes. Your arm is good. no leakage. Here now, hold out your wrists. Let me wipe them clean. Now your ankles, please. Stay still, now while I bandage them.'

'You *sure* no work Mrs M?'

'No, Astur. I do NOT work for Mrs M. Is she the one in charge of all the care people?'

'Mrs M bad person. Bad, like her!' she pointed at Dee, 'She you call steppa- daughter?'

These words were said with unexpected venom.

'She evil. Like Devil. Drugs. Girls to hire. "Girls for Girls", she call it.'

'Who was Zahra?'

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'Zahra special. She my kinda sister, one time ago. Dee bad like Mrs M. She beat me. Kick, punch. Zahra copy, beat, kick punch me. Drugs.'

'How many of you are there?'

Astur screeched and hugged her knees, her head down., sobbing.

'Mr Robbie, you *sure* no work for Mrs M?'

'No, Astur, I promise you, I do not work for Mrs M. Not now, not ever.'

'But you work her long ago?'

'No, that was another person, someone else. Astur, you are safe here. I will never hurt you, I promise. And I will not let Mrs M or anyone else hurt you. I give my word.'

'You swear God?'

No, I give my own word. Now, please, how many others are there, others like you?'

'Only Astur. Dee go mad and kill others, Zahra say. She is always kill them after she make them do bad things for her. Zahra, she bad on drugs too. I say:

"Zahra, **no do!** Is bad thing, **stop!** I know where get money, run away, you and me."

Astur looked at the firesafe and then the wardrobe. Then, she closed her eyes and bowed her head, looking guilty. and looked down, guiltily.

'I bad to tell Zahra 'bout money. Zahra tell Dee. They come get me, beat me. I tell, here is money. Let me go. They see money, they say:

"Time to die, Astur."

'Zahra has knife. She come kill me. I get gun. I shoot. I shoot. I shoot. This bad thing I do. Jesus no forgive?'

Astur's eyes were fixated on the corpses, her lips mumbling what I later learned were prayers, spoken in her own language.

She ignored my follow up questions, locked in her own world of guilt and fear, shock, remorse, relief and anxiety about what would happen to her. It was as if she was in a trance. These were signs I knew well. I brought her shoes and socks, fiddled them onto her feet, eased her upright and guided her into the corridor, switching out the light and locking the door behind us.

'Come, Astur. Let's find someplace to talk.'

'Robin. In wardrobe. I have Zahra phone.'

We re-entered the room and retrieved it.

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'Astur, this phone could be dangerous. It could lead them to us.'

'OK. Robin. I say to Zahra, no use, only bad things on that phone.'

She handed over the phone. I switched it off and slipped it into my trouser pocket.

Later, I wished I had removed its SIM card.

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We sat in the parlour on the ground floor at the front of the house. The room was warm and muggy, damp but smelling of lavender furniture polish. Initially Astur was shivery, in shock, unable to function. I forced her to drink tap water and used Phoebe's mobile phone to call *Tesco*, ordering vegetarian microwave pizzas, mineral water, orange juice and grapes. I agreed to pay extra for express service. The van arrived within fifteen minutes, calling at the front door. I paid the young woman with cash adding a small tip.

I brought Phoebe's microwave to the parlour. We ate with our hands directly from the packaging. I made tea and forced her to drink it with milk and three heaped spoons of sugar surreptitiously crushing one of Phoebe's *Prozac* tablets into it, following the protocol used by both Dr Mena and Dr Max to help victims get through the early stages of trauma. In the camp we had used out-of-date *Remeron* or *Paxil*, donated by an American charity.

Gradually Astur came back to a version of reality and stared at me quizzically. After a few minutes she smiled, transforming her gaunt face revealing the shadow of a girl who had once been as beautiful as Zahra.

Astur's mobile buzzed in my pocket. It was a text from Mrs M telling Astur to stay put at home for the rest of the day but to keep her phone fully charged as she might be needed to make a collection later. Without explaining, I shut down the phone, removed the SIM card to my neck pouch and put the phone in my rucksack.

Although most people in our camp were Kurds, we had a sprinkling from other lands, all trying to get to the West. All had a smattering of English. In time, I tuned into Astur's version. Her words were interspersed with Somali phrases which she then repeated in English. I think it was this repetition which led me to notice her cadence and intonation were quite similar to my native version of Kurdish. After a while I was able to follow her version of English with relative ease.

The *Prozac* helped and as she talked, she became more fluent, more logical, easier to understand.

From my work in the camp, I was familiar with this 'grief release', when the victim feels compelled to tell every detail of their life so far to try to justify how they have arrived at this crucial stage. I had been trained by Dr Max and knew the best method was to let the person speak and not interrupt, saving questions for later.

I listened and she talked.

Sometimes she stopped to weep, sometimes to pray, in Somali.

During that long afternoon, as she revealed her life to me, I pieced together Astur's heart-breaking life story.

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I was very used to listening to such revelations, able to discern truth from fantasy and as she talked, I became fully convinced what she was telling me was entirely true.

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Astur's Story

We waited while she knelt and prayed in a language I did not recognise. Then, in a mixture of broken English and in an odd French dialect, she told me her life story.

Astur thought she was twenty-seven, Zahra thirty, or a little older. Although they were dark-skinned both girls had been told they had white grandfathers, which had been common in their village when it had been colonised by French traders and prospectors looking for gemstones, kaolin for medicines and other precious substances. Although the girls had thought of themselves as true sisters, Astur's mother had adopted Zahra as her own, inheriting her when she remarried after her first husband died of an illness, probably cancer.

Their trauma had started when they were teenagers, roughly fifteen years ago when Astur was about twelve, just after she had changed from a girl to a woman. They lived in an isolated fishing village on the coast of Somalia. It was somewhere near Djibouti which everyone had heard about but no one had ever visited. Their village was called Luul Badda (in French - Perle de la Mer), a name given by Papa Michael from France who had lived in the village for about fifty years until his death long before Astur was born. Although this was all in the distant past, Papa Michael was revered and their church was dedicated to him.

One afternoon their community was raided by a group of pirates, gun runners who came ashore in fast boats. Their menfolk, boys and male infants were hacked to death and the village's fishing boats were heaped on the beach and set alight with the carved wooden crucifix from their small church perched on top. That night every woman and girl over ten-years-old was raped. Astur and Zahra escaped this ordeal by hiding inside a sarcophagus which contained the remains of Papa Michael.

By dawn the next day, these raiders had gone. The remnant of the village women and girls was destitute. To escape their shame, Astur's mother and some other women had committed suicide by hanging.

A few days later, a man came in a huge pick-up truck and told them he knew a way to get some of them to England. They would pay for this by working for a nice English lady on her farm for two years and then they would be 'made English'. There was no cost. It was a good opportunity. The farm lady wanted twenty strong healthy girls. Only older girls, twelve or more; younger children were too much trouble.

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He picked the girls he wanted and took them in the back of his truck. They drove all night. While it was still dark, they were taken into a container. There was lots of bottled water and US army rations of dehydrated food with a portable toilet and a tank to put dirty water and other waste into. It had a lid with latches to seal the rubber and contain the smell.

The journey would take two weeks only, he promised. They must stay silent and use the two torches only when they ate or used the toilet. Batteries were very expensive, he said, and he only had a few old ones to give them as spares.

They felt the container being lifted onto a lorry which drove for a long time over bumpy roads. When it stopped, the container was lifted and lowered onto a ship. They could feel the waves rocking the ship and hear the noise of its engines.

Time past, maybe six weeks, maybe more. The food and water ran out. Six of the twenty girls died. Now they numbered only fourteen. The smell of the dead was horrible. Maggots crawled around. It was dark, the torches did not work any longer.

The container was lifted from the ship onto a lorry and driven for a long time, this time on smoother roads. They heard horns beeping and other traffic noises, big engines growling. Sometimes, when the lorry stopped, they could hear voices. Someone said these were English people speaking.

When the container was opened, the three men were wearing masks and white suits.

The Somalians who were too weak to walk were carried from the container and put in a closed van. Astur and Zahra were strong because Astur had prayed and Jesus had helped them. The bodies of the dead girls were sealed into blue bags and placed on the floor beside them.

There was only one man now, the driver with a shaved head who smoked one cigarette after another. He had a bad cough and looked ill.

At the farm it was cold and wet and windy but very green everywhere. Because they were the strongest, Astur and Zahra had been made to carry the blue bags from the lorry to a steel door. When all six bags were ready, the man unlocked the door and kicked the bags into the black hole. Lots of flies flew out and he slammed the door, cursing. Later they learned this black hole was the top of a mine shaft and that it was very deep.

During the first few weeks at the farm the remaining girls were given good food, plenty of fruit juice, and several injections. When they were considered strong enough, they were sterilised, to prevent any babies coming. The woman who operated on them was bald but also had a red hair wig. She had vague stary eyes and a strange smile and was maybe on drugs. Like Dee, she had Swastikas tattoos on her upper arms and high on the back of her neck. One of the guards had called her 'Professor'. Two girls did not survive this

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surgical ordeal and once more Astur and Zahra carried their corpses to the mine shaft for disposal. Only twelve Somalians remained from the original twenty.

There were many other girls already crowded together at this farm, mostly darker skinned, maybe around fifty in total, different groups in different rooms, sleeping on the floor together on mattresses. Many languages were spoken with only a few English words in common. Among these others, there were around twenty whiter and lighter brown girls who were kept apart in a larger room.

Astur's group were shouted at by the guards if they tried to speak to any other groups. The guards were all women and wore blue boilersuits and heavy boots, like soldiers.

It was always hot, smelly and sticky at the farm. The different groups of girls fought with each other all the time. Slowly the Somalians learned there were girls from Nigeria, Sierra Leon, Rwanda and other African countries and the whiter ones were from Romania and Bulgaria. These two groups of white girls hated each other. One day there was a fight and a Bulgarian girl died when her throat was slashed. After that, the Romanian girls were taken away in a closed van and never seen again.

When the surviving Somalians were healthy enough, they were examined by a different lady, a proper doctor who wore a mask and a white coverall suit. Later, Astur learned from Zahra this doctor had issued medical papers to show the girls were all 'clean', fit to work. Because they were both still virgins, Astur and Zahra were told they were more valuable.

After the doctor's visit, each girl was given a tattoo on their arm and a number. Astur was given number 1012.

Soon after the Doctor's visit, the twelve Somalians were moved from the farm to another place, a clean house with beds and good showers, two girls to each room. It was near the sea, in the distance. There were no other girls there, just four women guards and a fat ugly man who sat outside in a van with dogs. The women guards were all white. Their leader was Karla. They were all nice looking, well-dressed and drank Vodka and beer and smoked smelly cigarettes. Astur thought they might have been Polish or maybe Russian.

On the third day at the new place Karla, took the Somalians to a special room and told them to sit at make-up tables. Karla had blonde hair and big make-up. She shocked them by taking off her hair. Underneath, she was bald, shaved. She had a Swastika tattoo on her head. Then she took off all her clothes and showed them Swastika tattoos on her front and back. She had very large, strong breasts with rings through her nipples. Her pubic hair was shaved. There was another Swastika tattoo low on her stomach. After displaying herself, she put on a bikini, lacy black with red frills.

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Working with the other three guards, Karla showed the Somalians how to wear make-up. Over the course of that first day and the days that followed, these lessons were repeated by wiping off the make-up and starting from the beginning. Each girl was given her own make-up bag with three small bottles of perfumes to spray on.

Then the guards turned down the lights until it was dim before taking off their clothes, putting on bikinis like Karla's. Karla told the Somalians not to be shy and take their clothes off. Anyone who refused, was stabbed by a prod which gave an electric shock. Each girl was given four bikinis each in nice bright colours. They were skimpy, flimsy and sexy. One guard took the Somalians clothes away and from that time onwards they were compelled to wear bikinis only.

Karla played soft slow music and taught them to dance in a sexy way. The Somalians danced with the guards in turn and with each other, touching and kissing. The idea was to make themselves attractive to 'nice women'.

After these dancing lessons, they were shown videos of women making love to girls like them. Most of these women were white but a few were black. Most were nice looking and only a few were older, fat and ugly. Some of the women in the videos wore fake penises.

Karla chose Zahra and they left the room for a while. Later, she returned Zahra and chose another girl and took her away for a sex lesson.

Astur stopped, knelt, prayed for about ten minutes before re-starting her narrative.

When these sex lessons were over, Karla returned and said in slow careful English:

"Now you need to practise what you have seen and been taught. You need to be good enough or they will send you back. If that happens, I will send you to work in a brothel. No more nice food. No more nice clothes. Zahra, you are the best so far. Come with me for tonight. Astur, I warn you. Learn to cooperate or I will send you directly to the brothels."

The girls were sent back to their rooms and told to practise dancing and touching each other. Every night the girls were paired differently, to get experience. This continued for several weeks, with Karla and the guards taking girls to their own rooms for extra lessons. On those nights, shy girls were made to drink Vodka containing drugs and smoke relaxing cigarettes.

To keep them 'pure', dildos were not to be used on the Somalians, only the guards. These guards did not seem to know the girls had been sterilised and said:

"Remember, having sex with a nice woman there is no risk of having a baby."

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As a reward the best girls were given chocolates and wine to drink and allowed to go back to the special room and watch television in English and practice their dancing by playing music on a CD player.

Overwhelmed by these memories, Astur began to cry uncontrollably.

(Much later, when we had become 'true friends' and her English had improved, she told me: "Robbie, you are the first person who knows what happened to us, to Zahra and me and what they did to us.")

I took a chance and moved to sit next to her, placing my arm around her shoulder, gently stroking her hair and face, mimicking Dr Mena when I had my nightmares.

Astur clung to me with a fierce grip until the crying slowed then stopped.

Partially recovered, she lowered herself onto her knees and began to pray. It was a long prayer and after a while I slipped away to check on Tasha and Phoebe. Both were drowsy. I changed their nappies and checked they were safe and comfortable then encouraged each in turn to drink a glass of warm milk doped with *Restoril*, a half adult dose for Tasha and a double dose for Pheobe, because of her greater bulk.

This was necessary because I needed them to sleep soundly for around twelve hours. I was beginning to form a plan for the disposal of the corpses in the firesafe room but this would need Astur's one hundred percent commitment and would mean us leaving our patients unsupervised at *Redcroft* for several hours.

To add to their security, I locked both bedroom doors, removing Prince to ensure he did not disturb Tasha if he became restless.

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On my return to the Lounge, I brought another mug of sugary, milky tea for Astur, a mug of black, unsweetened coffee made with *Nescafe Gold* granules for myself, and a plate of chocolate digestive biscuits to share from Mrs M's jar in the Dining Room.

After another shorter prayer while sitting with her head bowed and eyes closed, Astur continued her story of what happened during their period of indoctrination and habituation to drugs.

It was during those weeks at the second place near the sea that Zahra had started to change, sneaking out when Astur was sleeping and going to 'party' with Karla or one of the other guards. When challenged she said it was good fun, that she liked doing it. Astur refused many offers of drugs and relaxing cigarettes and was never allowed into the special room. Gradually the other girls stopped speaking to her and some said she was "stupid to believe in Jesus" but Astur kept praying and Jesus kept her safe.

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They had been in the new house for about a month when the auction took place.

All the buyers were women. The girls were paraded either alone or in pairs, wearing only their best bikinis, made-up by Karla to look beautiful. Music was playing but only quietly and they had been told to dance in a sexy way if they wanted to get the best buyers who were looking for 'domestics' to live with them in their big houses.

If they were asked by their new owner, they must say: "I am a virgin. I no have sex with anyone but you."

In their new homes, they must always do as they were told or they would be sent back to become brothel girls. If they were good girls, they would be treated well and be given drugs to make them happy.

Astur and Zahra were bought by Mrs M as a pair, as special presents for her daughter Melanie and her stepdaughter Deirdre.

Mel who was sixteen at that time was tall, slim and attractive with small breasts. She picked Astur. Dee, who was fourteen and smaller, chubbier and wore thick glasses, got Zahra. From the start it seemed like Mel had chosen the wrong girl.

They were taken to a large house like *Redcroft*. After a few months they learned it was in North Berwick, near a city called Edinburgh which they thought was in England, at first.

On arriving at the North Berwick house, they were tagged with heavy wrist bracelets decorated to look like jewellery and shown a video of what would happen if they strayed outside the confines of the high perimeter garden wall. The film used mannikins which disintegrated when their bracelets exploded. This threat was heightened by verbal abuse from Mrs M and the underlying possibility they would be 'replaced' and sent back to the farm for 'disposal'. No one ever wanted 'used goods' when fresh girls were always available, Mrs M said over and over.

At that time both Astur and Zahra fully believed the bracelets would explode. They also knew they were illegal immigrants and risked deportation or imprisonment. Dee was giving Zahra drugs which had changed her, making her obedient to Dee and ignoring what Astur said. Zahra and Astur had argued a lot at that time. Zahra said Astur should accept their situation and since there was no way to escape, it was better to enjoy the drugs. Anyway, even if they could find the key to remove the bracelets, where would they go without papers, without money, without protection.

Later, when the four girls had been living together for about a month or so, Zahra told Astur that Mel had chosen Astur for her purity, and that Karla had told Mrs M:

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"The sister with the odd face is a challenge, religious, obstinate. Even though she is one of the youngest, she was their leader. She is a true virgin who has never even been 'touched' by any man or woman. But I've seen this before with the stubborn ones. Once she has been conquered and fully trained, she will be the best of them, worth her weight in gold."

Mrs M and her daughters would often be out all day and the girls were left alone in the house, confined by their bracelets. By this stage Zahra had started to shun Astur, locking herself in the attic which she shared with Dee, listening to loud music, smoking 'good stuff'. From about this time, Zahra began to treat Astur badly, sometimes slapping her or punching her, treating her as a slave. Then, when she was more normal, she would cry and say she was sorry she had been bad. During these times of remorse, she confided in Astur, telling her about Dee and Mrs M and Melanie and their secrets.

They soon learned that Mel was very clever, sneaky, twisted and vengeful. She often beat up Dee when Mrs M was out. At this stage Mel and Dee hated each other. Only later, when they were older, did they learn to hide their hatred, for the sake of the business and to stop Mrs M shouting at them.

After a few months, Astur became ill and could not keep food in her stomach. She began to lose weight. Later, she gave thanks to Jesus for saving her by making her ill.

The lady doctor from before at the farm came to examine Astur, still wearing her mask but in ordinary clothes. They knew it was the same woman because she had a slight speech defect and strange ears.

Mrs M told Astur she had *bulimia nervosa*. Astur was given a special small yellow pill every day. These pills came from America and were very expensive. It was emphasised by Mrs M if Astur missed taking this pill two days in a row, she would die of a brain stroke.

The yellow pills worked and Astur began to feel better, but she kept starving herself to stay thin, as Jesus wanted her to be. After a few months, because Astur was still thin, Melanie tired of Astur, said she was too ugly. Astur was relegated to doing housework and gardening, a role she preferred to being Mel's sex slave.

Much later, maybe a year after she was rejected by Mel, Astur deliberately held the yellow pill in her mouth without swallowing and, when Mrs M was not looking, she spat it out and kept it. Later that day she felt 'sad' and took the pill. But, after a few weeks, she repeated the test and this time she went for three days without swallowing and she did not die. From then on, most days she did not take the yellow pills, hoarding them, hoping to sell them if she ever got free of Mrs M.

At that time, Mrs M, (never to be called 'Mrs Marshall', her full name), was running a brothel for women, always to be called 'Clients', never customers or punters. This brothel

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was based in Leith, in a tenement close where all eight flats were occupied by illegal immigrant girls. Clients were usually professional women, lawyers, accountants. Most were older. In an emergency both Astur and Zahra had been forced to work there. Zahra said that some 'kinky' women liked Astur because she was thin and ugly. Once, even though Dee protested, Zahra was taken to the Leith brothel to a special Client who turned out to be the Doctor with the speech defect. Zahra said this woman wanted to be called 'Francine'. Francine gave Zahra a line of coke to sniff before having sex with her. Zahra said it was the best sex and best coke she had ever enjoyed. Francine had booked Zahra for the entire night through to the next morning. While Francine was sleeping, Zahra went through her handbag and checked her credit cards. Her real name was Dr Gladys Stimpson.

Later, the brothel business changed to a telephone service and later still to an Internet web-site format. The brothel girls were moved away from Leith to houses outside Edinburgh from which they were delivered to their Clients by taxi. These taxis were driven by illegal immigrants, older women who had been brothel girls. Zahra said Mel was being trained to help Mrs M to run this business. Mrs M still owned the eight flats in Leith. This is where Astur lived in a flat on the ground floor with Dee and Zahra directly above her.

Some years ago, maybe four or five, Mrs M and Melanie had started up *EHSCS* to grab a share of the easy money to be earned supporting rich elderly women in their homes and as a way of employing older brothel girls. Everyone called it '*The Carers*'. Like the brothels, only women were allowed as Clients.

Zahra said Dee did not want to be part of *The Carers* because she hated the idea of dealing with old people. Dee's part in Mrs M's business was to run the Internet brothel so she could get the best new girls for her and Zahra. Zahra said Dee's upgraded brothel website had software which could tell if any 'applicant' was a man from their answers to the online questionnaire which they must 'pass' before anyone could become Clients.

When *The Carers* started at *Redcroft*, Astur had been paired with another girl called Temi, from Nigeria. She was a lazy girl, always late. One day she did not come to work at all. Mrs M told Astur that Temi had been sent away and that Astur must do all the work alone. Zahra told Astur the Nigerian had been spotted selling sex to men on the street and that Dee had tortured her then dropped her down the mineshaft at the farm while she was still alive, to serve as a lesson to others. Zahra also told her the farm was called *Holmcroft* and that it had been owned by the Marshall family for hundreds of years.

From the time she started at *Redcroft*, Astur was given her 'freedom' and moved from North Berwick to Leith. Mrs M told her the bracelet had been a hoax. Every day when Mrs M gave her the yellow pill, she reminded Astur if she missed two days she would die of a brain stroke. She was given a flat to herself, the smallest flat on the ground floor.

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She lived in just one room because the flat was stuffed with cleaning materials, disposal bags, mops, brushes, uniforms in different sizes and so on. Her flat was a store for *The Carers* business and she was responsible for advising Mrs M when new supplies should be ordered.

When she was moved to Leith, Astur knew Jesus had arranged this because she had been patient and faithful in saying her prayers and doing good whenever she was allowed. She was never given any money. Mrs M gave her food and collected her every morning. But after work she had to walk home. By stealing a few items from the store and selling them to a hardware shop run by a man from Pakistan, Astur managed to get enough money to buy a radio from a charity shop. This was a secret. When she was alone in the flat, she listened all the time, mostly Radio Four, trying to improve her English.

The other ground floor flat was a 'special flat' for storing 'other stuff'. It had three strong locks and a door made of metal but painted black with red surrounds, made to look like wood, like the other doors. Only Mrs M was ever allowed in this flat, not even Dee or Melanie, probably because it was where she kept her drugs, Zahra said.

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An amazing thing happened after she was moved to Leith: Astur was taught to drive *The Carers* pick-up truck. This was done in the evenings, after work at *Redcroft*. In all her life, she had never dreamed she could learn to drive.

They practised at a disused aerodrome outside Edinburgh where she was instructed by an older Polish woman called Pietra who had taught all the taxi girls to drive. She was a very horrible woman, shouting and hitting Astur's hands with a leather strap if she made a mistake.

After two weeks driving around the aerodrome, Astur was allowed to drive on the quieter streets of Edinburgh with this woman guiding her. At first, they did this during the night, when traffic was less. Over the next two weeks, they extended her driving until Astur could drive through the busiest of traffic and use a GPS to find addresses.

After she could drive the truck, she was taught to drive a small delivery van which was used to deliver items from her store to the other houses, always with Pietra with her, checking on her driving and behaviour. That was how she learned there were seventeen other houses where *The Carers* had Clients but that *Redcroft* was the largest and because Mrs McKelvie and Tasha were 'easy to manage', Mrs M had chosen it as her business office.

When she was good enough to drive alone, Astur was shown a driver's licence with her face on it. Mrs M kept it, telling her if the police or anyone asked to see it, she should say her name was 'Alice Wilkie' and give her address as '55 London Road, Edinburgh'. If

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they asked to see her licence, she must say it was at home and she would bring it to a Police station soon.

If this happened, Astur must tell Mrs M first and Melanie would 'activate' the licence before it was given to Astur to show to the Police.

But Zahra had told her that this was the address of a Macdonald Burger outlet and that all the taxi drivers were called Alice Wilkie. If anyone was caught by the Police, they were disposed of by Dee, at the farm. This had only happened twice but it made the taxi girls careful and courteous drivers. Zahra told Astur if she was stopped by the Police, the best thing to do was to run and try to hide.

Every night during this training period, Astur prayed to Jesus to be allowed to drive a proper car so she could become a taxi girl. But it did not happen.

When Pietra said she was able to drive alone, she was given a mobile phone. It was not a proper mobile phone. The only calls it could make or receive were from Mrs M. It must be kept charged, always switched on when she was alone in her flat in case she was needed to do some extra caring or make urgent deliveries. The phone must stay at her flat in Leith, at all times, except when she was driving the van making a delivery of visiting a Client in an emergency. One time she forgot to charge the phone and missed a late-night call from Mrs M. The next day Dee gave Astur a beating and locked her in her flat for a week until the bruises went down.

Zahra knew everything about Mrs M and Melanie and Dee.

All the 'nurses and carers' with the taxi girls and the brothel girls were members of Mrs M's 'illegal family'. The taxi girls were the most 'trusted' and lived in Portobello and Tranent in houses owned by Mrs M who liked to think of herself as the 'big boss'. But Zahra said it was Melanie who was really in charge. Astur was certain this was true; she too had heard Dee say this many, many times. Everyone was frightened of Melanie because she was very clever and ruthless.

Zahra said Melanie and Dee enjoyed killing people, not just the girls who were disobedient but other people who were 'annoying'. About two years earlier, Zahra said Dee told her that between them they had 'done in' sixty-three people, mostly men who had filled in the brothel questionnaires while pretending to be women.

The day-to-day business of *The Carers* was run by Mrs M, who did everything using her mobile phone, using the dining room of Mrs Phoebe's house as her office. She controlled everything, even ordering food and other personal essentials for Astur which she could collect from Tesco on her way home, because Astur was not allowed money. Mrs M worked every day and never took holidays. She used pills to help her concentrate and, Zahra had said, to help her sleep.

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Dee was the computer expert, and Melanie was the one who controlled the business, the money side. The business was run from the offices of a place called *C&C* where Melanie had plans to become the boss. This would happen soon. A man called 'Tom' was the key to this. This plan was supposed to be a great secret but Dee had told Zahra who had told Astur.

Zahra also knew all Dee's secrets, events she had revealed when they were both high.

Dee had told Zahra that the thought of being touched by a man made her feel sick. This feeling came from something very bad her father had forced on her when she was a child, while he was washing her hair, sharing a deep bath with her. She had told her mother who had smacked her for telling lies. The abuse by her father had continued for years.

Dee told Zahra that the Police believed he had died by accident when an electric fan heater fell into his bath. Dee told Zahra she had done it to punish him but because she was only eight years old, they did not suspect her. The day after the funeral, Dee's mother had taken a drugs overdose and died.

After Dee had spent a few months with foster parents, Mrs M had claimed her sister's orphan, taking her to her home, to be brought up as a sister to Mel, giving her the name Marshall to add to her own.

Mrs M had her favourites. The 'nurses' at *Redcroft*, were the most favoured. They always told Mrs M what she wanted to hear, happy to sit around all day playing games, smoking, drinking tea and coffee, and swallowing pills to help them 'chill'. These women were not proper nurses and they were lazy, forcing Astur to do almost everything for Phoebe and Tasha, and refusing to help with house cleaning, organising laundry or emptying bins and occasionally beating her ears with a flyswat, accusing her of eavesdropping.

Everyone who worked for Mrs M was an illegal. In total there were around twenty in *The Carers* group working as nurses. Many were from Russia and other 'white' countries because most Clients of *The Carers* preferred white nurses. Astur had not made friends with any of them, except Babsie who had lived above her in the tenement building in Leith. Babsie was from Glasgow, not Edinburgh, and she was nice, kind and gentle, always willing to listen to Astur and help her with her English.

At the mention of Babsie, Astur broke down, sobbing and praying in Somali.

From what I had just learned, I realised Babsie had been Astur's only confidant and now she was gone and Zahra was dead too, Astur was entirely alone, afraid of what might happen next, her mind frozen by fear and locked by disbelief and self-pity. This was a stage of the grieving process I was very familiar with from my work in the camp. The best 'treatment' was to allow the person to grieve and 'cry out' their hurt. In this way, Astur's survival instinct would re-kindle and when it did, I would be ready with my plan.

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I left Astur in the parlour, on her knees, sobbing and praying while I checked again on Phoebe and Tasha. Both were sleeping soundly, their vital readings safely in range and stable.

I checked the front and back of the house by peeking from the edges of the curtains. All seemed normal but I was worried about Mrs M coming to check why her contract had been cancelled. It was a dull day with light misty rain. I checked my watch and was surprised it was only just after three o'clock in the afternoon. There were dark rain clouds overhead and the wind was rising, threatening another rainstorm. It would be dark soon.

I headed back to the Lounge knowing I had to keep Astur talking to find out everything she knew. I made more sweet, milky tea and found some Twix bars in one of the drawers in the Dining Room.

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Buoyed by sugar and caffeine, Astur continued her story about Babsie.

Babsie's secret dream was to find a nice man to marry and have children, lots of children.

But Astur had soon learned from Zahra that Babsie was living a double life. She told everyone she was writing a book but her real job was working as a 'special nurse' for *The Carers*, giving lady Clients intimate massages in return for extra fees, charged as 'acupuncture therapy'. Zahra said Mrs M had objected to Babsie, mainly because she was liked by these ladies and much in demand. Mel had made Mrs M give Babsie free accommodation and rates and heating, like Astur and the others who lived in the building at Leith. The only money Babsie got was for working in the library.

Dee told Zahra that Babsie had been a roommate of Melanie's at St Andrews University and they had been lovers. Zahra told Astur that both Mel and Babsie were bisexual in earlier years but that Melanie had changed and had become more like Dee.

Although she had tried to keep it a secret from Astur, Babsie was addicted to pills which helped her to keep high, stop her becoming sad. Zahra had said, being a 'special nurse' for *The Carers*, Babsie could steal what pills she needed from Clients.

Sometimes Babsie and Dee had made love, Zahra had said. This was a big secret they must keep from Mel, who was still jealous over Babsie because, although she did not want her for herself anymore, she did not want her to go out with anyone else, especially not men.

Like Astur, Babsie was a Catholic who had been in a convent for two years before her aunt in Canada had died leaving her enough money to fund her university studies. Babsie seldom went to church but when she did, she asked Astur to go with her, usually on a

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Saturday evening, to confession. Because Babsie took drugs, Astur did not share all her secrets with her.

Astur went to early chapel most mornings. If she missed a day, she always prayed on her own at half-past seven. She had memorised the names of the Somali girls from the container and prayed for them three times a day, especially those who had died, keeping their memory alive in her heart.

Astur bowed her head and began to pray in Somali.

Equilibrium

Discoveries

Re-starting her story, Astur told me that while travelling to do an extra shift at Dalkeith, she had spotted a farm which looked like the one they had lived in all those years before. This surprised her as she had thought it was much further away from North Berwick. After her duties in Dalkeith, during her return journey, she stopped and looked at its outline in the bright moonlight and became certain it was the same place from the shape of the roof and the number of chimneys and the long, low curved steel hut in the garden where the guards had grown cannabis.

Astur had dared to stop the pick-up truck in a lay-by then walked up the long drive to check, to be sure it was the right place. Closer to, it had looked derelict, boarded up. It was dark at the farm but she had a torch. She had been worried there might be a caretaker or a security man with a dog but it was deserted.

Although she had been afraid, she had followed the track to the door of the mineshaft. On the hook, behind the tallest tree, she found the key. Was this the same key? Why was it still there, after all these years? It still worked and when the door swung open, she knew at once from the smell this was where Mrs M sent the refuse bags from her care homes to be disposed of, in this same deep shaft with the bodies.

Alone in the moonlight, with the door open and a cold wind blowing spits of rain, she had stood with her head bowed and her hands together and prayed for all the girls she had known and for the others she did not know, people Dee and Mel had killed. Before relocking the door and replacing the key, she had made the sign of the cross over all the dead at the bottom of the deep shaft.

After this part of her story, Astur stopped to bow her head and pray.

Watching her, my mind was racing ahead, knowing that only Astur could help me solve our problem. She could drive, she could access the mine shaft. Did she understand this? If so, was this why she was telling me? Would she be willing to do it? Or would her sense of guilt and Christian duty make her go to the Police. If I stayed, the Police would check up on me and discover I was not the real Robin McKelvie, meaning I would have to abandon Phoebe and Tasha, take the firesafe money and run. But where? Spain? France? Back to Glasgow?

After a few minutes she dried her tears on her sleeve. Sobbing, Astur confessed she had found the shiny Chubb key for the firesafe room under Phoebe's pillow. She knew at once what lock the key fitted because it was the same silver colour. She borrowed the

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key and took it to the Pakistani man at the hardware store and asked for a copy to be made but he wanted £65 and said it would take a week and that he would have to get her passport to prove to Chubb that she was allowed to have a copy.

Returning later that night, in the dark, with a torch, she had entered *Redcroft* while everything was quiet. On that first night she had found the gun in the wardrobe and had examined it, eventually working out how to load it and operate the safety switch. She confessed she had enjoyed holding it and pointing it because it made her feel safe. She thought about stealing the box with the gun and bullets but knew if Mrs Phoebe found it was missing, Mrs M would know where to look for it and might let Dee use the gun to 'dispose' of Astur in the mine shaft.

From then on, each day when she was attending to Mrs Phoebe, she kept watching out for the Chubb key and when she found it, she borrowed it, returned late in the evening to check the Chubb room before returning the key early the following day while she was attending to Pheobe.

On her third visit, the lower bookcase had been rolled to the side and she saw the firesafe for the first time. From that night, she had looked everywhere for the key, checking the wardrobe, inside all the books on the shelves, all Mrs Phoebe's Chubb key hiding places then checking Tasha's room, Robbie's room, other rooms in the house, prowling around in the night, often with Prince beside her.

Eventually, about three weeks ago, she found the hidden key on its string and opened the firesafe. Kneeling, with the money laid out before her, she had prayed for a long time trying to decide if she should take it and the gun box and run away at once and try to make a new life. She confessed since finding the money, she had been tempted many times to steal it and go alone to find Blairgowrie.

The afternoon she found the key and the money, she had jogged back to Leith to catch the Pakistani man before he closed, to have a copy made, bartering three bottles of bleach and six packets of wet wipes.

The next morning, while she was waiting in the street for Mrs M to pick her up, her phone rang. Mrs M told her there had been an emergency. Astur must go to *Redcroft* alone. Later, from Babsie, she learned the old lady at Dalkeith had died, slitting her wrists in her bath then drowning herself. There had been no suicide note. Dr Stimpson had covered it up by certifying she had died of 'natural causes', to prevent trouble for *ECHCS* who were supposed to provide an overnight carer but had not done this.

After this phone call Astur had walked quickly all the way to *Redcroft*. When she arrived, there were no other carers in attendance. During that day, when Mrs Phoebe was asleep, she had returned the original firesafe key to its hook and the Chubb to its hiding place under the soap dish in Phoebe's bathroom.

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The firesafe key was the most precious thing Astur had ever owned. But now she needed a very safe place to keep her copy key hidden because Mrs M was always suspicious and sometimes ransacked Astur's room at Leith, looking for money and drugs she thought Astur might be stealing from Redcroft.

It was then Astur remembered a secret which one of the girls at the farm had shared with her, the place where the girl kept her drugs. With her head down to hide from me, in a very quiet voice she told me she had kept the key in a plastic bag hidden in her vagina, removing it only to urinate, keeping it safe while trying to think of a way to save Zahra.

Zahra had told Astur some of the taxi women had whispered a town called Blairgowrie was a good place to hide, with lots of fruit-picking and ski-hotel work for immigrants, no questions asked, no papers required, with food and accommodation provided. When she was 'sober' Zahra was sometimes like her old self but Astur knew her sister would not even consider running away because of her craving for the drugs Dee and Mel and Mrs M gave her.

Now, at last, Astur was up to date with her story, telling me of what had happened the day before, yesterday.

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Babsie had come knocking on Astur's door. When she opened it, Babsie rushed in and hugged her, desperate to share her news. She had met the 'right man' at last, the man she had dreamed of for years, and had come down to tell Astur all about him. Then after a few minutes of being happy, Babsie started to cry.

It was then I learned Astur was a superb mimic, rendering a nearly perfect version of Babsie:

"Astur, he's pure dead gorgeous and fantastic and absolutely fabulous. I won't say his name in case it brings me bad luck. But Astur, what if he doesn't really love me? Anyway, I know I can't keep him for myself. Mel will steal him from me. That's what she always does to punish me for being 'unfaithful' to her. If she finds out about him, she might even beat me up again. Last time she broke both my pinkies. It took months for the pain to go away."

To comfort her friend, Astur had told Babsie about the money in the firesafe at a house where she worked, suggesting they could take it and get away from Mel if Babsie would help her get Zahra to go with them. But Babsie would not listen because she was happy again and was sure that her new boyfriend would rescue her, take her away somewhere nice.

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Then it was time for Astur to wait outside for Mrs M. When she opened the door to leave, they heard Dee and Zahra shouting and banging at Babsie's door and Babsie ran upstairs.

Astur was already in bed when, around midnight, Dee had used her master key to enter her flat. Zahra was with her. They were both high. Babsie had told them Astur had money and was planning to use it to 'steal' Babsie and Zahra and take them with her.

Zahra held a knife against Astur's throat. They took more pills and then gave Astur another beating, both Dee and Zahra punching and kicking her again.

With another near perfect mimic performance, Astur had repeated Dee's words:

"This is your last chance, you skinny, ugly wee tart. Have you been shagging Mel's Babsie on the side, eh? Right, Astur, this is your last chance afore I kick yer teeth in. Tell us where the money is! If you don't, I'll tell Mel about you and Babsie running away the gether and she'll come and deliver the final solution on you. But if you tell us now, we'll let you run, just with no money."

It was then they told her Babsie was dead, that Mel had shoved her in front of a bus, making it look like an accident, like suicide. This news made Astur give up hope and she agreed to take them to where they could get the money. They told her to dress in her nurse's uniform and gave her the car keys for the EHSCS pick-up truck. With Zahra holding the knife at her throat, they made her drive to where the money was kept.

While she was driving, from what they were saying to each other, Astur realised they knew nothing at all about Redcroft or Pheobe or Tasha. When they were inside, still in the basement, Zahra had held the knife under her chin, telling her not to speak while they waited. Dee had returned within a few minutes, telling Zahra the truck was hidden at the Tesco car park, a few minutes' walk away. This made sense to Astur. She knew Dee was a poor driver because of her bad eyesight and normally drove cars with automatic gears, not manual gears like the pick-up.

They had forced her upstairs to the Chubb room. At first Astur had resisted, saying she did not know where to find the key. Then she thought of a plan, a way of getting hold of the gun and use it to lock them inside the Chubb room while she took the money and made her escape in the pick-up. Because of the smell, Dee and Zahra waited outside while Astur went into Pheobe's room to find the key.

Inside the room, Astur was still working on her plan, delaying, waiting for a chance, saying she did not know where the firesafe key was hidden. They punched her to the floor, kicking her, trying to get her to tell where the key was. While they were doing this, they were smoking 'the best stuff', arguing about what clothes they would buy with the money.

Once again, Astur stopped, bowed her head and prayed in Somali before going on.

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It was then she worked out how to trick them, she said, sobbing. Although it was a huge risk, she knew she had to take it because, once they had the money, they would kill her and dispose of her in the mine shaft, pretend to Mel she had taken the money and escaped. Curling into a ball, she fiddled the key out from her hiding place, removed it from the plastic bag.

Then, rolling over, she threw it hard at the firesafe, shouting:

"There!"

While the pair used the key to open the firesafe, Astur was moving, crawling quietly for the wardrobe and the gun.

Pointing the gun at their backs, Astur eased the door to the corridor. Prince was just outside and began mewling, asking to be lifted for a cuddle.

Zahra turned, saw Astur at the door and ran towards her, slashing at her with the knife. Astur fell back against the door which clicked shut, cutting off her escape route. She moved backwards towards the corner of the room.

They were screaming obscenities, Dee stooping sideways and kicking out at her, Zahra jumping in and out, stabbing at her.

Everything became confused.

Astur kept firing the silenced weapon until they were dead.

Stunned by what she had done, she slumped to the floor.

By accident, her hand touched Zahra's knife. She lifted it, at first intending to slit her wrists but changed her mind. Instead, she used it to cut off her Swastika tattoo and her sex slave number, something she had wanted to do for years.

Putting the nozzle of the gun in her mouth she placed her finger on the trigger but could not do it because suicide was a mortal sin which would prevent her from going to Heaven to be with Jesus and Babsie.

To shut out the images of the dead girls, she had switched out the light. Moving back to the corner, crouched with the gun in her hand she waited for Mel to come to try to kill her, believing if she shot her first, she could get the money, find the pick-up and drive away and try to find Blairgowrie then get rid of the truck and hide among the other illegals.

Time passed and she waited, sobbing and praying.

When a tall figure entered the room, she thought it was Mel and shot at me.

Equilibrium

At this point in her story, we sat in silence for a long time. I wanted to move her on, find out anything else which might affect us and try to agree how we would dispose of the bodies. I must, somehow, make sure she did not tell the Police.

'Astur, you must not feel guilty. You did what you did because otherwise they would have killed you. They were both bad people, even Zahra. And Mel is still out there, somewhere, with her mother. They are evil too.'

'Robbie, you good or bad? You help Astur or give to Mel to kill?'

'Astur, I will try my best to keep you safe. But the first thing we need to do is get rid of the bodies, yes?'

'Yes. I do truck go farm. I drive. I pray, I dump. We do good-bad thing. Need do. Ask Jesus forgive. Many times. Forever. Every day. Till I die. You stay. Keep safe Tasha. Keep safe Mrs Phoebe. I come back you. We take money. Take gun. Take Phoebe. Take Tasha. Run 'way, far way.'

'Astur, are you brave enough to do this? Will you go and get the pick-up? I will get the bodies ready and take them to the back door. OK?'

'Robbie, what you do Mel or Mrs M come here?'

'I don't know. I have the gun. But we must act now. Here are the keys for the pick-up. Go now, please.'

'Robbie, you good man!'

Equilibrium

Speed Bump

With Astur away to bring the truck, I worked quickly, fetching blue plastic bags, using surgical tape to wrap the corpses, sealing them inside like mummies, making certain they were leakproof. After a further final check to be sure I had not missed anything, I placed all Dee and Zahra's clothes and personal items in a third blue bag and taped it shut. I locked the safe and put both keys in my neck pouch then re-loaded the gun, checked the safety was on and placed it in the upper part of the rucksack beside the spare ammunition, easy to reach in an emergency.

With the rucksack on my shoulders, I carried the three blue plastic 'mummies' one at a time, laying them side by side near the rear door, ready to load them when Astur returned.

I heard noises outside. Listening with my ear to the back door, I heard Mrs M's voice:

'Fuckin' code doesnae work, Mel.'

'Here, let me try,' from a posher Edinburgh voice.

There was a sharp metallic sound as the flap to the lock-box was prised open.

'Fuckit. Nae key. Use yer jemmy oan the door itsel, Mel. It's no Fort Knox, is it?'

'Mum, you're sure they're here?'

'Definitely. Cost me two hunner to get that guy tae track the phone and it's definitely here, OK?'

OK, here, hold the gun. **Watch!** The safety's off.'

I retreated into the darkness, unhitched my rucksack and extracted the gun, checked again that the cassette was full and that there was a round in the firing chamber before sliding the safety to "FIRE". Copying what I had seen the guards at the camp do during training, I eased myself down to lie on the Kitchen floor with only the smallest part of my head and gun hand protruding from behind the partially open door.

It took the intruders a few minutes of noisy crunching and swearing to get the back door open. With a final kick it swung free.

'Right Mum, you take this and give me the gun.'

A torch switched on, illuminating the blue bags.

'Christ, whit the fuck is this?'

Equilibrium

'Quiet Mum. Not a word. Surprise is everything,' hissed Mel.

I shouted:

'Drop that gun if you wish to live!'

Mel's gun swung towards the kitchen door. It was a semi-automatic machine pistol, possibly an Uzi. The explosions were deafening. I returned fire, aiming at the centre of their bodies.

Please believe me, I had to do it. It was them or me. I had no choice.

In the silence which followed, I stayed put, reloading. By the light from their torch, I could see they were probably dead. When they had not moved for nearly a minute, I crawled forwards. Kneeling, gun pointing at them, I checked their pulses. Both were dead.

I switched off their torch, stepped outside into the light drizzle and scanned all round, holding my breath. I heard only the swish of traffic in the distance. No voices cried out in alarm; no feet came running. I let out a long, slow sigh and stepped back inside and dragged mother and daughter into the kitchen, then went back and secured the outer door, jamming a heavy kitchen chair under the doorknob as I had seen in films, back at the camp, on Dr Max's laptop. I tried again but both top and bottom slip bolts would not engage with their keepers.

Safely in the kitchen with the door closed and locked, I switched on the kitchen light and set my mind to the gruesome task of preparing them for disposal. I repeated the process used on Dee and Zahra using kitchen scissors to cut them out of their clothing.

This revealed multiple Swastika tattoos on Mrs M.

Mel's were tiny, one in the shape of a Swastika butterfly above her shaved pubis and two replicas, smaller, behind each ear lobe.

Standing at the kitchen sink, I checked their blood-soaked clothing, shredding it, looking for hidden items, placing each fragment into a blue bag for disposal with the corpses. After a superficial check, I put their personal belongings, handbags and purses into a second blue bag to examine in detail later, when I had time to focus. I hid this bag in the boiler house, in a dark corner.

Each woman carried two mobile phones which I switched off before removing their SIM cards to prevent tracking. I noticed the SIM cards were 100 GB Data-SIMs. I removed them to my neck-pouch for checking later then placed the phones inside the bag with Mel's corpse and sealed it. There was no additional ammunition for Mel's machine pistol, so I added it to Mrs M's corpse bag.

I now had a total of six blue 'rubbish' bags for disposal.

Equilibrium

It felt as if Astur had been gone for hours.

Why was she taking so long? Had she decided to run, leave me to sort it out alone?

Still on high alert, I cracked open the back door and held it with my foot, the gun in my hand, the safety off.

After a further wait, I heard the pick-up reversing down the path towards me. Astur stepped down from the driver's side moving to unhitch the tailgate:

'Sorry, Robbie. Take long time. Truck no start. Man help jump it. Need fuel soon.'

Leaving the internal lights off, I opened the door for her, beckoning her inside, my finger to my lips. She gasped when she saw I now had six blue bags and wrinkled her nose at the smell from Mel's gunshots.

'Astur, I have more bad news. Mrs M and Mel came here to shoot us. They had a gun. I had to shoot them. I had no choice. They were shooting at me with a small machine gun.'

'Robin, you good man! I no pray them. They bad people. Now we safe?'

'I'm not sure. But first we have to get rid of these bodies, OK?'

'Yes. Robin, you good man. We do this good-bad thing. Go fuel first. Go quick.'

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It took around four hours to complete the disposals and get back to *Redcroft*.

At the farm, the key for the mine shaft door was missing from its hook behind the tree, We searched all around with the torch. No key. I tried my lock-picks but the deadbolt mechanism was too heavy for me to turn the levers. Using my bunch of keys from the antique shop, we opened the front door to the farm.

There was no power, just the ripe smell of cat urine and faeces and many green eyes staring back at us. Using the torch, we found a handful of keys in the kitchen drawers. Astur recognised the one which opened the mineshaft door.

The four bodies and the two bags of personal items dropped into the darkness. The smell of rotting corpses was familiar to me from my time at the camp.

Standing at the open door and again later before we left while sitting in the pick-up, Astur prayed and sobbed for her lost sister Zahra but not for the Marshall family.

We drove the pick-up to IKEA where we left it with the keys in the ignition. My thinking was that someone might take it, causing confusion if anyone reported it missing.

From a nearby street, we hailed a taxi which took us to a 24-hour *Tesco*. Leaving the taxi, we pretended to enter.

Equilibrium

With the taxi gone, we walked back to *Redcroft*, through the light drizzle.

As we walked, Astur took my hand. It was soft and warm. She squeezed very hard and smiled up at me:

'Robbie, you brother to me? Please?'

Equilibrium

A Fresh Start

We arrived back at *Redcroft* just after six o'clock in the morning while it was still dark, entering by the boiler room door. Before leaving, I had secured the back door by dragging the heavy kitchen table across, jamming it behind the door. Using Pheobe's bank card, I had paid for a half tank of diesel at the Tesco filling station, an amount Astur had said would be enough for our trip to Dalkeith and back to Leith where we had parked in a side alley near Astur's flat.

As a precaution, in case we might need it in the future, I fiddled under the bonnet to disconnect the battery before locking up and replacing the keys in my rucksack. With Astur wearing my blue hooded jogging jacket and me in my green anorak, we walked smartly back to *Redcroft* through the rainswept streets, a trip which took an hour and a half.

I tensed when I saw a Police car parked up ahead, its lights out, watching the traffic junction. I was wearing my field rucksack with the gun in the upper section, fully loaded with the safety on. Astur looped her arm around my waist, leaned into me and propelled me onwards. As we passed them, the police officers hardly glanced at us. Even when we were out of range, Astur continued to hold my hand, patting it from time to time with her other hand, smiling broadly.

Safely inside, we raced upstairs to check on Tasha and Phoebe, both still asleep. Retreating to the corridor, in a long, whispered conversation, we agreed our plan. Running in my mind, a fear I did not share with Astur, was the notion that 'others' in Mrs M's organisation may come to *Redcroft* looking for her.

While Astur cleaned them up, put on fresh clothes and fed them from the fridge, I moved to the Dining Room with my *iPad*, and logged onto the BT wireless router by reading the passcode from the label on its base. Mrs M had had this router installed when she set up *Redcroft* as her business office, Astur had explained.

Posing as Pheobe McKelvie I searched the *Tesco* website looking for an account but drew a blank. This suggested she had been a telephone-only customer. Ignoring the local store less than ten minutes away on foot, I chose the *Tesco Extra* at Corstorphine as my 'base' store and created an account for Phoebe. Browsing, I was amazed at the huge range of goods available. Working through my mental list I clicked steadily, adding a long list of items, planning to remain indoors until we felt safe.

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Reviewing my order list, I added a large can of WD40, an amazing lubricant we had used a lot at the camp, especially for freeing zips on tents, and a three-pack of duct tape which we had often used as a substitute for surgical tape and to waterproof bandages at the camp. Using Phoebe's bank card from the firesafe I paid online adding the premium for an express delivery. I then placed the card in my bum bag, already planning further accounts for Pheobe with *Amazon* and other online stores.

My next priority was to make the house secure from further intruders. Moving to the basement area, exiting by the boiler room door to inspect the rear access door in weak daylight. The damage done by Mel's inexpert use of the jemmy was extensive.

Back inside, I put the jemmy in the boiler room beside the blue bag I had hidden, the one with the Marshalls' personal items. From their purses I removed around three hundred pounds in notes and coins but decided to leave more detailed checking until later when I could concentrate more fully.

As I was about to make a start cleaning up the basement, the front doorbell sounded at the repeater panel in the kitchen. I checked from an upstairs window and saw the *Tesco* van at the top of the driveway. It was the usual driver who seemed puzzled there was no alcohol in the order and annoyed that it had been pre-paid. I kept him on the doorstep with the door pulled almost closed behind me, introducing myself as Robin, explained my mother had been ill but was now recovering well. This raised a smile. As a tip, I gave him a handful of coins taken from Mrs M's purse, around two pounds, I think, an amount he openly scoffed at, muttering something which I could not catch.

This would be his last visit, I decided. All further shopping would be done by me or Astur. It had been a mistake to let anyone know I was now living at *Redcroft*.

Working at the rear door using copious amounts of WD 40, and with the aid of the jemmy as a make-do hammer, I got both top and bottom bolts across into the locked position and felt more relaxed, safer. This removed the urgency of having the door replaced.

Pheobe, no longer held down by the overnight sedation I had given her and with a much-reduced level of alcohol in her system, was becoming more assertive, slurring a stream of questions at me, her voice with an edge in it. Some of her questions I could not answer while others, including her demands for alcohol and cigarettes, I wished to deflect until I was ready to stand up to her, when I was surer of my ground.

Underlying this was my need to be certain that Astur would continue to agree to my plan and for this we needed to become a team. To give us time, I gave Pheobe a single dose of *Restoril* to sedate her again, a necessary rouse. Upstairs with Tasha, Astur found a nature programme series for her to watch.

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With the rucksack and gun always within easy reach, Astur and I spent the rest of the day in the basement and kitchen, cleaning the blood and washing down all surfaces with disinfectant. Checking on our patients every hour or so, we often found Tasha asleep, cuddled into Prince, a condition which Astur confirmed was normal. Throughout this period, Phoebe remained fast asleep, snoring loudly.

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That evening, our first as a proper family, all four of us ate microwaved ready meals followed by a home-made fruit salad with yogurt. I fed Tasha and Astur fed Phoebe. Working as a team, we toileted them, washed them and got them changed, ready for bed.

While I medicated them, Astur turned her back and closed her eyes. I discover then she was 'needle shy', this caused by seeing Dee and Zahra inject themselves after which they often beat her up for no reason, an association I was sure had caused her phobia.

Later, when we were alone, I asked her who from *EHSCS* had been responsible for giving Phoebe and Tasha their medications. She did not know. Had it been Phoebe herself or had the drugs been stolen by Mrs M? Astur did not know. I began to suspect that my adopted mother and sister had probably been randomly medicated or even largely unmedicated, perhaps for years. This thought gave me hope that soon, with better care, they would begin to improve.

By charging it up, I managed to get Tasha's motorised wheelchair working and we took her down in the lift to be with Phoebe. Sitting together, the four of us watched television for a few hours. We let Tasha choose, giving her the remote handset. After flicking through dozens of channels, she eventually chose a nature programme showing Ospreys diving for fish to feed their chicks.

We ignored Phoebe's repeated demands for cigarettes and alcohol and eventually she gave up and dropped off into a semi-stupor brought on by the medication I had given her.

The three of us watched on as Tasha squealed and laughed as the birds plunged down on the fish and flapped up again into the sky flying off with their prizes wriggling in their claws. Prince meowed at this, making us laugh.

By nine o'clock both Phoebe and Tasha were safely asleep in their beds, their doors locked from the outside to contain them securely.

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With the house lighting up full and working with my headtorch and lantern, we checked our earlier cleaning and decided we must do better. We started again at the firesafe room, the main source of contamination. Working side by side, using wet wipes and a rich

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soapy, disinfectant solution made with a special stain-removing cleanser I had ordered from *Tesco*, we cleaned away the blood as best we could. After this we tracked again over our route to the Kitchen and the corridor to the rear door, engaging in an ultra-deep cleaning process. While Astur mopped vigorously, I took the role of checker, repeatedly walking the route from the firesafe room to the basement with my lantern torch on full strength, checking for blood spots until we were sure they were none.

Moving outside, using my headtorch and lantern, I swept the area with a broom, removing all trace of activity from the rear door to the foot of the track where the pick-up had been parked. Fortunately, the heavy rain was helping with this concealment, washing away the muddy tracks.

Back inside, I irrigated the slip bolts again with WD 40, eventually getting them sliding by hand but still with great difficulty. They had not been used for years, maybe decades. Until I got the door repaired or replaced, I planned to use the front door to come and go from our 'fortress'.

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Satisfied we were secure at least for now, Astur and I sat again in the Parlour on the ground floor, drank tea and talked through everything that had happened, going round and round and slowing down to cover each event in minute detail, correcting each other occasionally then restarting, running through everything which had happened to Astur over the last two days.

Sharing on my part was restricted only to my return journey from *Greece*, giving Astur only a sketchy outline, no hard facts. Mainly we covered the ground of our shared trauma at the deaths of Dee and Zahra, glossing over what had happened when Mrs M and Mel forced entry.

From experience, I knew this was essential ground which Astur must cover, part of the guilt and grieving process. At least we had a shared experience, agreeing repeatedly that we had been forced to kill four people, people who had tried to kill us.

As we talked, I tried to blank out the memory of the real Robin McKelvie, the morphine addicted man I had killed in cold blood to escape to this new life.

As the implications of what we had been forced to do became embedded as a reality, Astur began to shake and keen, quietly at first but I knew this would rise over time to become a scream of madness caused by a mixture of shock, grief, guilt and fear for her future, as the fight or flight instinct forced her brain into overdrive.

I had seen this reaction many times before in the camp and saw she was on the edge of a break-down. Action was now time critical to fend this off.

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I ran upstairs, fetched a clean duvet and wrapped her in it, made fresh tea, sweet and milky, and for her own good, dissolved one of Phoebe's *Restoril* pills in it. As she slipped over, I eased her round and encouraged her to lie back on the settee, propping her head with a cushion. When she was fully asleep, I checked her pulse and heart rate. Near to normal. I covered her with the duvet and left, locking her inside.

My watch showed it was nearly four o'clock in the morning.

I collected the remaining *Tesco* delivery bags from behind the front door and took them to the kitchen. Using the materials ordered from *Tesco*, I first cleaned the large fridge-freezer, defrosting it using plates of hot water as recommended on the *YouTube* site which I accessed on my *iPad* from the Dining Room. The Wi Fi signal did not reach the basement or the upper floors, a real drawback.

There was an old, battered, rusting dishwasher, an appliance I had never used before, a type which did not show up on *YouTube*. There was power at the controls but it did not respond to my attempts to make it work. In any case, I had no cleansing tablets.

I then cleaned out all the cupboards and drawers, washing and disinfecting them and placing all the cutlery in the sink with detergent and very hot water to sterilise them, rinsing them with boiling water from the electric kettle brought down from the Dining Room.

For a third time I wash down all food surfaces and disinfected them. Earlier while washing the floors to remove the blood, I had looked for mouse droppings and was pleased there were none, no doubt due to Prince. I then washed all the pots, pans, dishes and crockery and utensils twice over. In a further search, I discovered a hoard of plastic *Tupperware* containers unopened, still in their plastic wrappers. These I washed and dried thoroughly.

Anyone who has suffered from dysentery knows that kitchen cleanliness and hygienic food preparation is crucially important.

The hob worked by induction heating which took time to understand, with help from *YouTube*.

Over the next two hours, using ingredients from the *Tesco* bags, I cooked a variety of soups and a small selection of vegetarian meals. By the end of my session, I had several dozen small portions of tasty food in the fridge to serve the four of us during the days immediately ahead and a back-up of a further month's supply in the freezer section.

My plan was to eat lightly four times a day, using small portions of brown rice as a filler and generous portions of fruit and yogurt as a second course. By eliminating potatoes, breads, cakes, sweetened biscuits and suchlike to reduce carbohydrates, sugar, salt and

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other additives, I hoped my wholesome lower-calorie diet approach would help control Tasha's diabetes and induce weight loss in Phoebe.

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With my cooking equipment washed and dried, I checked my three patients then settled at one of the other settees across from Astur. The room was warm, slightly overheated. The radiator valves were seized. I opened the door to the entrance hallway, but this made little difference.

As I lay back, I tried to imagine what might be happening soon at *the* offices of C&C and how would *The Carers* behave without Mrs M to boss them.

My mind began to spin ahead:

Who would replace Mrs M and Mel?

What would the people at C&C think when Mel, Dee and Zahra failed to appear for work.

Then it struck me; I retrieved my *iPhone* from the front pouch of my rucksack and reassembled it, pleased I had a good Vodafone signal.

07:43 Saturday, 19th December 2015

The mobile phone shuddered: an email from Rachel, sent the previous evening:

'Hiya Robin, are you free tomorrow morning?

Meet you at Hendersons for late breakfast?

An early birthday pressie.

My shout, eh? How does 10 o'clock-ish suit?

Becca is here in Edinburgh too. She says, Grrrrrr!

CU,

Rache.

This was a meeting I must avoid. These people from Robin's past might eventually realise I was a fake. I decided not to respond, ignore it and hope they would not visit *Redcroft*, assuming they knew I might be here.

Replacing my mobile, I noticed the bullet hole in my rucksack and remembered the thud as the shot from Astur had struck it. I removed the *Dell* from the padded pouch section and placed it on the coffee table. The bullet had entered the rear of the lid at an angle and was lodged inside. The toughened glass screen was damaged, shattered. I pressed the power button. The innards sizzled and gave off a whiff of dense acrid fume. I shut it down at once. Perhaps it could be repaired but the damage would be difficult to explain.

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In the camp Dr Max and I often cannibalised computer equipment to help the guards get an old laptop working. I used this expertise to remove the hard disc with my information on it.

In the basement, reluctantly, I used Mel's jemmy to smash my almost new laptop to prevent anyone trying to discover my online secrets. Wrapping the shattered remains in a Tesco bag, I put it in my rucksack intending to dispose of it in a builder's skip next time I saw one.

Hoping to nap for a while, as I lay back and turned to lie on my side, my neck-cord pouch snagged, almost strangling me. I remembered the pen-drive I had extracted from Dee's secret trouser pocket. I took it out and studied it. Once more the idea that this USB stick might prove important began to dominate my thinking. It could hold crucially important information about who might try to find out what had happened to the Marshalls and Zahra and whether Dee had shared with anyone what she knew about me.

They would probably start by looking for Astur which meant they might come here, to Redcroft, her normal place of work.

I decided it was better to act than wait. It was now 08:10 and my mind was racing:

At the Library of Scotland there were several open access PCs but would they accept an unauthorised pen-drive?

Babsie had told Dee about me. Had Dee shared this information with anyone else? If I went to NLS again, would someone be waiting for me?

Did they sell laptops at the local Tesco shop? I checked using my iPhone. No.

Tesco Extra at Corstorphine offered a limited selection. No mention of sales support to help set it up and transfer data from my hard disk. Getting there in the continuing heavy rain was an issue.

Would Rachel let me borrow her Alpha course laptop? Unlikely and unwise.

What about the computer shop across from Henderson's Vegan?

Could I risk going there to buy a replacement laptop and still avoid Rachel?

I had enough cash and Robin's credit and bank cards. I also had Pheobe's bank card.

When would it open? I searched for it using Google. No luck.

I ran upstairs.

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Pheobe was sleeping soundly. Tasha was awake. I checked her pad, changed it, checked her various readings, all normal. I then placed a fresh cartridge into the holder of her Insulin pump system and put the *Gruffalo's Child* DVD into the player and set it to repeat.

After feeding her a plate of lentil broth, I gave her a glass of diet coke with half of a *Restoril* tablet crushed into it.

After a few more minutes of watching the film with her, she slipped over into sleep.

It was 9:18.

Could I risk leaving all three of them for a few hours?

I was still undecided. Perhaps I might risk the library.

I checked on Astur again. Still sound asleep.

I left a note folded and tucked inside her hand:

BACK AT 12 NOON OR SOONER.

This time I left the lounge door unlocked.

Prince was pawing at my leg. I carried him downstairs and let him out the front door. He looked up, seemed to accept this new freedom then ran down the steps and disappeared around to the back of the house.

Back inside, I put the gun into the firesafe, took a further three hundred pounds in twenty-pound notes, locked the safe and put both firesafe keys into my neck cord pouch beside the pen-drive, the Chubb key and the Data-SIM cards.

Changed into denims, a tee-shirt and pullover and shrugged into my anorak I slipped out the front door, locked it then headed off into the dull misty rain, striding out, moving quickly, just less than a trot.

As I passed *Tesco*, I checked for The Carers flatbed truck. It was gone. I decided to double check in the store. I searched the shelves then asked at the Customer Services desk to be told they had stopped selling computers years ago.

I took a bus into the centre of Edinburgh.

The National Library of Scotland was just opening as I arrived. I was alone by the terminals and trying not to look suspicious, I checked, looking for a suitable PC. No luck, all the USB slots had been isolated behind see-through covers, these secured by digital padlocks and the area was covered by CCTV. I decided to retreat.

I arrived at the computer shop across from *Hendersons's Vegan* in Thistle Street. I read the notice to discover it did not open until 11:00 on Saturdays. I was looking through the

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window at the display when a fist thumped me in the back. I turned to find Becca standing beside me, smiling. She leaned forward and kissed me long and hard. Her hands slipped up inside my anorak, then inside my tee shirt and her fingernails raked the skin on my back. Her breasts were pressing into me hard. She smelled and tasted wonderful. I wanted to take her somewhere where we could be alone.

She pushed back and said:

'Robbie, are you carrying?'

I did not understand.

'Have you got any good stuff? I'm desperate.'

It was then I realised she was a dope addict. Probably cocaine. Her pupils were dilated, her pale white skin slightly tinged with a yellowy colour.

'No, sorry, Becca.'

'**Fuck!** Ah, no, I get it! You're jesting me, right?'

'Absolutely not.'

'**For fuck's sake**, Robin McKelvie. What gives? Eh? OK! OK! Look, I know where we can get some good stuff. You've got cash, right?'

'No, not much. Just a few pounds.'

'**Fucking wanker.** Just fuck off. Look, at least give me a tenner for a taxi. OK?'

'No. You need help, Becca. Treatment.'

'So, Rache got to you in the end with her religious mumbo jumbo, eh? You do know she's always wanted to shag you, right?'

'No, it's not like that. No, this is not to do with Rachel. It's about you and how to . . .'

'Nah, Robbie, don't give me the spiel about going clean. **Just fuck off! Right? JUST FUCK, FUCK, FUCK OFF!**

A taxi appeared with its yellow light showing and she stepped out into the street in front of it, arms and legs spreadeagled. It stopped. She got in and it pulled away.

As the taxi swung around the corner out of sight, I realised I had passed another test: Becca had also accepted me as Robin McKelvie.

From her direct approach, it seemed 'we' had once been lovers.

Had she ever been anything but a man chaser? Or was her addiction responsible for her current behaviour.

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Robin had been addicted to morphine when he was in the camp. Perhaps he had had other addictions I did not know about. Cocaine?

As I turned to leave Rache shouted from the doorway of Hendersons':

'Robbie, come on. I've got a great table. Becca will be here soon. Come on.'

I crossed and joined her. She hugged me tightly, then reached up and pulled my head forward and planted a sloppy wet kiss on my lips. She tasted of coffee. We sat in a corner at a table with seats for four.

I was introduced to Alain, a baby-faced boy with slightly protruding front teeth and poor skin. He looked about sixteen but was quick to tell me he was twenty-seven. Rachel told me that Alain was newly enrolled on the Alpha course and that she had been assigned as his mentor. It was obvious from the way she kept rubbing his inner thigh with her left hand they were in a relationship which went beyond the normal limits of Christian counselling.

We ordered the seasonal platter of five tapas to share and a carafe of tap water infused with lime juice with four glasses to have one for Becca. Every so often Rachel would excuse herself and go outside to try to contact Becca by phone.

When the food arrived, Rache blessed it with a simple prayer.

As we began to eat and chat, Becca was forgotten.

Alain was a tall, awkward boy with a slight speech defect. He was student at Edinburgh, doing a PhD in Ethics and Theology. His parents lived on Skye where his mother was a GP and his father ran a computer repair shop. I said I was planning to buy a laptop and asked him what he thought about Rachel's. At this mention, she took it from her tote bag and flipped it open.

According to Alain, *Apple* laptops like Rachell's were far superior to all other types. I asked how much I should expect to pay for a decent second-hand model. This opened a floodgate. Alain was now in charge of the conversation.

Using Rache's *MacBook Pro 13"* with Retina display, he gave me a mini-tutorial. He had a similar model for sale. It was at his flat, two streets away. He could let me have it for £400 because the case was marked, caused when the previous owner had dropped it. His father had repaired and upgraded it. The eager young man assured me it was in perfect working order and came with a two-year warranty from his father. Alain revealed, conspiratorially, he had started a hobby business selling second-hand refurbished and upgraded models which his father provided free of charge. It helped subsidise his studies, he claimed and, since his sales turnover was below the threshold, there was no VAT involved.

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Rache's mobile buzzed and she stepped outside the restaurant to take the call. When she returned, she was sobbing.

'Guys, I have to go. Becca's been in an accident. Mum and Dad are at the hospital with her. She jumped off the North Bridge onto the railway tracks. I've got a cab coming. I'll ring you later, Alain. Sorry, guys. Robin, will you pay, please? We'll do your birthday treat another time, eh?'

She leaned forward and kissed Alain fiercely on the lips, pecked me on the cheek, slipped her MacBook into her bag and was off, weaving her way through the tables to the door.

'Robin, we should pray, shouldn't we?'

'If you like. I'm not religious.'

'Oh, Rache said you were at one time before you met Becca. Becca has always been a loose cannon. Drugs and so on. Do you take drugs, Robin?'

'Sadly, yes, I dabbled but that was in the past. Nowadays, I only take drugs prescribed by a doctor.'

'Do you know we have all been praying for you since you came back to Edinburgh?'

This revelation made me tense. Who were these people Rachel had shared my details with.

'Oh? Who are 'we'?''

'Rache's prayer circle. There are twelve of us. I'm the only male. That's how I met Rache, through the Alpha group. Robbie, please don't tell her I used to smoke cannabis. But don't worry, I stopped after I met her. Rachel is really is truly amazing, isn't she? And yes, she does know I used to eat junk food and drink alcohol but now I'm one hundred percent clean now, honest. I made a pledge, to God, to Jesus, to Rachel. And my new diet, it's helping my acne. My Mum and Dad are very pleased about us but only Mum knows Rache and me are secretly engaged, which means that since we are pledged to each other, enjoying sex is not really a sin, not a carnal sin. I told Mum all about our intimate relationship and she wants to meet Rache to be sure she is, well, 'suitable'. We were planning to go Skye next weekend although this thing with Becca might change everything, I suppose. Robin, would you mind if I take a few minutes to pray. I don't speak, just say the words in my head.'

'Sure, Alain. Go ahead and pray.'

I waited. After a few minutes he opened his eyes.

'Right, Robin. Are you interested in that MacBook?'

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'Yes. Let's go.'

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I was back at the National Library of Scotland by half past eleven with my new laptop hooked into the free Wi-Fi. I inserted the pen-drive. As expected, it was passcode protected. I went online and downloaded the decryption software which Alain had recommended, the software his father used to unlock stubborn devices. I had told him I had a USB stick my father had given me but the passcode he had sent in a separate email had not worked and when I had asked him to email it to me again, he kept getting it wrong.

According to Alain, this was a fairly common problem.

I copied the link from the USB stick into the decryption software and let it run on "BUSY". After about ten minutes it returned a code:

SwastikaRed2015@

I closed the software, restarted the pen-drive and pasted in the password.

I scrolled slowly through over two hundred individual spreadsheets relating to different clients. All these clients were women.

The files listed contact details, home addresses, drugs supplied, amounts and dates.

Estimates of client assets and wealth were listed.

The names and reference numbers of the girls supplied were recorded together with dates and prices charged.

Client preferences were noted regarding which type of sex was desired: 'giving', 'receiving' or 'both'.

The information stretched back to 1998.

The only name I recognised was Dr Gladys Stimpson.

I had no idea what to do with this list of names.

I copied the files onto my MacBook and gave it a new passcode, following the rules which Alain had recommended.

I also changed the passcode on the pen-drive to a similar but different secure passcode then ejected it and put it back in my neck cord pouch.

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Next Moves

I was back inside the house in *Redcroft* before one o'clock. Prince had been waiting for me on the front doormat, curled, asleep.

I checked Pheobe and Tasha; both asleep, breathing, pulses and heart rates normal. Pads were needing changed but I decided to leave this.

I roused Astur. I needed her to help me. She was slow to come around but after a mug of strong, sweet, milky tea she perked up and seemed more relaxed, less jumpy. Although these signs suggested her trauma crisis had passed, I knew it would almost certainly return, especially if she was exposed to stress again.

Healing a damaged mind takes years, as I know from personal experience.

We sat across from each other at the kitchen table while she ate soup followed by a mild vegetable curry dish I had made earlier. I encouraged her to drink lots of bottled mineral water, still, not sparkling. Soon she was smiling, transformed. Once more I was struck by her underlying beauty. With the threat of the Marshalls and their regime of fear nullified, perhaps I could recover her physically, an essential precursor to good mental health. In the camp we knew good nutrition was the key to recovery from all sorts of ailments.

It was time to set her a challenge, keep her moving forward.

'Right Astur, are you ready to help me get Mother and Tasha cleaned up? The rain has stopped and the sun is out. Later, when its dark, perhaps we might take Tasha out in her wheelchair to *Tesco* and buy you some new clothes? New clothes for you too? That would be nice, wouldn't it? What do you think?'

'Police? Come to us? Take prison?'

Although I did not want to tell Astur lies, I knew I could not share my fears with her. For this new arrangement to work, she had to believe we were now safe, secure, free from any ongoing threats.

'No. They have no bodies, do they? Without bodies, they have no crimes. People go missing all the time. And who will even tell the police they are missing? I don't think any of the other girls will be willing to go to the police. Do you?'

'No. I think they run 'way! Robin, you good man. Clever. Kind to Astur. Kind to Tasha, to Mrs Phoebe. You like brother to me?'

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'Yes, Astur, this is true. We are like brother and sister. We will make a good team. If they come to ask, we know nothing, right?'

She smiled and then laughed. It was a wonderful deep chuckle, like the one I had heard from her when Prince had meowed at the Osprey catching the fish. I wondered when this poor girl had last laughed.

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At Christmas we celebrated by buying Tasha lots of toys, books and DVDs. We bought a Santa outfit for Prince who seemed to realise he was the centre of attraction and every time we put it on him, he would meow loudly, 'singing' to us.

As we adjusted to each other during the early days of our confinement, I sternly resisted Phoebe's pleadings for cigarettes and alcohol. By the middle of January 2016, she stopped asking.

As time passed, following my strict routine, all three of my patients were noticeably improving.

Even Prince was changed. Now that he was allowed outside for a few hours each day, he seemed more content but still playful, stalking me and Astur around the house, sometimes pouncing on us as if we were his prey. Additionally, we were relieved of the burden of cleaning his smelly toilet tray. Around the second week into this new arrangement, he also stopped urinating in dark corners, scent marking his external territory instead, I presumed.

Eating and sleeping better and no longer spending hours every day doing laundry and ironing, Astur seemed to become obsessed with cleaning and housework generally. After a few weeks, every surface was gleaming and the entire house began to smell of lavender polish. However, there was still an underlying musty odour which I would learn later was the smell of dry and wet rot eating its way through the structure.

Three times a day, every day, I checked all the doors and windows, always when Astur was busy with Phoebe or Tasha. One other part of how we lived was unnatural; I insisted we must keep all blinds fully down and curtains closed. If we ventured outside, Astur and I went together, almost exclusively to *Tesco*, always mid-evening around eight o'clock and back home within the hour. We used my rucksacks to carry our purchases, never shopping bags and always paid using cash.

For the next three months the four of us lived quietly at *Redcroft*. I kept my phone off, using it only to check for messages from Rachel. Each time I switched it on there were missed calls from a number I had tagged as 'Babsie' but since I knew she was dead, I decided to ignore them, reasoning they might be from a colleague at the library or a

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friend who had found her phone and was calling round to tell everyone of her demise. Eventually, after a few weeks these Babsie calls stopped.

Every day, usually mid-afternoon. I took my laptop to one of a dozen or so coffee shops nearby which offered free Wi-Fi. Working quickly, limiting myself to ten minutes maximum, I scanned the online newsfeeds but there was no mention of any missing persons.

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Building a Family

By June 2016 it was almost six clear months since we had disposed of the Marshalls and Zahra.

Throughout this period of seclusion, the only direct outside contact we had was with the pharmacy courier who came always on the last Thursday of each month with a parcel of medications for Phoebe and Tasha. After the first visit when I had spoken to her from behind the front door explaining we were all suffering from bad colds, she was happy to leave the medications on the doorstep in return for a signed receipt which we exchanged via the letterbox.

Apart from advertising circulars, bank statements and utility bills we had few other callers apart from Amazon deliveries, usually left on the front doorstep unless a signature was required. My ploy of keeping the house dark and shuttered seemed to be working.

Most nights I lay awake for hours worrying over the details of what had happened, wondering if we had left a trail which would lead the Police or anyone else to our door. In early May, four full months after the attack by the Marshalls, I eventually concluded Astur and I were in the clear, as the passage of time had proved.

As each further day passed without incident, I began to relax and plan ahead, trying to be as careful as possible to keep ourselves low key, an almost normal family but largely confined to an indoor life due to illness and disability.

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After resisting for several months, I had finally agreed to Astur's request for more stylish clothes. I already had an account in Pheobe's name with Amazon but Astur wanted clothes from John Lewis and Marks & Spencer, saying she had made many visits to these nice shops in the past but had never been able to buy anything, just feeling the material, hoping one day she might own a nice summer dress or warm winter coat. As with Tesco and Amazon and other online purchases, I did everything in Phoebe's name, as the registered householder, trying to keep my Internet profile to a minimum.

Side by side at the Dining Room table and using my laptop, Astur and I studied the images on their websites and placed orders for home delivery. At first, this proved to be a rather hit and miss experience, requiring repeated visits by me to various Post Office outlets to return unsuitable items.

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Eventually, at a total cost of around £2,500 debited from Phoebe's account using her bank card, all three of my patients had completely new wardrobes. In parallel, I ordered around £500 of clothes and shoes for myself, again using Phoebe's accounts and bank card. Astur then laundered and parcelled up the best of our cast-offs and I deposited them at a variety of charity shops, leaving our anonymous gifts on their doorsteps in the early hours of the morning while it was still dark.

Now we had made a start, I bought a large plasma screen from *John Lewis* and had them install it in the front lounge which became our family room.

In parallel, 'Phoebe' applied to BT and had a whole house Broadband service installed, adding a TV package with Sports Channels, Films for Adults and Kids and the Discovery Channels for Nature and Wildlife programmes.

Astur was keen to have a personal phone, one with proper access to the outside world. I resisted, saying it would be too much of a risk and pointing out that apart from me, she had no one to call. Unfortunately, her desire to have her own phone became a point of ongoing tension in our otherwise excellent relationship but I became adept at distracting her and often we might go for weeks without her raising the subject.

For *YouTube*, to avoid advertisements and access additional content, I took out a full subscription in Phoebe's name. From the camp on Dr Max's laptop, my Internet access had been very restricted but now my *YouTube* sessions were guided by *Google* search and supported by articles from *Wikipedia*, I was discovering a wealth of new information and opinions about many things which had puzzled me and topics I had not previously thought about.

At this stage, it seemed there was almost nothing I could not teach myself, given enough time.

Next, we bought an *Amazon Show* screen, primarily for music, setting reminders and alarms. Then, as I learned more about home automation, I added a batch of *Blink* surveillance cameras for the front and back doors. I also placed wall mounted cameras to enable me to monitor Phoebe and Tasha remotely, particularly when Astur and I were elsewhere. This exercise of monitoring them when we were away out of *Redcroft* proved my biggest technical challenge to date but, after several long frustrating sessions spread over many days and with help from *YouTube*, I got them working, linking them every camera to my *iPhone* and *Apple* laptop.

Now, in theory, I could leave my patients for a few hours alone, provided I was close enough to respond in an emergency. At Astur's suggestion, I had a ramp installed at the front of the house so make it easier to get Tasha out, usually for trips just to *Tesco* but then we became more adventurous, going by taxi to *Edinburgh Zoo*, a trip which soon became her favourite outing.

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When I looked at the huge garden, I saw a wilderness, a jungle. I judged it had not been cultivated in anyway for many years, maybe even a decade. After considering options such as hiring a gardening contractor or making an inexpert start myself, I deferred the matter meanwhile.

Instead, I began to explore the house, noting damp patches in many of the top floor ceilings. This led me to the attic roof space, noting larger damp patches on the woodwork above my head and around the brickwork which formed the chimneys. From *YouTube*, I realised the house was infested with dry and wet rot, leading to the recurring thought that *Redcroft* might be beyond redemption. If this crumbling wreck was to be sold as a ruin, how much would it fetch and what could we afford to buy? To get out of my predicament, I would need external help, eventually, but it was too soon because I knew instinctively that I must keep our profile as low as possible, both for myself and for Astur.

The whole idea of trying to find another suitable home for my new family overwhelmed me. I gave in, trying not to think about it while knowing the matter was becoming critical.

Instead, I must concentrate on things I could achieve and leave the rest of the issues for later.

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My next project was to dispose of the *Mercedes* and *Honda* then find a vehicle which would suit our needs, something basic, second-hand, one which would not stand out or draw attention to us.

Before posting their images to various potential buyers, I gave the vehicles a thorough inspection, checking everywhere for hidden personal items. Following tips from a *YouTube* video I subjected each vehicle to in-depth valeting sessions, spending just over £150 at *Halfords* for a tyre inflator, a power washer with special hoses and nozzles, a pack of special cloths and sponges, cleaning agents, paint restoring cream and polish.

My final act was to use strong disinfecting wipes to go over every surface, inside and out, to try to eliminate any traces of my fingerprints and DNA.

Online, after a short round of negotiations, I settled on a buyer willing to offer a premium for the purchase of both cars in the *Redcroft* garage. The trade buyer was a husband-and-wife team from Doncaster who were happy to travel to Edinburgh to collect both cars, arriving in a gleaming 'as-new' twenty-three-year-old Range Rover Defender 110 towing a fancy double-height transportation trailer. From various sources I had learned Jamie and Sandra Knowles were well-respected for providing a good product. The couple reckoned the full restorations of both vehicles might take around a year.

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As an aside, they asked if I might be interested as a potential purchaser for the *Honda* roadster, when they had it ready for sale, saying they would give me priority. I knew from my research that the sports car, which had been Robin's 18th birthday gift, was a much sought after model if offered in good condition. I declined their kind offer, explaining my mother was unwell and that we were consolidating our assets, planning to buy a motorhome or similar. They explained that, unfortunately they did not deal in such 'specialised' vehicles.

Throughout their visit, I wore lightweight surgical gloves, explaining I had a skin condition, mildly contagious, requiring me to medicate with a special cream, hence the gloves. While they were outside loading the vehicles, I was at the kitchen table, completing my part of the official registration transfer documents in a fair copy of Phoebe's signature. This done, I slipped them into a transparent plastic sleeve.

Before releasing the documents and the keys, I watched online from my *iPhone* as their payment of £37,500 arrived in Phoebe's account.

In parallel, I had been researching online the best vehicle for wheelchairs. After a week-long search, I decided on a customised Fiat Doblo motorhome complete with a rear folding-out ramp, fully motorised. The seller, an elderly man from Cumbria whose disabled wife had recently passed away, was happy to drive it to Edinburgh without my prior commitment to buy, saying he would make a bit of a holiday of the trip.

The Fiat seemed to me to be ideal, not too large and only slightly scruffy. Its proud owner was happy to demonstrate all the features to Astur and me. I had not realised until that point that it had an automatic gearbox, a feature which turned out to be most helpful.

Before transferring the agreed amount of £23,300 to his bank I entered his personal details into a 'pay-for-data' Web-App to be sure Mr John Julian Grayson from Worthington was a genuine seller, not a bankrupt, and that he owned the house where the Fiat was registered in the *DVLA* database.

Phoebe was now the owner of a five-year-old Fiat Doblo motorhome and, with the vehicle details to hand, I went online and obtained full insurance with *Churchill* for her to drive with me as her co-driver.

That first evening, with Astur driving, we took it for a short outing, filled it with diesel then parked it in the garage, out of sight. Although I had Robin's driving licence and knew the basics, I needed to get experience of driving in traffic. Each night, when Phoebe and Tasha were settled, Astur took me out for a driving lesson. We repeated the process she had been through during her driving tuition and after about six weeks I was able to drive with competence, knowing I could produce Robin's driving licence, should I be challenged.

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During these early weeks and months, becoming a family was not without problems, but I knew from discussions with Dr Max that a strict routine and firmness is vital to achieve the stability which leads to tranquillity.

On a dozen or so occasions, with more energy and clear of the fog of alcohol and overdosing on sleeping pills, Phoebe became truculent. Craving for cigarettes and alcohol, she would flare up, becoming angry and abusive. Ignoring her demands, Astur and I would work as a team to distract her by offering tea or coffee and special treat dark chocolate *Bounty Bars*, re-running her favourite films and boxed sets. When these tirades were over, Astur would hug her, wash her face and hands with a warm damp cloth then dry them with a towel before applying skin cream, first rubbing it in before stroking gently, cooing and singing to her as if she was a baby.

Tasha was our star patient, generally easy to please, always singing to us when we wakened her each morning. Online, I bought a CD player and lots of simple children's Karaoke discs.

From their website, I could see *The Hibeas* were on a successful run in the Scottish Championship. I applied for disabled passes for Tasha with myself as her carer and we went to see a few home games, celebrating their return to the Scottish Premiership and going on to beat Rangers 3-2 in the 2016 Scottish Cup Final to earn a place in the EUEFA Cup for the season ahead.

I know Tasha did not fully understand how great an achievement this was for *The Hibeas* but she knew all the songs, singing along and whooping, accepting and offering high-fives.

Our family ethos was founded on sharing all the ordinary things that families do, chattering away to each other many hours a day, the four of us (and Prince) ending each day watching TV. Later, when Phoebe and Tasha were medicated and asleep, Astur and I often watched on as a couple, taking turns to choose what programmes to view.

With each passing month there was a noticeable improvement in Astur's spoken English. As a simple teaching tool, we used subtitles and the 'pause' and 'replay' buttons to help her understand what was being said. To be fully honest, I found it helpful as well, expanding my vocabulary. She desperately wanted to learn to read and write. Sitting together at my laptop, using Phoebe's account, we bought a batch of children's primers. Using these, she began reading aloud to me, her finger pointing at each word in turn. As a follow-up exercise, she then copied each story by hand in block letters, often several times over, sounding each word as she wrote it down, mimicking the approach I had learned with Dr Mena. From *YouTube* recommendations, I bought teaching software and a printer from Amazon to create worksheets for her.

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In that period, when the other two were asleep, Astur's reading and writing 'mission' became the new focus of our evenings. The Somalian girl worked hard, often stopping to pray before continuing. She threw herself into it, catching up on lost years. In our routine, each morning by seven o'clock sharp we were both up, showered, breakfasted and ready to deal with our patients but now in the late evenings it became difficult to get her to stop by 10.30 pm, our agreed time for parting, she to her room and I to mine.

Later, alone in my room, I would often continue to browse *YouTube* and other *Google* leads, keeping abreast to the refugee situation in the Middle East and elsewhere. Most nights I also raked around in local and national media news sites, searching forwards from early December 2015. In a separate, more directed approach, posing as Phoebe, using her email address, I joined a raft of missing persons forums, even daring to mention Mrs Marion Marshall by name. On six occasions in January, I made anonymous visits to the C&C website. Nothing I tried turned up anything. Although relieved, I was also baffled.

Why was there no outcry?

Why was there no mention of them, particularly Mel and Dee Marshall when even a lost pet was the subject of screeds of words?

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To help her progress, we bought simple books from *Tesco* and she became an avid reader, now shunning the television and radio in favour of books. Then, from *Amazon*, we ordered a *Kindle* book reader in Phoebe's name and loaded children's books. The *Kindle* soon became Astur's most prized possession.

She asked me to buy her a Bible. Checking on *Amazon* together, we decided to buy her 'The Catholic Children's Bible' from St Mary's Press, in hardcover. This was the same Bible I had been given as a present on my 8th birthday by Dr Mena, before she became an atheist. Over the weeks which followed, Astur read it from cover to cover. It was then she told me she wanted to become a nun and had prayed to Jesus to help her.

Now that Summer had arrived, Astur suggested that Phoebe was 'well again' and that we could take the Fiat and go for a holiday, preferably to the seaside, somewhere with nice sand, like her village in Somalia. She also wanted to visit Blairgowrie, to see what it was really like. I tried to put her off because I was not happy about leaving the house empty. And there was Prince to think about. And I was not sure we could cope in a hotel or a self-catering holiday home, mainly because of Tasha's needs but also because of Phoebe, who I feared might relapse and try to purchase alcohol and cigarettes.

The whole idea of leaving *Redcroft* seemed fraught with problems, increasing the danger of discovery.

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Throughout this first period, the medications continued to arrive from the *Stimpson Medical Centre and Pharmacy*, now delivered each Thursday afternoon by a new lady driving a small white van. One day she told me Dr Stimpson had retired and the business had been sold to an Asian GP called Dr John Ahuja who had decided to keep the name of the original practice meanwhile. Dr Gladys had moved to Dumfries, the woman said, to live with her sister Mavis and her husband.

There was one thing about this development which had worried me. Obviously, Tasha and Phoebe's medical records were held by *Stimpson's* but where were my own records? And what if my blood type was different from those shown in those records for the real Robin McKelvie.

The problem solved itself when Dr Ahuja's practice manager wrote to me apologising. It transpired that during a data migration exercise, my personal records had been mis-filed in the new system, presumed corrupted or deleted. Would I please contact the Practice to have a simple health check carried out to re-establish the integrity of their records files. Under NHS policy, I would be due compensation for this loss and inconvenience, etc, etc.

Two days after my visit to the GP surgery, a further letter arrived from Dr Ahuja addressed to Mrs Phoebe McKelvie requesting she make an appointment for her and her daughter Natasha Jalbani to visit the practice or arrange a home visit to facilitate an annual health check to be sure their current treatments and medications were appropriate.

By the end of June, the McKelvie family were fully established in the NHS system. However, Astur was still outside it although in an emergency I knew we could fake her details by giving a false name and address and date of birth. I had read online how to do this. Fortunately, she was now almost fully physically recovered from her years of starvation and abuse and had blossomed into a very attractive young woman who turned heads everywhere we went. I think most people thought she was my wife.

At was at this stage I decided to 'lose' Robin's driving licence and apply for a replacement with an up-to-date photograph, now minus the goatee beard. Two weeks after submitting my application, the replacement licence arrived.

I then repeated the process by 'losing' my passport. Reading up on this online, I discovered many people needed new passports because they had left the original in clothing put into the wash. I took a calculated risk and contacted Rachel and Alain to ask them to certify me. Thankfully they were happy to do this.

To process the paperwork, we met for a celebratory lunch at *Hendersons' Vegan*, just the three of us. They were now officially engaged and Rache was wearing a ring with a large diamond. She had a new job, I learned, starting in a few weeks as a senior nurse in

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Alain's mother's practice on Skye. Alain, who had graduated with his Doctorate, was joining his father to expand the business by offering website design and e-advertising. He had also signed up as a voluntary lay preacher to understudy the local Church of Scotland minister who was heading for retirement, aged seventy-nine. A baby girl was due in a few months. The wedding and baptism would be held in Dalkeith, at Rache's parents' home, in a marquee, just the immediate family. It would be on the anniversary of Becca's suicide, chosen to turn this great sadness into a time of joy. The new baby would be Christened Rebecca.

About a month later I had my brand-new UK passport with my own photograph embedded, now minus Robin's pretentious goatee beard.

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In early July a letter arrived at *Redcroft* from *Carruthers and Crawford, Solicitors*. It advised the retiral of Mr Vincent Thomas Sanderson. In the blurb which was enclosed. I read that *C&C* had been incorporated into *Thomsons Beveridge*, a larger and long-established firm based in Glasgow. As a footnote, I read that Mr Tom Washington Sanderson was to become the joint managing partner of the new expanded firm which was now Glasgow based. I checked online and *C&C* no longer existed and that the offices they had occupied at *The Gyle* were up for sale.

There was a consent form to be signed by Phoebe, seeking agreement that Mr T W Sanderson and his team would continue to provide my professional services.

After a few hours of online research, I decided to take the opportunity to change Phoebe's solicitors and made an appointment with a firm called *Armitage Steven* who were rated as the best family solicitors in Edinburgh in a recent survey. I was seen by Mrs Deborah McInnes and after a short discussion, she made the necessary arrangements and our documents and papers were transferred from *C&C*.

This move, I hoped, would completely break the link between the McKelvie family and Mel, Dee and Zahra.

Equilibrium

Stumble

Now I felt free of the Marshalls and whatever link they may or may not have had with C&C, I was now hatching another plan. It was time to do something about the crumbling state of *Redcroft*.

From an extensive trawl on *Google* and *YouTube*, I knew what to look for and went back into the attic to confirm by probing at the damp patches with the spike on my Swiss Army knife that the wet rot was extensive. From *Amazon* I had ordered six packs of dry rot detection sticks which confirmed the whole house was also riddled with dry rot. From various forums, I discovered there were many other Edinburgh properties of a similar age suffering from the same issues. My layman's assessment was that *Redcroft* would need re-roofed and all the lathe and plaster walls stripped back then the exposed bare bricks sprayed to kill the fungus followed by renewal of damp proofing and complete redecoration. I was certain these costs were well beyond my budget and that the disruption would be intolerable.

Once more I shied away from doing anything about my predicament.

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In mid-August, during the height of the *Edinburgh Festival*, the nearly identical house on the other side of the park caught fire. It happened late on a Saturday night and the response of the fire brigade was slow. The flames were spectacular and Astur and I watched the drama unfold from my bedroom window. Next day the house, called *Mansefield*, was declared unsafe and cordoned off. A news report on the television said the house had been lying unoccupied for several years and had probably been 'torched' by vagrants and drug addicts who had been seen using the premises in recent months.

Almost at once a demolition squad arrived and within a month the site was cleared, trees felled, their stumps removed to allow excavation for foundations and drains to be installed and scaffolding erected around the property giving access to the roof and the external stonework.

A familiar sign from my ramblings in Pollokshields appeared.

Under Development by Pam Wright Projects

Alongside it was a second poster with the familiar figure of an attractive mature woman smiling to the lens with a speech balloon giving her motto:

Wright First Time!

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The project information board showed an artist's impression of the 2.2-acre site with the original villa converted and extended to provide seven luxury flats and a row of five compact stone-clad town houses. The sketches showed a secure gated community set in communal landscaped gardens with discrete covered parking and a sizeable circular triple-glazed communal conservatory and patio area overlooking a wildlife pond and wild garden with a bird feeding station. Interested persons were invited to apply to view plans and discuss options.

In her 'personal statement' Pam Wright pledged that accommodation would be available by early summer 2017, only nine months ahead.

Curious, I researched '*Pam Wright Projects*' and learned she was a minor legend famed for taking on old houses like *Redcroft*. If they were retrievable her preferred approach was to restore and adapt them to provide luxury apartments, as she was doing to the property across the gardens from us. Looking at her projects list showed that over the last decade her earlier projects had been in Glasgow, mainly in Pollokshields but with a more recent focus on Morningside where she had completed four similar developments to the *Mansefield* project in the last two years.

A few days after the builder's accommodation portacabins arrived, I saw Pam Wright sitting in her small white car outside *Redcroft*. It was a Monday morning, about a week since the project opposite had started.

When she saw me watching her from my bedroom above the front door, she got out of the car, blipped on the alarm and waved to me as she walked smartly to the front door.

When I opened the door, she stepped forward and offered her right hand. She then passed me a business card confirming she was a Chartered Accountant with many letters after her name.

'Mr Robert McKelvie? Pam Wright. My cousin is Debs McInnes, from *Armitage Steven*. Ah, yes! I've got you now! I saw you once in Pollokshields, right? It's the beard thing. Yes, definitely a better look without it. Back then I took you for a footballer. You certainly look like one. But Debs said you're a nurse, right? May I have a few minutes of your time, please?'

Discounting the Internet installers from BT and the TV people from *John Lewis*, Mrs Pam Wright was the first person to enter *Redcroft* since we had closeted ourselves last December. I felt a surge of attraction, probably because she reminded me of Dr Mena but perhaps because I sensed she was about to make me an offer for *Redcroft* which might help me resolve our dilemma.

'Yes, yes. Please, come in Mrs Wright.'

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'So, it's Robin, right? I'm Pam. And just to let you know, Mr Wright is no longer part of my life. He's in Frankfurt now, at the last count.'

She sniffed and wrinkled her brow.

'You do know you have a rot problem, right?'

I waited her out. She delved in her tote bag and extracted a packet labelled 'Fugenex' detector sticks, the same brand I had used.

'Robin, I bet you a thousand pounds to a penny this place is riddled with dry rot. I can taste it in the air. Just like the place across the way. Pity I didn't find out about this one first or I could have offered a better deal. But two fires in the same area would be too much, even though my insurers are co-investors. My drone surveyor advises your grounds are almost three acres. Sadly, from the detailed drone images of your roof, I reckon *Redcroft* is probably irretrievable. Another factor is your site is awkward, quite steeply sloping which is probably why your basement areas are damp, right? The old damp proof course is almost certainly breeched, right? I may be wrong but I think your home is probably not worth saving, sorry.'

This confirmed my worst fears. But Pam Wright was already moving on:

'Anyway, I guess that living in this old house can't be much fun, right? I mean, it's single glazed with rotten, leaky window frames and high ceilings, right? I mean, it must be a complete nightmare to heat, right? And with accommodation on the three floors and a dingy unlit basement, caring alone for two semi-invalids, well, I mean, it must be a 'challenge', right?'

Not sure what to say, again I waited.

After a short pause, her face changed from stern to a small smile:

'But have no fear Robin, on the upside, with a bit of innovation, I'm sure we can make your sloping site work to our advantage. I've been thinking about this for a few weeks now and I have a suggestion to make, a two part-deal, as it were. I see from that look on your face you're interested, right?'

'Yes. Yes, please.'

'Can we find somewhere to sit together and discuss my ideas, see if we can help each other?'

'We could use the Dining Room?'

'Ideal! Let me show you what I have in mind. I'll need your Wi-Fi code, please?'

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Unfortunately, the elevator door opened and Astur wheeled out Tasha. They were heading for *Tesco* to do some shopping and give themselves an outing. When she saw Pam Wright, Astur reacted guiltily, her hands flying up to mask her face.

I tried to cover it up:

'Astur, Tasha, this is Mrs Wright, she's here to discuss some private business with me. Off you go to the shops then. But give us an hour please, OK?'

I watched the woman's face and saw her looking closely at Astur as she edged past. In that instant I knew I had failed.

When they had gone, I took Pam Wright through to the Dining Room and offered to make her tea or coffee, which she declined, preferring to drink from a flask carried in her tote bag.

'Robin, who is Astur?'

'A nursing assistant. She lives in now, helps me with my mother and sister. She's a very caring girl.'

'Robin, tell me, do you know a girl called Barbara Taylor, Babsie?'

'Only slightly. I met her once at the National Library of Scotland, I think.'

'Only slightly? Are you sure of that, Robin?'

'Yes. It was so sad. She seemed like a nice person when I met her at the library then I saw her face on an online newsfeed and read she had died in a dreadful accident. Such a shame, she was a very nice person, very helpful.'

'Did you know Babsie was friendly with Astur? That they were best friends?'

Sensing there was something else she wanted to say, I waited her out, raising my eyebrows, inviting her to continue. She kept her voice even, neutral, but her eyes glinted angrily, boring into mine. I had a sense she might strike out at me physically and realised I was seeing a different side of Pam Wright's nature.

'Babsie was my goddaughter. Her mother and father died in a car crash on Arran when Babsie was eighteen, a student here in Edinburgh, just enrolled in first year at the School of Art. That was twelve years ago. Since her loss, she has had mental health problems. There was some drug taking and a spell in rehab. But over the last five years she has been stable, settled. When the *Corner* returned a 'death by misadventure' finding which the press reported as suicide, I could not accept it. You see, Robin, Babsie was a dreamer, an enthusiast, not a quitter. Some witnesses say Babsie threw herself under the bus but others, including the lady driving the bus say my goddaughter was pushed. They claim Babsie was part of a group of three women. Two others were caught on a street camera

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walking away from the scene. The pictures are grainy. They have not yet been identified but one was dark-skinned tall and slim, the other, white, small and dumpy. I did some checking up. Babsie's neighbours say she was friendly with two coloured girls who lived in her building in Leith. When the police checked, they discovered both of those coloured girls have disappeared, The inquiry report on the incident is still open.'

'Robin, is Astur the coloured girl from the street cam, one of the two coloured girls the neighbours told me about?'

Pam's phone vibrated. She checked it then turned it off.

Dreading this question, my mind had been racing ahead and I was ready with a near truth, hoping to deflect her:

'Astur was working here when I got home from overseas. My Mum and Tasha really like her. She is a very nice person, religious, diligent, hard-working. We depend on her.'

I waited, trying to hold the gaze from Pam Wright's steely grey eyes.

'Robin, we both know that's not a straight answer. Babsie kept a diary. I have it at my home in Glasgow, should you wish to see it. It's clear from this diary that a girl called Astur was a very close friend of Babsie who depended on her for support with her mental health issues. But here's the thing, Robin, when she was hit by the bus, Babsie had a mobile phone in her hand which was crushed under the bus tyre. The Police thought it was wrecked but I took it to a techie guru I know and he was able to get it working again. There are many photographs of a girl like your Astur on that phone. Robin, I bet you a thousand pounds to a penny your Astur and Babsie's Astur is the same person, one of Mrs M's girls, right?'

Once more I waited, hoping she might let it go, give it up.

'Robin, your turn to say something, right?'

If only I could find some way to get rid of her, I would load us into the Fiat, get away before she told the Police about Astur living here and cause my world to cave in on me. If we could get clear of *Redcroft*, I would rent someplace safe and then figure out what to do next. But what would we do about medications? My hands began to tremble and suddenly I was desperate to urinate, a familiar sign of stress.

Was I heading for another breakdown?

'Robin, there is a list of outward calls on that phone of Babsie's including the one she made just before she died. I've tried to call that number many times but so far I've had no success. And guess what? That number is tagged 'Robin Dishy'. Are you that Robin? Did you know my Babsie on a more personal level? Were you involved romantically with her? Did you take advantage of her vulnerability?'

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My instinct was to deny this accusation but I could see Pam Wright was already convinced I was Babsie's Robin Dishy and so again I kept my face neutral and said nothing. The pain in my bladder was distracting me from thinking clearly. I closed my eyes, dreading what would come next.

'Right then, Robin, so, we will just sit it out together, wait and ask Astur when she returns.'

I knew I could not let that happen:

'What exactly do you want, Mrs Wright? Why can't you just leave us alone?'

'Well, Robin McKelvie, until about ten minutes ago, my intention was to make you an offer for this property. Perhaps we'll come back to that later, but first I want to help you both, you and Astur. You see, from what I read in Babsie's diary, she was involved with a woman I've known for years, a rather nasty woman called Marion Margaret Marshall and her two equally horrible daughters, Melanie and Deirdre. Ask anyone who lives in Leith and they will tell you that whole family are poison.

'You see, Robin, like Mrs M, I am originally from Leith, but I took a different path in life. Oddly, and wonderfully for Leith and Edinburgh generally, about the time of Babsie's death, all three Marshalls seem to have disappeared. Generally, in the immediate area, this is seen as a good thing, especially by the Police. I am guessing here, but did you know Mrs M operated a business called *Edinburgh Home Support Care Services Ltd*, registered at this address? And did you know that Melanie and Deirdre Marshall both worked for what used to be called *Carruthers and Crawford, Solicitors*? Yes, Robin, I see from your face what I have just said is **not** news to you.'

It seemed Pam Wright knew almost everything about me and Astur. Was she planning to steal *Redcroft* from us in exchange for her silence? I leaned forward and said:

'Mrs Wright, I have no intention of submitting to blackmail based on this complete fantasy fiction you are spinning. My only contact with Miss Barbara Taylor was at the National Library of Scotland and I don't know anything about a person called Babsie or any of the other women you've mentioned. Please, please, will you leave now and let us get on with our lives. **Please!**

'Robin, Robin. *Relax*. You have the wrong idea entirely. All I want to do is help you and especially Astur. I feel I owe her that, for Babsie's sake. My goddaughter was not perfect, but she was not a bad person. How she managed to get mixed up with the Marshalls I cannot fathom. Do you know?'

Again, I waited. So far, Pam Wright had not hinted I might be a fake, a substitute for the real Robin McKelvie. My mind was whirring, my pulse was throbbing, and I could see her eyes searching my face. I decided to try a story which I hoped would work.

Equilibrium

'OK, here's what I know, second hand. Astur said Babsie told her she met Melanie at St Andrews University where they had shared rooms. That was how she got to know the Marshalls, I suppose. And yes, I did learn from Astur she was brought to Scotland in a container. And yes, Astur is from Somalia. It seems Mrs M 'bought' her at some sort of people auction where illegals are sold into slavery, mostly as sex slaves. To make herself unattractive, she starved herself. In recent years she was a cleaner and carer for *EHSCS*, based here at *Redcroft*, looking after my Mum and sister. When Mrs M left to wherever she has gone, Astur came here hoping for sanctuary and I took her in. She was quite unwell when she first came to me, suffering from self-starvation. As you have seen, she is much better nowadays but she is still damaged mentally. Her English is poor. I could not turn her away and anyway, she is very good with my mother and sister. I've come to depend on her. She is a very sweet natured girl.'

'But she is an illegal, right?'

'Yes. It's a big worry. I'm not sure what to do about it.'

'Do you know her sister Zahra?'

'No, not really. Astur has talked about her many times since she came to live here but she's lost contact. The sister is an illegal too, of course. Astur thinks she may have gone to Blairgowrie to pick soft fruit but we don't know.'

'Did you know Zahra is also known as Sarah Stimpson?'

'No, I did not know Zahra had two names. Astur says their family name is Dualeh but that was kept secret between Astur and Zahra. It seems no one was interested in their family origins. They were kept in a form of slavery, threatened with exposure to the Police and given drugs to make them dependent.'

As I was talking, deliberately slowly, I was trying to imagine where these questions were leading and if they were designed to trip me up and uncover my true identity.

'Did you know that Zahra under the name of Sarah Stimpson is listed as a director and is the company secretary of *EHSCS Ltd* and that her address is listed at Companies House as here, at *Redcroft*?'

'No. I know almost nothing about *EHSCS*. As I explained to Mrs McInnes, when I returned from overseas, I found my mother and sister were in very poor health. The care from the nursing team was verging on negligent. I immediately dispensed with the services of *EHSCS* and took over their care myself. When Astur came to ask for refuge, she explained she had worked here and knew my mother and sister. My mother confirmed this and said Astur was a good person, very hard-working. I gave her a trial and it was soon obvious she was telling the truth. She is very good with Mum and Tasha. I have been teaching her the basics of nursing care. She is very religious, always praying and hopes

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one day to become a nun. I want to do my very best for her. As I said, Astur is a very sweet natured girl. She deserves a break.'

'So, Robin, should I assume that you are also unaware that the other directors of *EHCS* are listed as Dr Gladys Stimpson, Margaret Marshall with Melanie Marshall as the CEO? The business was founded in its present form six years ago but has since been suspended for failure to lodge annual returns. Prior to that it had been run by Mr Vincent Thomas Sanderson and his wife Mavis, nee Stimpson. You know who he is, right?'

'Yes, he used to be in charge at *Carruthers and Crawford*, my former solicitors. Why is he important?'

'Well, to be brutally honest, I'm not sure but I do know dear old Vince Sanderson is another nasty piece of work. There were lots of rumours about how he coerced Roddie Crawford's family into accepting a low price for his business. The Police did check but there was no solid evidence. It seems clear he was in league with the Marshalls. You did well to move to Debs McInnes.'

'Mrs Wright, where do you think the Marshalls have gone?'

'Who knows. Your guess would be as good as mine. Let's just hope they never come back, right? As I said, they are poison.'

'I heard Dr Stimpson has moved to Dumfries?'

'Yes. By all accounts she did. However, the most recent grapevine tittle-tattle suggests she died of a morphine overdose, self-administered, suicide. Let's hope it is true but you must realise that Gladys is devious and this might just be another smokescreen. Nothing would surprise me where Gladys is concerned. Although she was bright enough, she was most definitely deranged. Certifiable. You see, Gladys, Marion and I were in the same class at school. Marion was always top of the class. She could have turned out differently.'

'Do you think this man Sanderson is looking for Mrs Marshall and her daughters?'

'Probably. I don't think he's the type who likes loose ends. He has a nickname: 'Vince the Vindictive'. If he finds out Astur is here, he may well come after her just in case she tells someone what she knows about Mrs M and her girls. In my opinion this puts you and your family in great danger and I strongly recommend you take this opportunity to move out of his patch. I have a very nice place just finishing in Pollokshields. It might need a bit of adaptation but we could discuss that, if it's of interest you. It would be a good move, I think, for your own sake as well as for Astur. I have photographs here on my iPad. Would you like to see them?'

'No, not yet, thanks. You said you wanted to help Astur. When Zahra became Sarah Stimpson, did that mean she was no longer an illegal?'

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'Yes, sort of. Debs has a chap who works for her who is good at that sort of online snooping. He says there is a 'Sarah Stimpson' of the right age registered with the *Stimpson Medical Practice* from around seven years ago, living at an address in Leith, in the same property as Babsie. We are almost certain Sarah is Zahra. Being a GP, Gladys Stimpson would have good access to medical records. We think she could have used the record of a dead child to 'create' a daughter. However, Deb's snooper did not find a matching 'Sarah Stimpson' on the electoral roll. Although HMRC may have a lead on her through her National Insurance number, they probably believe she lives here at *Redcroft*. Unsurprisingly, Sarah aka Zahra has never paid any tax or filed a return. Debs thinks they were setting up this fictitious person to take the blame. It's the sort of thing fly-by-night companies use to get local authority approval to operate. It must have worked as they seem to have got away with it for six years. My guess is Zahra knew nothing about their rouse and, now they have all disappeared, it's quite possible the whole issue will just wither away. HMRC are understaffed and have no incentive to start witch hunts. However, if they did decide to investigate *EHSCS* this would lead them here to *Redcroft* through Companies' House, another good reason why you should move, right? When they get fired up, the Inland Revenue hit squad are often aggressive, using the Police to serve search warrants and force entry, often with the media tipped off to record everything.'

'But could we do this for Astur, get her a 'real identity'? It worries me she could be caught at any time which would involve me and my family.'

'I'll speak to Debs. I'm sure we can find a way to get her into the NHS system so long as we don't rock the boat with social services. If we get her registered, would you be willing to marry her? It would be a 'marriage of convenience' of course but she is a beautiful girl.'

'Well, I should explain, all the sex slave girls were subjected to FMG and sterilised to prove they were virgins and prevent them having babies. Then they were given drugs to make them obedient, dependent. Astur insists she has never had any interest in sex, not even before she was 'cut'. She says she has always wanted to become a nun, even before she was stolen from her home in Somalia. Do you think we could get her into the system so that she is no longer an illegal? Could we arrange that, do you think? Then she might be able to become a nun.'

'Ah! Right! OK, if Astur is certain she has a vocation, do you think she would be willing to serve overseas, maybe Italy? I have a friend, a Monsignor in charge of recruiting for people to work in Catholic missions. He is always desperate to recruit new helpers to his cause and I know he has a refugee reception centre in Bari which cares for boat people coming from North Africa. Do you think this might suit her, perhaps as a nursing assistant?'

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'Yes, Astur is already competent for that sort of work. Is there a website for this mission where I can check it out, see what qualifications they need?'

'Robin, leave it with me, right? Look, here's the weblink for the Bari mission. What's your email address and I'll ping it to you, OK?'

'Best you send it to Phoebe, please. I try to keep a low profile since my return. Too many people out there I don't want to re-connect with. We do everything in Mum's name.'

'Yes, I see. Of course. Not a bad approach given Vince might have one of his minions snooping around the Internet. There we are, done! I'll phone Giuseppe tonight. If Debs and her man can get her into the NHS system and make her legal, perhaps we can get Astur onto a nursing assistant course at a local college. At this time of year, these courses will be starting again, I imagine. But Robin, look, this idea will only fly if you can get her up to speed on English, right? She's got to be reasonably fluent to get through the interview. And you may have to pay her fees, right?'

'Ah! Yes. OK. On the money side, I've been keeping a note and she has around £3,000 owing to her. And I have a confession. Earlier, when I said her English was poor well, that's not true, sorry. We've been working hard together for months and she has made rapid progress. Her spoken English is clear and her vocabulary is quite amazing. She reads all the time, on her Kindle and her Bible. And she can count fairly well too, enough to go shopping to *Tesco* with Tasha. Although her writing is slow, it's clear and legible. And she has basic keyboard skills. Astur is a perfect student, actually. She says Jesus helps her but mainly it's down to her cleverness and her diligence.'

'OK, Yes, so Astur is a viable prospect as a nun serving her Lord as a nurse attendant. Good. So, Robin, first things first, right? Let's get a deal done on this house and get you hidden away in Pollokshields well away from Vince Sanderson's patch, right? All these thugs are territorial.'

'Yes, I realise now I have probably been too lax, allowing Astur to move around the Morningside area alone but until you told me about Vince Sanderson, I thought we were safe. I'll keep her indoors from now on, just as we were in the first weeks.'

'Robin, look, I suggest you don't tell Astur what we are planning, not just yet anyway. We don't want to raise her hopes unless it really is possible.'

'Yes, you're right, as I said, she's still a bit fragile, mentally.'

'Good man. So, Robin McKelvie, Debs said you have Power of Attorney for Phoebe McKelvie and that you are Tasha Jalbani's Legal Guardian. Are we ready to do business, get you away from *Redcroft* as soon as?'

She held out her hand and this time I was able to look at her directly, eyes to eyes.

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Like Dr Mena, I sensed Pam Wright was a person I could trust.

'Good man. Now, timescale. I think we should aim to get you moved within two weeks maximum, maybe sooner. Naughty of me, perhaps, but I've already got the drawings in at Edinburgh Building Control. I've spoken to the Planning guys to make sure they are onside with me and Debs has the applications and other bumf in the 'churn', as we call it.'

Her iPad found the website and she scrolled through the images of a very nice blonde stone-built development like the one where I had seen the girl who might have been Rebecca with the Ranger's footballer on my rambles around Pollokshields many months earlier.

'Here we are, Robin, what do you think of this place. It's got four en suite bedrooms three public rooms and a massive, wheelchair-friendly open-plan kitchen leading onto a south-facing deck with landscaped gardens. It's one of fifteen luxury-living in later life units inside a discrete security screen all sharing a common concierge and cared for by my dedicated gardening and servicing team. I'll let you have it for the 'offers over' price of £700,000. On the open market I'd get north of eight. And I'll give you £800,000 cash as a balance. Not a fortune, not with your responsibilities, but it should give you a bit of headroom. And I have a proposal for you. Do you fancy running a care home business? A legitimate one. We could go into business together. I've checked you out. You had a ropey time in your teens but, hey, didn't we all?'

Pam sent me the link to the website for the Pollokshields development and we shook hands on the deal and then went online to fix an appointment to meet at *Armitage Steven* on Friday at noon, to view the papers and sign the deal.

From the front parlour, I watched her sit in her car and make several phone calls then put on a bright pink boilersuit, work boots, a safety helmet and safety glasses then make her way across the park to the building site opposite.

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Turmoil

When Astur returned she was worried. I explained a shortened version of what Pam Wright and I had discussed and then she calmed down. I had expected more enthusiasm and questions, but she seemed subdued, perhaps overawed by the proposed move to Glasgow. That evening she went to her bedroom directly after we had bedded Phoebe and Tasha, saying she wanted to pray and ask Jesus to guide her.

I had also explained we might be in danger and had to move quickly to escape from the bad people who were trying to find the Marshalls and Zahra and from the Government tax people because *Redcroft* had been used to register *The Carers* for tax purposes and because money was owing for unpaid tax. Astur seemed more worried about the Government coming to search *Redcroft*.

Over the next few days, Astur was withdrawn, not her usual happy, cheerful self. Looking back, I realise now my explanations must have spooked her. Foolishly, I had also told her about the mission in Bari and that we hoped to get her on a nursing course.

When she heard this news, she began to cry then ran to her room and returned with a new mobile phone she had bought at *Tesco*:

'Robbie, I say them this phone is for Tasha. I buy pay to go SIM only. I want get App for Alpha Bible Course for free. I hope you no big angry at me. I pay back you sometime, OK?'

'Astur, Astur, no, no, I'm not angry, just worried for you. But now you are to start your new life soon, having your own phone we can keep in touch. But please let me teach you how to use it and how to keep yourself safe online.'

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On Wednesday morning I received an email from Debs McInnes with six attachments.

Four were official government documents in the name of 'Mary Denholm' which had been completed and only required signatures from Astur to make them official after which they would be lodged in the system by *Armitage Steven* to establish her new identity.

The fifth document was an offer of a place at a residential nursing course in a seaside town in Yorkshire called Scarborough. It was run by an organisation called *Christ's Helpers* under the auspices of *The Catholic Medical Missionary Society*.

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The final document was a detailed proforma letter of enrolment to the 'Sisters of Succour' explaining every aspect of the commitment required by an applicant with a final section already completed and signed by Monsignor Giuseppe Di Paulo beside a space to be signed by Mary Denholm.

The covering email asked Mary to come to the offices of *Armitage Steven* at 6:00 pm on Thursday evening to meet Monsignor Di Paulo to sign the master copies of the set of documents in his presence for witnessing and 'sealing' by Mrs Deborah McInnes.

I printed copies of these documents and that evening, after Phoebe and Tasha were settled for the night, Astur and I sat at the dining room table and we read them together, line by line, sitting side by side. I answered her questions and offered the reassurance if this plan did not work out, she could return, that she could always count on me. From time to time we stopped while she prayed. Eventually, she took these papers to her room and I did not see her until the next morning.

On Thursday morning, when she appeared at seven o'clock, the time when we usually met to have a light breakfast before starting our round of morning tasks, she was transformed, radiant.

Zahra had appeared to her in a vision, forgiving her and thanking her because she was now in Heaven with all the others from their village in Somalia. After Zahra left, Jesus and Mary the Holy Mother had also appeared telling her to sign the papers from Monsignor Di Paulo, saying she must not worry about me or Phoebe or Tasha because the Holy Spirit had us in His care.

Immediately after lunch, she asked if she could leave early and go to the church where she and Babsie had gone to Mass. She wanted to say goodbye to the local priest and a few old ladies she knew. On her new mobile phone, she had the address, postcode and telephone number of *Armitage Steven* and I showed her how to use *Google Maps*, adding my telephone number in case she needed help.

She hugged me, kissed my cheek then went off on foot, smiling and singing softly under her breath.

After she left, I received a further batch of documents from Debs McInnes formalising the verbal agreement I had made with Pam Wright. The email suggested I should attend the meeting at *Armitage Steven* to support Astur and, later, to sign hardcopies of the attached documentation to complete the sale of *Redcroft* and initiate my purchase of the Pollokshields property.

To leave me free to attend, I re-schedule Phoebe and Tasha's day to ensure they were medicated and bedded down for the night by four o'clock.

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Arriving at *Armitage Steven*, I was met by an odd-looking woman who introduced herself as Henrietta, Mrs McInnes's personal assistant. She led me up two flights of stairs to the conference room where Debs McInnes introduced me to Monsignor Di Paulo. While we were waiting on Astur, we chatted about the forthcoming Festival and how busy Edinburgh would become. Henrietta brought coffee and biscuits.

From just after six I had tried calling Astur every ten minutes but chose not to leave voice messages. My instinct was that she had taken cold feet and had returned to *Redcroft*. While waiting, I signed the papers Debs presented, saying she would send me facsimiles to Phoebe's email address as per agreed protocol.

At seven o'clock, I apologised, shook hands, said I would be in touch when I had found 'Mary' and caught a taxi from Rutland Square to Morningside.

As I was leaving, Debs reminded me that we were due to meet the next evening, Friday, to complete and sign off on the final details and costs for the adaptations at Pollokshields to make it suitable for Pheobe and Tasha regarding wheelchair access and showering and general accessibility:

'Robin, five o'clock, here. And *please* don't be late. Henrietta and I have tickets for a piano recital which starts at seven.'

During the taxi ride, a feeling of panic took hold of me: my hands were shaking, there was a cold sweat on my brow and my heart was thudding and I desperately needed to pee.

Standing by the garage, I emptied my bladder while forcing myself to go through my calming routine, the one Dr Mena had taught me, taking deep breaths to flood my system with oxygen and fully exhaling to purge my lungs of stale air.

Energised, I slipped in the back door. All the lights were on. The remains of Prince were on the floor of the hallway leading to the kitchen. His head had been severed and was missing, his torso sliced open to reveal his innards.

I saw at once what must have happened. Somehow, they had snagged Astur, taken her hostage, tortured her and made her bring them here. A surge of rage coursed through my body, flooding my system with adrenaline.

My second instinct was to flee but I knew I could not. I must do whatever I could to protect my new family. Should I die trying I would do so with honour.

I ducked into the kitchen and took two knives, a small one which I tucked into my trouser belt out of sight behind me, and a larger one which I held in my left hand, my weaker hand. I then found a kebab spike, wrapped it in a kitchen cloth and slipped it inside my right sock hidden under my trouser leg, the point downwards.

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I switched off the lights to give me an advantage should I need it. I knew every part of this house intimately.

Knife fighting was the way most disputes were settled in the camp, the winner being the man who was first to draw blood.

There were no other rules and two or more knives or blades were often used.

I then ran upstairs, calling ahead to Astur, making sure the person or persons knew I was coming. Outside the Dining Room, standing by the open door, there was a squat, well-built man dressed in a chauffeur's suit and cap. In his left hand, he held a huge pistol. Its silencer was pointing at my stomach, the centre of my body mass. His right arm was shorter, hanging loosely by his side, its withered hand holding a vaping tank.

'So, yer here at last, prick. Drop the knife and get your erse in there. And nae heroics or Ah'll drill you through the heed.'

Stooping from my knees, I lowered the knife to the carpet and entered the room.

Sitting at the far end, at the head of the table was a man with silver hair and sun-bronzed skin, tapping lightly on the tabletop with a gold-plated cigarette lighter held in his right-hand.

To his right was a hard-faced woman, with painted-on eyebrows and false eyelashes. The resemblance to Mrs M was uncanny although this woman was older by at least a decade, if not more. She laid down her *iPhone* and took an extra-long hand-rolled cigarette from a silver case. I suspected it was a reefer.

The man lit it for her with his gold-plated cigarette lighter. He used his right hand. He then stood the lighter on end, facing it towards me, displaying the letter 'V' encrusted with diamonds. Beside it, to his left, there was a second cigarette case, also gold-plated and to the left of the cigarette case there was a second pistol, a smaller pocket-sized model, unsilenced. It was not clear if the safety was 'on' or 'off'.

Everything about him suggested he was right-handed.

I moved to stand across the table from him, slightly to his left, remaining silent, waiting him out, judging the distance between his right hand and his pistol trying to decide if I could throw myself across the table, grab his pistol, take cover under the table and shoot at the chauffeur's knees.

Vincent Sanderson cleared his throat and spoke with the gravelly rasp of a heavy smoker:

'Well, McKelvie, where's my fucking pen drive?'

I said nothing, waiting him out, hoping he would light up a cigarette to give me more time.

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The blow to the side of my head caught me by surprise and I stumbled forwards, slightly disoriented. As the squat man came after me, holding his weapon like a hammer, I turned to face him, dropping to my knees in a bunny hop position. He held the pistol high, butt end showing and started to bring it down on my head. I lifted my left arm to fend off the blow and reached forward with the short knife, slashing with full force at his right groin, aiming at his femoral artery. As he screamed, I pushed up from my knees and smashed into his face with my forehead, feeling his nose crunch and splinter. As he fell backwards, twisting away from me. I snatched the barrel of his gun and brought it down hard on the back of his head.

In my peripheral vision I saw Sanderson reach for his pistol and launched myself across the table at him, swinging the silenced pistol backhand at his head, catching him on his chin. The crack of the impact told me I had connected with his jawbone.

The woman pushed back in her chair and half-standing reached across for the pistol. As she raised it, I fired first, catching her in the throat. She staggered backwards and tripped, dead before she hit the floor.

I turned to the silver-haired man. His eyes were open, but the life was fading from them fast. I checked. His pulse was weak, failing. I held my finger on the artery until the pulse stopped.

The squat man was also dead, from brain trauma and loss of blood.

Armed with both guns and my small knife tucked again behind my back, I crept upstairs. I checked first on Phoebe and Tasha. Although their rooms had been ransacked and their duvets and pillows shredded, they were otherwise unmolested, still both asleep, breathing normally, their pulse and blood pressure readings normal.

With the small pistol tucked into my belt behind me, and the larger silenced weapon at the ready, I set off to look for Astur.

Over the next hour I moved quietly from room to room, finding a trail of devastation. Incredibly, although the books had been trashed, the firesafe had remained undetected behind the removable lower bookcase. I checked: everything inside was at it should be, including my laptop, the Maxim 9 and spare ammunition.

For the next two hours I continued searching, checking in every room, every cupboard every dark corner. When I was certain sure I was alone in the house, I moved back to the Dining Room and checked the three bodies, emptying the woman's handbag and heaping the contents of their pockets onto the table, removing the batteries and SIM cards from their mobile phones. Then, as an afterthought, I reinserted the SIM and battery into Mavis Sanderson's *iPhone* and checked her list of contacts, trying to find

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out who she had been phoning when I entered the Dining Room. It seemed most of her calls and messages were made using an App called *Linkedin*, not *Facebook* or *WhatsApp*.

From their credit cards I discovered I had killed Mr Vincent T Sanderson, Mrs Helen M Sanderson and Mr Ralph Rayburn. In Rayburn's suit jacket I found a car key with a Mercedes key fob. I tipped everything into my rucksack for checking later. The priority was to dispose of their bodies. I checked my watch, just after half past ten. I looked outside and it was overcast, dark and gloomy.

I found the silver Mercedes 500 SEL saloon parked in a nearby street, easily spotted by its personalised number plate. When I pressed the key fob, its lights blipped to show the alarm had unset. At *Redcroft*, I parked outside the rear door.

The rain, which had threatened all day, started in earnest.

When I opened the boot to check how many bodies I might get into it, I made the gruesome discovery which hit me like a blow in the solar plexus. Inside a transparent plastic bag was the severed head of Astur Dualeh. Her face had been punched to a bloody pulp. From what I could make out, I judged she was probably dead before she had been decapitated.

(Months later I would read that the decayed headless body of a tall African girl had been washed up on Portobello beach.)

I sealed the three corpses into blue *EHSCS* bags with duct tape. At the derelict farm I heaved them into the mineshaft. Finally, with great reluctance and tears streaming, I dropped the plastic bag containing Astur's head into the dark shaft then closed and locked the door.

Standing in the teeming rain with tears in my eyes, the embryo of an idea implanted itself. Sitting in the car, I used my *iPhone* to capture the *GPS* coordinates of the mineshaft at *Holmcroft*.

In the dark car park of a disused cash-and-carry warehouse near Dalkeith, I torched the Mercedes then walked seven miles to Morningside, glad of the heavy rain which concealed my tears of guilt and regret, trying to shut out the images flashing across my mind and the screams of pain from the heartless beating inflicted by the sadistic monsters who had murdered my best friend to get at me.

I was aware I was operating in a semi-trance, my mind struggling to adjust to the loss of my soulmate. But I also knew the danger had not yet passed. I had to keep functioning, keep going to ensure we escaped from *Redcroft*, away from the danger of others who may be party to the knowledge the Sandersons had beaten out of Astur.

As I walked my idea began to take shape.

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Perhaps the best form of defence was attack?

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First Strike

It was almost two-thirty when I re-entered *Redcroft*.

Phoebe and Tasha were still asleep. I did a quick tidy up of their rooms replacing the damaged duvets and pillows, vacuuming the mess of feathers then checking their stats before tucking them in again. Finally, I dimmed the lighting and checked their cameras were linked to my iPad.

Sitting at the Kitchen table with a pot of black coffee, I fired up my laptop and pulled up the files copied from Deirdre's pen drive months earlier. I began by putting the GPS coordinates from my *iPhone* into the Ordnance Survey database.

The farm with the mineshaft came up as *Holmcroft*, confirming what I already knew. I copied the Ordnance Survey hyperlink to my new spreadsheet adding:

SITE OF MASS GRAVE IN MINESHAFT. POSSIBLY SEVERAL HUNDRED BODIES.

Moving on to complete my new spreadsheet I copied the names from Deirdre Marshall's pen drive list into *Google* one at a time. As I added each new name, the search engine returned dozens of threads but none linking anyone from the list to each other or to the Marshalls or Sandersons. Most of these names from Dee's list used initials rather than full forenames but when I felt sure I had found the right person, I saw the pattern emerge. All but three of the names on my new list were female with one of those three males being V T Sanderson.

As I progressed down the list of Deirdre's names, I was surprised almost everyone was involved in the legal profession: QCs, Barristers, Solicitors and para-legals. A few were MSPs. Others were high ranking officials in the Scottish Government Executive, the civil servants who advised and 'controlled' the politicians. Almost everyone was Edinburgh based, with only a few from Fife, East Lothian, and a few older people living in Peebles, Melrose and other Border towns, retirees, consultants, hobbyists.

Of the total of one hundred and thirty-three names I was able to verify and transfer from Deirdre's list, none was from Glasgow or the West of Scotland, appearing to confirm what Pam Wright had hinted at - that Vincent Sanderson was an Edinburgh-based kingpin.

Until I entered the last name from Deirdre's list, I could see no evident link between these individuals, but when I asked *Google* for information on Freya Sommerville, it returned a hyperlink to Sommerville's *Linkedin* profile, a response which reminded me I had seen this App on Mavis Sanderson's phone.

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From *Linkedin*, I learned that Ms Sommerville was a QC who specialised in property disputes and that she was supported by a small team operating remotely from an office in Dumfries while she lived in North Berwick. There was other information about her 'good works' helping displaced families, overseas aid agencies and that she was involved with a charity creating affordable temporary accommodation for incoming refugees. This mention of accommodation for refugees reminded me of Astur's story of being able to see the sea from the second house and the connection with Dumfries reminded me of Gladys Stimpson.

Taken together, I sensed there was a thread which needed to be tugged.

I decided to risk an experiment.

To create a cut-out, I first opened a *Google* email account for Melanie Marshall giving her address as *Holmcroft* farm. Using this email account, I created a derivative address for a fictional person called Hilary.Pierce@gmail.com which I used to join *Linkedin*. To create a credible profile for Hilary, I blagged a photograph from a French web dating agency then, modelling this fictitious woman on Pam Wright, I created a story portraying Hilary as a property developer supposedly active in the Liverpool and Manchester areas.

Hilary then asked to be 'linked-in' to Freya Summerville. Not surprisingly, since it was the middle of the night, there was no immediate response from Ms Sommerville.

However, within a few minutes, Hilary was being 'linked-in' automatically with many of the other names from Deirdre's list.

By re-booting Mavis's *iPhone*, I double checked and now saw that many of her *Linkedin* contacts matched Deirdre's list. Remembering the Swastika tattoos I had found on the corpses of the Marshalls and Zahra, I wondered if I would have found similar tattoos on Mavis and Vincent had I taken time to check.

I had read a little about witches' covens and wondered if I had stumbled upon a network of depraved individuals who manipulated, exploited and abused a circle of refugee girls supplied and controlled by the Marshalls and Sandersons with the help of Gladys Stimpson.

I checked and cross-checked my list many times over, eventually reducing it to one-hundred and twenty-seven names that appeared consistently in the data I had garnered.

To this list I added the names Vincent Thomas Sanderson, Helen Mavis Sanderson and Ralph Rayburn. As an afterthought, I added the details of their credit cards and mobile telephone numbers and Mavis's *Linkedin* address and profile.

I knew that proving this theory of corruption and mass murder to bring these people to justice was a job for the authorities. If they took my plea seriously and checked out the

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mineshaft at *Holmcroft*, I suspected they might shy away from exposing their discovery to the media, fearing the publicity would reveal them as incompetent in having allowed it in the first place. However, that would hang on their consciences, not mine.

Wearing my hoodie jacket and disposable latex gloves, I walked through the light rain to the 24-hour *Tesco* in Cramond Road where I bought four A5 padded envelopes, four pen drives, a pack of computer address labels and a booklet of first-class stamps.

Back at *Redcroft*, I made copies of my listings onto these pen drives leaving them unprotected, readable to anyone with an EXCEL program app. I also printed out PDF copies of the list.

Before sealing the four envelopes, I created a simple unsigned letter and pinned it to the printed copies of the list of the evil cabal:

It is your duty to investigate these people. They are involved with drugs, prostitution and people smuggling.

They have murdered and disposed of the bodies of those who have opposed them.

If you do not act, I will send copies of this letter and pen drive to every major UK newspaper and to the BBC Newsnight team.

I will be watching you.

Using *Google*, I looked up the names and addresses for the serious crime squads in Scotland, Manchester, Liverpool and for New Scotland Yard in London and printed labels for the envelopes.

I made a further trip to the post box at Cramond. Standing in the downpour with tears streaming down my face, I whispered to Astur:

'I hope your God really has taken you to be with Zahra and your all your family and friends from Somalia and that you will ask Him to watch over me and my family and keep us safe.'

I posted the four envelopes, adding:

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'I am sorry I cannot do more for you. Goodbye, my dear, dear friend.'

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In the Dining Room at Redcroft I took time to examine the personal items I had confiscated from the Sandersons and Rayburn. When I re-activated Mavis Sanderson's mobile phone again and scrolled through her contacts, I was stunned to find a telephone listing for 'Professor Philomena Shearer'. The listing was a mobile number only, no address or other profile details.

Why? Why? Why?

I stared at it for a long time, remembering the face of Dr Mena who had cuddled me and encouraged me into her bed when the bad dreams came. It was inconceivable that she was connected in any way to the evil perpetrated by the Sandersons and Marshalls.

Deciding this particular link with Mavis Sanderson was random, I copied Dr Mena's contact number into my *iPhone* under a false name.

When I was sure I had checked all the other details, I trashed all three phones with the smaller pistol and chopped up the SIMs and bank cards, sliced open the empty wallets and the purse then scissored them into tiny pieces before dividing my pile of trash randomly between six plastic *Tesco* bags.

I emptied the remaining ammunition from the two pistols then, at the workbench vice in the garage, I smashed at the weapons with a heavy hammer to bend the muzzles and distress the triggers.

With my mind still spinning from my discovery of Dr Mena's telephone number, I walked through the new downpour, heading first to the Royal Mile, dropping my *Tesco* bags into a series of rubbish bins. In the Old Town I removed my final *Tesco* bag from my rucksack and dropped it into a skip, disposing of the disabled weapons, ammunition, cigarettes cases, Vince's lighter and Ralph's vaping device. At the next rubbish bin, I removed my latex gloves and rubbed life back into my frozen, trembling hands.

The rain began to ease. The traffic was picking up and with the number of buses increasing, Edinburgh was coming back to life after a long, wet night.

As my adrenaline levels decreased, my arms and legs felt leaden making me realise I was probably dehydrated and on the edge of hypothermia.

Forcing myself to pick up pace, I set off home to clean up the Dining Room, knowing I would have to remove and dispose of the rug soaked with Ralph's blood. I would wrap it in plastic bags and use the Fiat to take it to the municipal waste depot for disposal.

Equilibrium

Finding Dr Mena's number in Mavis Sanderson's mobile phone was dominating my thoughts. By the time I reached *Redcroft*, the best explanation I could come up with was that Mavis Sanderson had been a patient of Dr Mena.

Perhaps treatment for a gynaecological issue?

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Back at *Redcroft*, I took a long, hot shower and changed into fresh clothes, putting everything I had been wearing into the washing machine. After a quick breakfast of muesli and yogurt and a sprinkling of blueberries washed down with several glasses of orange juice, I did a quick, silent check to discover both my patients were mumbling, nearly awake.

Using my lantern, I checked both rooms and saw that my first effort at cleaning had been inadequate, rushed. I needed to be sure I had properly cleared up the mess. Taking a handful of blue bags from the basement cupboard and wearing my head torch, I set about picking up every bit of debris by hand, hoping that my patients would not notice the effect of the destructive search which had happened while they slept.

With the blue bags in the basement, I roused Phoebe and Tasha, cleaned them up, then fed and medicated them to prepare them for the bad news to come.

I explained Astur had left us to become a nun. After a short conversation, we all agreed that this is what she had always wanted to do. I promised Tasha I would ask Astur to send us pictures of herself dressed in her nun's outfit, like Julie Andrews in the *Sound of Music*.

I also revealed the bad news that Prince had been run over by a car and that I had buried him in the garden. Tasha asked if we could plant a tree beside his grave because he loved climbing trees.

In the front lounge we watched the video of *A Big Fat Greek Wedding*, our fourth viewing.

Before settling them again, I changed their pads and topped-up their medications, again re-setting their body clocks from day to night as I knew I would need to leave them sleeping during the remainder of the day ahead.

My worry was that the Sandersons might have shared with others the information they had about me from Astur. I also wanted to distance myself from the place which held so many memories of my time sharing with her. To survive without another breakdown, I needed to move on, to look to the future. With growing certainty, I convinced myself Pam Wright was the key to our safety. I was determined to move us from *Redcroft* as soon as possible and to put this into effect, I must meet Debs McInnes at five o'clock at her office, to sign the papers. But first I needed to rest, to recuperate.

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Feeling shivery, I showered again then collapsed into bed, checking their cameras from my *iPad* to be sure they were asleep.

My bedside clock showed 13:33.

Each time I closed my eyes, images flashed across my mind of Astur's suffering.

Had the Sandersons had people watching for her in the Leith area?

Perhaps someone had seen her enter the church.

My imagination raced from scene to scene. I saw her being cornered, hooded, bundled into a van and taken to a lock-up where she was beaten to get the information from her about what had happened at *Redcroft*.

My shivering increased making my whole body vibrate uncontrollably.

I thought at first it was another PTSD attack but when I started to sweat and sneeze, I realised I had caught a cold.

At 14:24 I gave up on the idea of sleep, rose and dressed in my oldest clothes and began cleaning and tidying, working from room to room to remove all traces of the damage and mess caused by the Sandersons.

By late afternoon, the entire house had been 'sterilised' to the best of my ability. I had filled a total of six blue plastic bin bags with rubbish to go to the municipal depot, stacking them at the rear door beside the rug from the Dining Room. This was a priority task for tomorrow, using the Fiat.

My final act was to pack Astur's nicest clothes and shoes into a large battered suitcase from the attic. I placed her few personal items and her Bible and rosary on top, closed the lid, locked it, tied the key to the handle and put the suitcase in the cupboard near the backdoor for dropping off at a charity shop later. Sobbing, feeling jittery and slightly disoriented, my eyes were streaming again, facing the reality that I would need to cope alone, somehow.

I shredded her *EHSCS* uniforms and put the shreds with her older clothes and shoes into another blue bag which I added to my pile.

I roused my patients and went through my routine, working as quickly as I could, ignoring Phoebe's repeated demands to know where Astur was. Tasha said I should find Prince for her. I fobbed them off and, exasperated and running out of time, I medicated them to be sure they would sleep while I was away.

Showered and changed I walked through the warm misty rain to my local *Tesco's* main entrance and asked a waiting cab driver to take me to Rutland Square.

Equilibrium

Abyss

I made the five o'clock meeting at Armitage Steven with only minutes to spare. My cold was now full blown and I was light-headed due to lack of sleep. I realised too late I should have called off but the idea of getting away from *Redcroft* at the earliest opportunity had become a driving obsession.

I was met in reception by Henrietta, the same odd-looking lady as the previous evening.

'Oh, hello again, Mr McKelvie. Oh, dearie me, please forgive me for saying this but you look dreadful, absolutely dreadful. Surely you should not be out in this horrible, horrible weather? Did your friend Mary ever turn up?'

'Eh, no. No, not yet.'

'Such a pity. Never mind, I'll keep her file safe and sound and when she does show up we can re-arrange a further meeting, although I think Monsignor Di Paulo will be hard to pin down. From what I understand, he seems to be on the move almost constantly. Such a fine man. A saint, really. Now, you know the way up, don't you? Mrs McInnes and Mrs Wright are already up in the conference room. You go ahead and . . ."

I felt myself staggering as I tried to walk to the stairs. The floor came up to meet me and I dropped into a black hole.

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When I came around I was in hospital, connected to a saline drip and wired up to a monitor. Sitting across the room by the window was Pam Wright. She had been using her *iPad* but when she noticed me struggling to sit up, she looked up and smiled:

'Well, Robin, good to have you back.'

'Phoebe, Tasha. I need to get back to . . .'

'**No, Robin.** Take it easy. They're fine, safe and well. Dr Ahuja has been excellent. Between us, we moved your mother and sister to a care home which he has an interest in. **You** are our priority for the moment.'

'What happened to me?'

'You've been out for a week. Double pneumonia, among other things. What happened to your collarbone? It's cracked in three places. And you have a hellish lump on the side of your head.'

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'Oh that. Eh, eh? Oh yes, it must have happened when I fell off a ladder changing a light bulb?'

'Really?'

She crossed the room, leaned forward and lowered her voice:

'When I went to *Redcroft* after you were admitted, I had expected to find 'Mary' there. I searched the whole house from top to bottom but there is no sign of her.'

'No, in the end she decided to go to Blairgowrie. She has a friend working there in a hotel who got her a job as a housemaid, no questions asked. She phoned me to explain. The idea of going to Italy did not appeal. I think she only agreed to come to the meeting to sign the papers to please me but I think she was scared by the whole idea meeting people in a solicitor's office. Maybe she thought it was some sort of trap.'

'Blairgowrie? Really? What a pity she forgot to take her suitcase. And very strange that she should leave her Bible and rosary, seeing as she is so religious.'

'Where am I, please?'

'You're in the Nuffield Hospital, you know, the one near *Redcroft*. This is day eight since you passed out. You had a very high temperature. Delirious, talking all sorts of gibberish. It was as if you were in some sort of gangster movie with dead bodies all over the place and you had to dispose of them. It was so weird it was almost hilarious but not quite. There was too much fine detail in your ramblings to make it total fantasy, if you get my drift.'

She saw the fear in my eyes.

'**Oh My God!** So, I'm right, am I? It wasn't a nightmare, Robin, was it?'

'Yes, yes, it must have been.'

She glanced behind her to make sure the door was closed.

'Robin, please. You can trust me. Cross my heart. They attacked you, didn't they. That head wound and your collar bone. Was it Vince Sanderson?'

'No. No. It was a nightmare. Nothing happened.'

'Did they kill Astur?'

The tears came and with them deep sobbing cries of anguish spilled out.

Pam Wright moved from her chair, sat on the bed and hugged me, pressed my head into her bosom, whispering in my ear.

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'There, there, Robin, that's it, let it all come out. You're safe here with me now, promise. You must trust me. You can tell me everything and I promise you I'll keep it secret. That's it, let it all out, Robin. If you bottle it up, it will drive you mad. I know what I'm talking about. My brother committed suicide because he could not live with the reality that after his knee surgery he was no longer a superstar footballer. I tried to help but he was too proud, too macho to admit he needed help. That's when I joined the Samaritans.'

I realised I was in deep trouble. I had let my guard down and Pam Wright had seen through me. It was clear she needed an explanation which would satisfy her. I began slowly as the tale formed in my mind. I eased myself away from her, lay back in my bed and set my face to 'honest'.

'I don't know how they got hold of Astur but I know they beat her up to try to find out where I was. I think they were looking for a computer file or a laptop or maybe a phone, I think they thought I had found it and was hiding it in the house. Astur told me that Mrs M had used the Dining Room at Redcroft as her office, which tallies with what you told me about the records at Companies' House. That night, when Astur did not come to meet your friend the Monsignor, I had a bad feeling. She had *promised* me she would come. When I got home, they were already inside. I was attacked by a man with a gun. He hit me on the head and shoulder with the butt of the gun and I fell to the floor stunned. When I tried to get up, I grabbed at his legs. He was high on drugs, screaming at me, shouting, "where is it, the file, where is it?" During the struggle his gun went off and he shot Vince Sanderson. Vince's wife went mad and grabbed the other gun that was lying on the table and they both shot at each other at the same time. The noise was incredible but then suddenly it was so quiet. I checked they were dead then panicked and ran upstairs to check on Mum and Tasha. Then I ran around for ages, checking every room, trying to find where they had put Astur. But she was not there. When I had calmed down, I knew if I called the Police I would get the blame. If anything came out about Astur, they would keep at it until they stitched me up. You see how they do it on television and in films. Police always need to 'solve' every crime, don't they? That's why I decided to dispose of them. Astur had told me of a place where there is an old mine shaft, very deep. I found Vince Sanderson's Mercedes and when I opened the boot, I found Astur's severed head in a plastic bag. They had battered her face into a pulp before they decapitated her. Finding her head made me realise how bad these people were and that made it easier to do what I was planning, if that makes any sense to you. Anyway, I did it. I took the three of them and dropped them into the mine shaft. Then I set fire to Vince Sanderson's Mercedes to get rid of any evidence that I had been involved. Then I walked through the downpour from Dalkeith all the way back to Redcroft. The rain was icy, with hail and sleet in it. I was hypothermic when I got home. I think that's how I must have caught the chest infection. Or could it have been from the dry rot spores at

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Redcroft, do you think? After you told me about them, I was desperate to get us out of there.'

'**My God, Robin!** Astur is dead? Really? The poor, poor girl. I told you the Sandersons were animals. **Thank God** they are gone for good, they deserved to die, all three of them. At least you survived. But how did you manage to lift them into the car with your collar bone so badly damaged?'

'I don't know. My collarbone didn't seem that bad at the time. Only later, when I was in the taxi coming here for the meeting with you to sign the papers for Pollokshields, that's when I began to feel odd. I thought it was shock. I was so, so tired but all I could think of was Astur and her suffering and how to get Mum and Tasha out of *Redcroft* away from those deadly spores. And I'm worried about The Marshalls. If they are in hiding and find out that Vince and his wife have disappeared, they might come back to *Redcroft* looking for Astur and try to get rid of me too.'

'There's a rumour going around on *Facebook* they have moved down south, running a new care service in Southport. Anyway, let's hope they keep well away from Scotland, yes? But Robin, did you not realise how unwell you were?''

'No, Pam, I think I was running on pure adrenalin and my mind was sort of frozen, obsessing on Astur and what they had done to her. Then, when I got back from Dalkeith, I was too busy looking after my mother and Tasha and cleaning up the mess. They had trashed the house looking for 'the file'. The only thing I could think of was a computer file. I had been worried they might have found my laptop and *iPad* but when I checked, they were safe. In fact, there is nothing else of any real value at *Redcroft*, only some cheap costume jewellery of Mum's which looks like bling to me.'

'You're very wrong on that count, Robin. When I was looking for Astur, I found it, the hidden safe. I have the keys from your neck cord, so I was able to open it. I know it your Mum's stuff looks like bling but I've seen this sort of garish oriental jewellery many times before. I took it away for safe keeping in Deb's vault. We now have an expert valuation which states at auction in London it should fetch north of four hundred thousand pounds, should your mother wish to sell it.'

'Wow! I wonder if she realises how valuable it is. Mum hasn't asked once about the jewellery or even the safe since I moved back in to look after them. When can I see them. I need to let them know I'm alright. When can I get out of here?'

'Let's call the doctor, shall we. And Robin, as I promised, this conversation stops here. In fact, if there was any real justice in this world, you should get a medal for what you've done. The world is a better place without the Sandersons and the Marshalls and Gladys Stimpson, wherever they might be. Do you think Vince killed Margaret Marshall and her girls because they had stolen that file from him?'

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'Probably. Who knows how these people work out their grievances.'

'Robin, are you hungry?'

'Yes. Did I say I'm vegetarian?'

'No, but hey, this is the Nuffield, right? They have a real chef in the kitchen here. Let's give them a challenge. What do you fancy?'

'A hot and spicy vegetable curry, please. And a large jug of iced water infused with lime juice.'

She left to place the order on my behalf and five minutes later returned with a porter wheeling a large plasma screen which she linked to her *iPad*.

'I forgot to say Phoebe and Tasha's care home is in *Glasgow*, not far from your new house. I've spoken to the Matron and she is about to call us on *FaceTime*. She asks that we keep our chat to a maximum of ten minutes as they are scheduled to leave on a minibus trip to Pollok Country Park to see their *Clydesdales* and *Highland Cows*. It's Tasha's birthday today.'

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First thing next morning Debs, Henrietta and Pam visited me in hospital. Guided by them, using my *Power of Attorney*, together we completed the remaining paperwork for the sale of *Redcroft*. This done, I then signed to buy Unit 1 at *Nithsdale Mews* in *Pollokshields*, this property registered in the name of *Mrs Phoebe McKelvie*.

When the others had left, Pam sat on the edge of my bed and held my left hand:

'Robin, I need to put your mind at rest over a few things. After I had Phoebe and Tasha moved to the care home, I had a long chat with Dr Ahuja. He is one of the trainers at *Samaritans*, so I've known him for a fair while. The point is, I could see right off that Tasha has *Down's Syndrome*, so I spoke to him about her case, off the record of course. A child born with *Down's* is such a disappointment for parents and often leads to marital breakdown. Some people think it's hereditary, but research shows it's caused by a natural variation in the human gene and is around in all of us, occurring in about one in eight hundred births in all age groups although it is more prevalent in older parents. Unfortunately, Tasha also has *Type One Diabetes* which, from her records, was not diagnosed and treated early enough to save her left foot and three toes on her right foot. The upside is that although she is a slow thinker, she is a happy, cheery child, keen to please. Dr Ahuja is full of praise for you. From what he has gathered, he says you have brought Phoebe back from the brink of addiction. Although she is physically much improved, sadly there are signs of early onset *Dementia*. Of course, Dr Ahuja didn't know you had help from *Astur* and thinks you were coping alone but still, from what I imagine

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this burden has been limiting your life. For you, going forward, caring for them alone would be intolerable. When we get you settle in Glasgow, we must find a proper support team to help you. I have a few ideas on that front but we can get back to that, OK?'

The mention of Astur brought tears again.

Pam leaned closer, gave me a cuddle, nuzzling into my neck. Her perfume was floral and spicy and her breath sweet and warm. She continued in a low, husky voice. I felt as if I was in a movie.

'There, there, Robin, that's all right, let it out. You must not bottle it up. Astur has gone and, over time, the hurt will fade and new and better thoughts will replace them. Now, to set your mind at ease. When I was back at Redcroft alone, nosing around, checking out the roof structure and the basement walls, I was also being nosy. To be totally honest, I was trying to make sense of what I was seeing so I opened those black bin bags and saw the rubbish you had collected and the damage the Sandersons had done.'

'My plan was to take it to the municipal depot. There's a rug, soaked with blood, did you find it? It's been worrying me. If the Police got hold of it . . ."

'No, stop. Don't worry, it's all sorted. I had one of my guys take everything incriminating to a landfill site we use.'

'What about our motorhome? Is it safe? I think Astur may have left the keys in the ignition.'

'Henrietta had it taken on a trailer to a specialist company for checking. It needed a full service and new tyres to get through its MOT. They've also done a few bodywork repairs and paint touch ups. It's had a premium valet inside and out. I've seen it, it looks nearly new. She had them deliver it to Aytoun House where Tasha can see it from her window. Tasha has the keys. Henrietta's also arranged to swap Tasha's wheelchair for a new one, but that's a secret, for her birthday.'

'Thanks. I knew it was due but I wasn't sure how to organise it. The fact is, Astur did most of the driving. To be honest, after my time overseas my driving's a bit rusty. I'm OK on country roads but in Edinburgh everything seems to happen so quickly.'

'Oh, and Robin, I found your stash of girly magazines and naughty videos. I hope you don't mind, but I dumped those too. Let's hope now you should be able to get out and about more you'll meet some nice girl and, well, you never know, right?'

I wanted to tell her I had inherited this pornography from the real Robin but I bit my tongue.

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Two days later, after an evening meal at the Nuffield I received a short visit from my consultant, Mr Ernest MacLintock who reviewed my most recent bloods and X-rays, read the report from the physiotherapy team, checked my blood pressures and heart rate, shook my hand and declared me fit to go home.

Free of the confines of the hospital, I walked smartly through the growing darkness of a balmy September evening to *Redcroft* and studied the Project Development Poster for "Forthview Vistas" due for completion by August 2017. True to her word, Pam Wright was already moving ahead quickly.

As I walked up the stairs and opened the front door, I fully expected Astur to call down from Tasha's room but of course the house was empty. It was a weird feeling giving rise to a sense of her presence hanging in the stale overheated air. The boiler and heating system were still running. I shut them down from the control panel in the Kitchen. .

From the basement cupboard, I retrieved the suitcase with Astur's clothes and the black bin bag with her shredded uniforms. I slipped out the back door and completed my exorcism of Astur's ghost by dropping the bin bag in the skip at Pam Wright's building site on the other side of the park before walking to the *Oxfam* shop in Morningside Road where I left the suitcase.

Back in *Redcroft*, I emptied the contents of the firesafe plus my laptop and *iPad* into my small rucksack with the originals of the legal papers, our three birth certificates, driving licenses for me and Phoebe and my passport. I used the remaining space to stuff in underwear, socks, a spare tee shirt and a pair of Rohan quick-dry activity trousers. The rest of my things I packed into my kit bag and the larger rucksack.

I made a last slow circuit around the familiar crumbling ruin which had become my home over these long, hard months, noting that the better items of furniture had already been sold, an exercise organised by Henrietta. The remaining items were labelled, some earmarked for charity shops, the others to go to the municipal refuse depot.

My final act was to pack Phoebe and Tasha's better clothes and personal items into four suitcases which Henrietta had provided. I left these inside the front door with my own luggage and emailed a photograph to Henrietta who had agreed to send them to *Nithsdale Mews* in two weeks' time when our new home would be ready for occupancy.

As agreed, I locked up and dropped the bunch of keys back inside through the letterbox; Henrietta had her own copies.

My watch showed 22:03. At midnight, the ownership of *Redcroft* would pass to Pam Wright Developments.

Back on Morningside Road I caught a black taxi and headed for Waverley Station to catch a train for Glasgow.

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Brief Encounter

I took a black cab from Glasgow Queen Street to Pam's home at *Lomond View* in Dalziel Road, Pollokshields.

I had been offered her hospitality until our new home at *Nithsdale Mews* was ready for occupation. Throughout the train journey my mind had been filled with words and images from her daily visits to my bedside at the Nuffield.

According to Pam, this short stay with her would be:

"A fantastic opportunity to facilitate planning for one of our latest Glasgow projects, a new build development to create a modern era care home."

She envisaged an eighty-bed unit on the site of an existing building which had once been a grand 'castle' before its most recent use as accommodation for first year students at Glasgow University.

Coupled with the offer to stay with her, Pam had pitched her ideas:

"Robin, I have been mind-mapping, using blue sky thinking, pooling ideas. My vision is to create a world class experience for care home residents by the application of an innovative, user-friendly built environment coupled with superbly trained staff, supported by automation, including robots where possible, and emerging green energy and recycling technologies to minimise its energy footprint. This stage always gives me the biggest buzz, right?"

My initial role, Pam had advised, would be to help her Architect with the patient-centred room layouts, working hand-in-glove with Dr Victor Bahl, the GP with whom Pam co-owned the care home where Phoebe and Tasha were now resident. Bahl now lived in Newton Mearns where he was the senior partner in a long established GP practice.

"Robin, although Aytoun house is caring, well-run and profitable, even Victor and John would admit in private it's a mish-mash compromise in every respect, restricted by its layout, inefficient in operation, giving rise to high energy and staffing costs. As twenty-five percent partner with Dr John Ahuja and his cousin Dr Victor Bahl, I have been pushing them hard to pitch in with me to create a world first at Sherbrook Sanctuary. My plan is to provide for those with high dependency needs but at affordable cost. Imagine a scenario where your Mum and Tasha were residents with you in overall day-to-day charge but still free to have your own life back. I think back and shudder at the memory of my mother's last years, after her stroke."

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In Pam's vision for my future when *Sherbrook Sanctuary* was commissioned, I would become the Campus Administrator responsible for appointing and managing all staff and maintaining standards. When the *Aytoun House* residents were relocated, it would be immediately demolished and the new *Aytoun Sanctuary* created, a further but improved eighty-bed unit incorporating the lessons learned at *Sherbrook*. My role would be expanded to set up and run *Aytoun*. Over the next decade, further sites would be found to expand the 'Sanctuary' care home brand.

Pam had emailed me CVs for John and Victor from which I learned these men, cousins, were part of a wealthy Sikh dynasty based in Pollokshields, former pupils of Hutcheson Grammar School (fee-paying) who had attended Glasgow University Medical School during the same period as Dr Mena. Intrigued, I wondered if they knew her but knew this was a question I would never ask. Later, online, I confirmed they had graduated two years ahead of her making a direct connection unlikely.

In response to my question, "Does Pam have a partner?", Henrietta had replied:

"Robbie, beware of Pam! In old fashioned terms, she might be described as a 'man-eater', but it seems she can't help herself. Her 'romances' always start well and, to be fair, usually end well too. She is amazingly kind and thoughtful but 'driven'. At forty-one I doubt she is the marrying kind. It's her high-energy, high-intensity, competitive personality that men eventually find off-putting. Since her divorce, her affairs have all been short-lived, three months or less. It's clear to Debs and I that she fancies you. I advise you enjoy the experience but please don't let her break your heart."

At the perimeter gate, I looked up into the lens of the security camera and pressed the buzzer for 'Pam Wright'.

When she opened the door to her penthouse, she was already dressed in a flimsy pink dressing gown; I think we both sensed any further discussion about *Sherbrook Sanctuary* was not top of her agenda at that particular moment.

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During a long, slow night of kissing, cuddling and exploring each other's bodies, Pam gave me snippets from her life. She liked to talk about herself so I was spared the interrogation which would follow during the days ahead.

We made love four times, Pam assuming control, astride and above me as I lay below her in a crucifix position as directed, her knees tucked into my sides like a jockey, her head forward, buttocks up, elbows touching my ears, her lips hovering above mine, her torso always moving, sliding down then retracting, disengaging, teasing me, waiting for my upward thrust, re-engaging, up and down, wave after gentle wave as the tempo increased slowly but relentlessly until my head was spinning with the flood of dopamine and

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oxytocin, the feel-good neurotransmitters often called love hormones, her breath sweet and floral, crooning:

*Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross
To see a fine lady upon a bold horse
Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes
And she shall have music wherever she goes.*

At our third and fourth coupling, climaxing at a gallop, we exploded together, noisily.

The condoms I had bought from the machine in the Gents at Waverly station had been rejected: Pam preferring 'skin on skin', telling me she was 'on the pill'. After each coupling we showered together in her huge walk-in wet room and patted each other dry with fluffy pink towels. During the months to come I would learn pink was her favourite colour.

This tantric sex experience set the pattern for what would follow.

The next morning, after a few hours on her telephone and laptop, Pam announced she was taking a week's holiday. We drove off in her Toyota sports car in open-top mode, headed for Ardrossan and took the ferry to Arran, my first time on a boat. She had booked a five-night stay in a lodge at the Auchrannie Resort Hotel.

On the first day we did pony trekking, my first time on a horse.

We tried Archery, another first for me.

Our Segway safari was a first for both of us.

I caddied for Pam at the golf course at Corrie. I learned her handicap was 3.8 (which meant she allowed herself four strokes) and she went wound in two under par.

We hired bikes and rode the full circuit around the island.

On our final evening, we sat in the car with binoculars and watched an otter mother and her two cubs hunting for crabs and small fish in weedy rock pools as the tide ebbed.

Pam adopted a policy of abstinence for the week and ate vegetarian with me, claiming she was enjoying the detox experience.

In addition to our nightly sessions, we made love before breakfast and again in the late afternoon before our evening meal. By comparison with Babsie, my only other partner, Pam was more adventurous, more sophisticated, involving extensive erotic foreplay, which I found intoxicating.

She had a pink faux crocodile leather handbag containing her 'love toys'. Most were pink and fluffy, some feathery for teasing and soft furry gloves for stroking. She had a

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selection of masks and soft and fluffy fake handcuffs used on wrist and ankles of the 'captive'.

Most sessions started slowly with 'talk sex' which eventually developed into urgent mutual undressing. Naked, we stood under the shower head set to 'mist', soaping each other with fragrant gel, making ourselves slippery as a precursor to 'standing sex' with Pam leaping up and lowering herself onto me, her legs wrapped and ankles locked, writhing with the shower head turned up to 'deluge' until we climaxed. Rinsed, we patted each other dry before heading for round two on the bed with the heating at 'full'.

A similar and equally enjoyable alternative began by lighting joss sticks then dripping warm aromatherapy oils, taking turns to massage each other enjoying the slow build up to the final slippery jockey ride to ecstasy.

On several occasions we played strip poker in front of the log fire while toasting marshmallows. In these contests, the last item to be sacrificed was the loser's mask. I lost every round and had to wear fluffy pink handcuffs pinning my arms to the bedhead.

After love-making Pam became prone to revisiting the version of events I had told her at The Nuffield.

This made me wary.

Like me, Pam liked to have all the facts and I found I was struggling to fill in every detail she seemed to need. However, from her Samaritan training, she told me this was a good thing, a sign that my memory was fading, that I was healing.

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As our honeymoon break rolled to its conclusion, Pam became restless, fretting about her 'projects', spending hours at a stretch on her mobile phone and iPad.

Although I would have loved to be able to share everything about my life with this wonderful older woman, I knew this could never be. She was just too inquisitive. Indeed, she already knew more than I wished, albeit I had painted myself as 'innocent'. My worry was that in time she would unearth my many secrets.

Thankfully, as we talked about her *Sanctuary* care home project, I could tell from her impatience she had realised I was not 'fully engaged', unlikely to become 'compliant'. Although she had not yet accepted 'defeat', I think she had already realised that apart from sex, we would not make a good twosome.

As Henrietta had predicted, it seemed clear we would not suit each other for the long term. Happily, our romp did not end in tears or recriminations. When we returned to her flat in Glasgow, we had a long, sensible discussion and agreed that we should become 'just-sex buddies' but without any deeper commitment.

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Choosing my words very carefully, taking great care not to offend her, she accepted my rejection of her offer to become her business partner in the *Sherbrook Sanctuary* care home project. In fact, a few weeks later, she gave up on the whole notion and I eventually realised she had only dreamt it up to try to draw me into her world by helping me.

For many months I had been hatching a quite different plan. Now I was free of *Redcroft* and its problems, I would take time to recruit a good care team to support me. My plan, if I could make it work, was to attempt to get Phoebe back to a sufficiently stable lifestyle in which I could step back a little and start my own life.

When the new flat at *The Mews* was ready and I moved in with Phoebe and Tasha, I was relieved to be able to move out of the penthouse and I think Pam was relieved as well.

At Pam's suggestion, saying I reminded her of Noel Gallagher, we renamed Unit One as "*Oasis*".

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Oasis

After my traumatic experiences at *Redcroft*, what I liked best about *Oasis* was its security arrangements.

Living Safe and Sound had become a signature selling point with older residents, particularly frail and elderly widows such as Phoebe.

While I was recovering at the *Nuffield*, Pam had emphasised her 'design intent' was to give residents at *The Mews*, a safe and secure living space. She had travelled to gated communities all over Europe and the USA and her solution was comprehensive. As she explained how she had achieved this, I found myself smiling - unlike the refugee camp, these much superior security measures were designed to protect rather than imprison me.

Our enclosed footprint was ringed with a discreet inner security fence. At 2.5 metres high with a 10 mm square mesh, this first screen was fabricated from tungsten steel of the type used at high-security military and government establishments throughout the UK. Its presence was concealed behind realistic artificial boxwood hedging panels fixed on both sides. Later, when I inspected this arrangement by walking slowly around the entire length, I saw a robust installation with vibration sensors every few metres, monitors which pinged a sector alert to a central panel at the Concierge & Reception Station (CRS). The outer screen was a 2.3 metres high lattice fence. This fence was made from heavy duty galvanised steel coated with green plastic, planted on both sides with mature copper beech saplings. When fully grown this hedge would be maintained at three metres high and one metre deep to act as a primary intruder barrier and provide a further visual screen.

Between these inner and outer screens, the corridor required for hedge trimming, inspection and maintenance comprised an astroturf pathway accessible from locked and alarmed gates located adjacent to the CRS. Pam advised this double fence arrangement had evolved as a standard provision on all her projects over recent years.

The Concierge service was in the CRS building, a low-key, single-storey blonde sandstone building in the style of a gatehouse to a Victorian country estate. When non-residents' vehicles were admitted, they were directed to a visitors' parking area which was also screened from residents and monitored by CCTV from the CRS which was manned during the hours of 6:00 am and midnight. During night hours, *The Mews'* surveillance systems were linked to a remote monitoring centre which supported many other premises with high security needs.

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In common with other residents, I was asked to sign authorisation forms to enable the Concierge team to sign for *Amazon* and other deliveries and store these for later collection or, if required, delivery to me at *Oasis* by one of the team, but only by prior appointment.

The primary intent was to prevent delivery agents from entering the grounds of *The Mews* thus ensuring residents were not unsettled by seeing unfamiliar faces. All deliveries were logged at the CRS and this information relayed to a dedicated display and intercom panel close to the front door at each unit. This Info-Panel also enabled me to contact the CRS team during daytime or the remote monitoring centre during night hours to ask for assistance, if required.

Controlled from the CRS, this Info-Panel interactive display also allowed residents to check a live relay feed from the entry CCTV camera thereby providing a means to exclude unwanted callers or to approve genuine visitors such as medical and care support people. On admission, visitors were then escorted to and from the resident's premises.

Visitors were never allowed free access to the internal area.

The Info-Panel also listed the scheduled presence of gardeners and maintenance operatives who were required to wear distinctive green and yellow striped viz vests and display prominent identification badges.

I would soon learn the small Concierge team were always on hand to help if required by delivering the Fiat to our front door from the communal garage below our unit and were always willing to help with the wheelchair and the loading ramp.

Low and Green Energy usage was another signature selling point.

Pam explained that there was no gas used at *The Mews*, everything driven by green electricity provided by solar panels connected to *Tesla* energy storage battery system, two battery units per home.

Super-insulation throughout with triple glazing and attention to airtightness in construction details meant our heating requirements were minimised while overheating was avoided by the combination of fully automated windows with interstitial solar control blinds and variable opening natural ventilation slots.

Computer simulations predicted that over an average weather year this well-insulated and solar-energy-based design solution would provide at least 85% of our energy needs. Top-up green electricity would be supplied to the *Tesla* battery system at off-peak hours purchased at a special discount, a tariff negotiated to cover all Pam Wright's developments in Glasgow and Edinburgh and a few others dotted elsewhere in Scotland.

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Like other units, *Oasis* was connected to the Internet by Ultrafast Broadband fibre, boosted to provide stable Wi-Fi in every corner of our new home and linked to sensors reporting data to a Central Smart Home learning hub at Strathclyde University. This supercomputer monitored and analysed building performance and compared data from thousands of sensors in the Pam Wright portfolio, comparing each individual home with local weather data and constantly tuning hundreds of individual bespoke control algorithms to ensure minimal use of energy compatible with maintaining an optimal comfortable environment.

By this means the need for intrusive ongoing site maintenance of the environmental control systems had been simplified, a fault which had been a headache on earlier automated homes, these now retrofitted to the new approach.

Almost every function was automated, most under voice control, including lights, doors, heating, automated patio doors and windows to provide fresh air ventilation when desired. In the background, energy use was being monitored constantly and, for those interested, could be interrogated using the Info-Panel providing live and historical read-outs of energy being consumed for each element of the system rated against theoretical best achievable, offering suggestions for improvement.

As a result, *The Mews* development had been awarded 'Platinum Eco-Homes' status in compliance with the principles set out by *Friends of the Earth* and *Solar Energy Scotland*.

In her summary, when making her pitch to me at the *Nuffield*, Pam had been keen to emphasise these measures in combination had been used to secure an 'all-premises, all-risks insurance contract' with much reduced premiums, this discount and the low green energy costs being used to offset the cost of running the security system and the CRS thereby creating a circle of virtue, a situation which had been lauded as 'the way forward' in an article by *Which?* magazine after their visit to her recently completed development a few streets away.

In our final discussions at the *Nuffield*, to make our new home habitable from the outset, Pam had offered to include interior decoration, basic furnishings and fittings, blinds, curtains, new crockery, cutlery, pots and pans and kitchen appliances, all items which we chose together from an IKEA catalogue. In exchange, she would deal with the remaining unsold contents at *Redcroft*, showing me a photo inventory of Phoebe's well-worn furniture, cutlery and crockery, tatty paintings and trashed books, objects which we both knew were probably worthless.

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As Pam had promised, our new home was stunning. Located in the best part of Pollokshields. Perched on the top of a gentle brae, furthest from the traffic on Nithsdale Road, *Oasis* had the prime position in *The Mews* development.

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The frontage of *Oasis* looked south-west with the other nine smaller units below us arranged in a semi-circle facing a communal pétanque court divided in to four segments, each of which I learned from *YouTube* is called a 'terrain'.

As promised, Pam had modified the original design of *Oasis* to incorporate automated front doors operated by a remote controller about the size of a car key, giving hand's free access for Tasha's indoor wheelchair and Phoebe's Zimmer. Sheltered under a weather canopy, these wide double doors opened outwards from a central 'reception hub'. This generous circulation space gave access to the principal ground floor rooms. Using proximity sensors these wide, sliding doors had also been automated, allowing easy access to Phoebe and Tasha's bedrooms with an additional disabled toilet and shower area intended for day visitors.

Oasis had easy care floors throughout, either tiled or with hardwood flooring. Early in our discussions I had agreed with Pam there would be no carpets or rugs to impede wheelchair movement or create trip hazards. All five bathrooms in *Oasis* were identical with spacious wet room showers without screens.

Beneath our building, hidden from view, an underground car park provided thirty wide bay parking spaces, three per resident. This space also contained ten generous hobby and storage units for golf clubs, bikes, fishing tackle and other such bulky items. Power, water and drainage was also provided with a workbench and tool rack for those who wished to 'potter'. We were the only unit with just one vehicle, the Fiat but we used one of our spare parking spaces for the additional outdoor ruggedised wheelchair we bought for Tasha, a dry place to store, protected from the weather.

While at the *Nuffield*, working together through her checklist, under Pam's guidance, I selected modern LED large screens from *John Lewis* for the living area and in Phoebe and Tasha's bedrooms. Pam agreed to get her trusted electrician to install and connect them to the BT Broadband fibre router. Acting as our authorised agent, as part of her 'settling-in service', Pam arranged to set up a contract in Phoebe's name for Sky and BT Sports and Movies channels so that I would be able to provide essential entertainment for my patients from the outset.

With the help of *Google* and *YouTube* on my *iPad*, I was confident I would be able to transfer Phoebe's *Netflix*, *YouTube* and *Amazon Prime* viewing Apps to these new TVs.

In the corner of the hub there was a spiral staircase leading to the upper level where a long corridor led to two other bedrooms, a generous home study/office and a fully equipped home gym. During our early discussions at the *Nuffield*, Pam had presented sketches showing an option (at extra cost) for a lift large enough for a wheelchair and a second person. This would have caused a delay of around two months and would have taken a large chunk out of the hub. These factors made it easy for me to reject it. Secretly I

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was pleased: without a lift, I would be able to maintain my privacy. Although I did not mention it to Pam, I was already planning to install Wi-Fi monitoring cameras to be sure I could respond to my patients when required.

Facing south-west, the ground floor front façade had full height panoramic triple glazed windows and doors incorporating internal blinds. From this open plan living/kitchen/dining areas automated tri-fold doors led onto patio furnished with outdoor dining tables and chairs. To one corner, we had a designated space for a future barbecue, should we wish one. A wide path led onto a hardwood sun deck protected from wind by two-metre-high perimeter glass panels.

Above us from the deck, looking north through a one-way glass wind break, we had a view over a formal landscaped garden dotted with busy bird-feeding stations and an interesting collection of animated artworks which whirled or nodded in the slightest of breezes.

To the west, we overlooked a communal wildlife garden and pond. Beyond this pond, sheltered by the perimeter hedge, was a small wrought-iron pergola with circular seating, draped with climbing plants. To the side was a sizeable wood-framed solarium with sun loungers. Between these facilities there was a largish patio set out as a communal barbecue area with tables and chairs.

The Mews demonstrated that by great attention to detail, Pam and her design team had made the most of this awkward sloping site, an experience which she told me she would use as the basis for redeveloping *Redcroft* to become "Forthview Vistas".

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Another Fresh Start

Our move to *Oasis* quickly proved to be a success, not just for Phoebe and Tasha but for me too. From the moment we were settled, I began to relax and, for the first time since arriving in the UK, I was sleeping better, feeling less jittery, more like the confident person I had been at the camp, before Dr Max left.

In October 2016, around a month after we moved in, I visited Pam at her penthouse by invitation. I had not seen her since Arran. It was late evening and Phoebe and Tasha were medicated, settled and asleep. Although I expected them to sleep through until around eight the next morning, my *iPhone* allowed me to monitor them. However, this was not straightforward.

The *Blink* cameras in Phoebe and Tasha's bedrooms were Wi-Fi based, served by an independent and dedicated *Blink* Wi Fi router. This meant I could not access my *Blink* cameras directly from my *iPhone* when I was out of range of the *Blink* router at *Oasis*.

Using guidance posted by *YouTube* enthusiasts, I had devised a work-around. By placing my *iPad* opposite my laptop on my desk upstairs at *Oasis*, I was able to stream live from my laptop camera to a private (secure) *YouTube* channel I had rented for this purpose. To view these *Blink* images of Phoebe and Tasha, I then dialled into my *YouTube* channel. Although cumbersome and sometimes jerky, this approach usually worked without hiccups.

There were rumours on the Internet that *Blink* were soon to upgrade their service to provide this sort of direct mobile link to phones using 4G or the much vaunted 5G network when it eventually reached Glasgow.

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It was a Friday night.

Before I rang Pam's intercom button, I checked; both of my patients were sound asleep and breathing normally. In an emergency, I could ride my new road bike back to *The Mews* in under five minutes.

Pam was dressed in loose-fitting silky pink pyjamas., the top buttons undone revealing her cleavage. Freshly showered, her hair damp, she smelled wonderful, floral and spicy. At her door she leaned into me, pressing, hugging pulling my head down as she offered her lips. I could taste wine from her breath, making me tense.

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At both camps there had been a lot of home-made alcoholic concoctions made from food scraps. There was also some real alcohol, this obtained from the guards in exchange for sexual favours. As a boy of eleven I had been duped into drinking a can of coca cola laced with something sweet. Apart from making me drunk, it had made me very ill. The next day I had promised Dr Mena I would never drink alcohol again.

We kissed briefly then Pam pushed herself away, sadness in her eyes. I think we both knew the previous magic had gone. She sniffed, blew her nose and turned away, while I waited on the threshold, expecting to be asked to leave.

Pam rallied:

'Yeah, I thought so. Pity though. Still Robin, while there's life, there's hope, right?'

'Yes, Pam, we did have a lovely time. I'll never forget that week on Arran. Never.'

'Come on through. A mug of Red Bush, is it?'

We sat across from each other at her kitchen table. She was looking a bit tired. Probably from working eighteen-hour days, seven days a week, staying overnight in Edinburgh at her flat in the New Town.

I sipped my tea as she poured herself another large glass of white wine.

'Well, Robin, what do you think of your new home?'

'Actually Pam, I've been longing to tell you that *Oasis* is perfect. The reality is away above my expectations. Everything works as it should. Mum and Tasha are happy too, now I have settled them to our new routines. Best of all though, is that the bad memories of *Redcroft* are beginning to fade, just as you said they would. Thank you for everything you've done for us. Thank you for being my friend, Pam, the best friend I have in all Scotland.'

At this outburst of praise, her smile brightened and she stood, poured her wine into the sink took my hand and tugged me to my feet:

'Robin, you will *always* be much more than just my friend. Now, come, please, I need you. Let's play sex buddies, right? But just so you know, this will be non-exclusive from now on, OK?'

'Sounds ideal to me. Should I wear a condom?'

'Ah, no. No, no condom, please. You know it would spoil it for me. Look, I promise you I'll keep us both safe, OK?'

'OK.'

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Four hours and two tantric sessions later, I left Pam Wright fast asleep, slipped out and rode my bike back to *The Mews*.

Standing below the CCTV camera at the CRS, I used my mobile phone to contact the remote security centre to gain entry. They checked my image against their records, asked for my mother's maiden name and my favourite make of car then invited me to enter my personal ten-digit string into the keypad beside the pedestrian airlock night entrance.

Once inside I rode up the slope to return my bike to our storage shed in the garage area.

From my bedroom I used my *iPad* to check on Phoebe and Tasha downstairs.

Both were asleep.

I showered, slipped under my duvet and stared across at the full-length mirror on the sliding door of my wardrobe:

Dr Mena appeared.

Shaking her head and smiling, she waved a warning finger.

Her image faded.

I rolled over and replayed the last few hours, smiling broadly as I drifted off to sleep.

The next day, Pam Wright was back in Edinburgh.

Our sex buddies' agreement set a new but irregular pattern, meeting three to four times a month.

During the months which followed, we kept in touch by brief, jokey *WhatsApp* messages, sharing the trivia which comprised our daily lives. For me this regular contact helped to mitigate the lingering feeling of loneliness which had haunted me since losing Astur.

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By late November 2016, I had been playing the role of the good son for around a year and, apart from the odd pang of guilt, I felt comfortable in my new life. My daytime flashbacks and trauma daydreams began to fade but on bad nights, when I was sure my patients were asleep, I would slip out and jog for miles around the streets of Pollokshields while distracting my mind by listening to *Radio Four* or *BBC World Service* on my *iPhone* earbuds. I weaved around these streets on a route which ensured I could always get back to *The Mews* in under ten minutes, stopping occasionally to review the images of Phoebe and Tasha from their bedroom *Blink* cameras.

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I had learned quickly that my neighbours were reserved, stand-offish. I think they were somehow embarrassed that we were a disabled family. I expect they had learned something of us from the Concierge team.

To be honest, this suited me. I did not relish the idea of having random callers interrupting my fixed routines, however well-meaning.

Gradually, by watching their behaviour I learned they were of a type, mainly middle-aged, well-heeled professionals. Some used their apartments on weekdays only, living elsewhere at weekends. Others were enjoying active early retirement, often missing for weeks at a time, traveling to distant lands, crossing out items on their bucket lists.

If our paths crossed, they smiled and greeted us politely while excluding us from their raucous pétanque afternoons or boozy barbecues and dinner parties.

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Step by Step

Shortly after our move to *Oasis*, we enrolled as a family unit at the Strathbungo Medical Centre under the senior GP, Dr Faizal Khan, a man who had trained with Dr Ahuja at Glasgow University. I had asked Debs McInnes to write to both doctors explaining that I held Power of Attorney for my mother and sister and asking that our files and prescription requirements be transferred to Dr Kahn. I also asked that Debs request on my behalf that I be allowed to participate in deciding their treatments, citing Robin's nursing qualifications. I expect that the two men would have chatted to each other about us over the phone.

Dr Kahn made a house call and later, upstairs in my bedroom after reviewing Dr Ahuja's notes, we discussed both of my patients. The upshot of this first meeting was that we agreed on a plan to try to get Phoebe free of her dependence on drugs, particularly Prozac and Nardil.

Since taking charge at *Redcroft*, under my healthy eating regime and by denying her alcohol and cigarettes, Phoebe had started to lose weight and her asthma attacks and coughing fits had diminished in frequency and severity. Although I did not admit it to Dr Khan, I had already started reducing her medications and her general health had improved a little, although it was evident the years of abuse had taken their toll.

Now that the withholding of these addictive drugs was official, I encouraged her to give blood to monitor her general health, liver, heart, blood pressure and check for improvements of her stage-two diabetes and her other chronic circulatory and bowel conditions. Sadly, like Tasha, she was still unreliable overnight, both patients requiring the continued use of double incontinence pants.

Before we parted, looking at with me with sad, kind eyes Dr Khan said:

'Robin, under different circumstances, I would normally recommend that both your mother and sister be moved to a residential care home. There is Aytoun House where they were placed during your spell in the *Nuffield*. As you probably know, it is a very well-run establishment, exemplary, and John tells me he believes you have the financial resources to afford this sort of residential care. But he also tells me you have already rejected this suggestion and are determined to care for them here, at home. On the plus side, your burden should not last too much longer. On their current trajectories I cannot see either Phoebe or Tasha surviving beyond five years, probably much less. Look, Robin. I know from John and from my friend Pam Wright you have been doing a wonderful job caring for your mother and sister. However, it's you I'm most worried about. Remember,

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you are my patient too and I can sense a tension in you which I suspect is the result of your struggle to cope alone. So, if you will not put your mother and sister into care, please consider finding help, proper help, from someone experienced and qualified. Think it over. If you need further advice, just get in touch.'

Given my previous experience with Mrs M and her *EHSCS* care team, I was reluctant to pursue this solution, even though I knew it was good advice.

With Faizal Khan's agreement, I installed a simple exercise bike and a treadmill in Phoebe's bedroom, and, after a lot of cajoling, she began to use them. Over the months which followed she fought her way down from twenty-three to sixteen stones and began to take an interest in what she wore. We shopped online, buying various new outfits, mostly trousers suits to conceal her thickened ankles, and sensible, comfortable shoes, with no or low heels. As before, we returned those items which did not suit while steadily building up a new wardrobe. After a few weeks of wearing her new outfits, she was happy to allow me to launder her old clothes and gift them to a charity shop.

At *Redcroft*, Astur had used a home hairdressing kit to trim their hair, a duty I had inherited but I could see I lacked the expertise required. I asked for advice from the CRS team who arranged for an elderly man called Ron Realto to visit once a week. For decades Ronnie (real name Ronald Reid) had worked on cruise ships before retiring to live with his mother in nearby Strathbungo, running a part-time home stylist business while playing a tenor saxophone in a small dance band on the side. Ronnie was a natural storyteller with a huge repertoire of improbable but outrageous stories which kept my two ladies laughing while he expertly fashioned their hair. Thursday afternoons became the highlight of our week.

Now, on our outings in the Fiat or on foot, I felt we looked and behaved more like a normal family.

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On our first Christmas at *Oasis*, I sourced a replacement Burmese for Tasha. She decided to call her new cat 'Duke' even though 'he' was 'she', an older, more docile neutered cat from a rescue centre who preferred to sleep rather than prowl after birds and mice. As her main Christmas present, I bought Tasha a full-sized Yoga tablet which I loaded with all her favourite films and several clips of the Hibeas scoring goals. This simple device gave her such pleasure that I felt guilty I had not thought of it before.

Early in the New year, Dr Khan and I reviewed Tasha's medical history. He directed me to continue to medicate her as before while warning me again, very gently, that Tasha's life expectancy was low, due to her type one diabetes and her lack of mobility. To help, he recommended we try 'aqua-aerobics'. Online, we enrolled Tasha in a club for disabled

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swimmers at Eastwood Leisure Park, an easy twenty-minute drive away. Thankfully, Dr Kahn had authorised me as a Blue Badge driver which made parking everywhere easier.

Supported by floatation aids, Tasha was soon one of the best 'splashers' in her small 'least able' group. To give her two outings a week, we also joined the club at the Easterhouse Health Centre but soon withdrew because the long drive on the M8 motorway was unnerving. After a few weeks we moved to another group which met at the Glasgow Club in Maryhill but then Tasha refused to go to any of her classes saying:

'Robbie, don't make me go back, I don't like the smell in my hair and it's too cold in the changing place.'

By the late spring of 2017, as I steered Tasha in her motorised outdoor wheelchair with Phoebe gripping my arm for balance, we managed the mile long round trip to our local shops. We had to stop and wait for Phoebe to rest and get her breath back and so these outings often took us well over an hour. I could tell Phoebe was reluctant to leave Oasis, frequently making excuses for not joining us on these outings, promising she would do a spell on the treadmill instead.

However, overall, we were making some progress and I felt I was edging towards a future where I would be able to get out and about on my own and perhaps take some photography courses at nearby colleges.

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Although I was pleased my plan was working, I was becoming bored with my lot, restless, keen to create a situation where I could start my own life in earnest.

Following a *WhatsApp* dialogue with Pam and a further consultation with Dr Kahn, I began to research local care agencies. It took me several weeks of careful sifting to find *Orchard Park Carers*, a small company run by Ruby and Maureen Lang, spinster sisters who had been trained as geriatric nurses. When their parents had died leaving them a sizable inheritance, they had given up on the NHS, starting out on their own, recruiting several of their former colleagues to join them.

From early March, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, *Orchard Park Carers* provided Ralph and Gary, a gay couple in their early fifties, recently married although they had lived as partners for twenty years. They arrived promptly at eight each morning and left at four in the afternoon, filling the apartment with happy chatter, performing song after song to the accompaniment of *YouTube* videos, encouraging my patients to singalong. We learned they were in several choirs and informal groups, particularly the *Rock Choir* with whom they had performed at events all over Britain, including the Albert Hall in London. As the Lang sisters had promised, Ralph and Gary proved to be 'just right' for us, a perfect combination of cheerfulness and professionalism.

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An unexpected bonus was that the cost of employing them was mitigated by grants which Ruby Lang organised in Phoebe's name. I had been unaware Tasha and Phoebe might be eligible, but Ruby assured me she would complete our applications and, after a delay of several months, the money began to flow into Phoebe's account, with a lump sum backdated to the start of Phoebe's contract with *Orchard Park Carers*.

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Hobbies

Seeing people swim created a worm of desire which soon became another obsession. I checked online and joined a 'learn to swim for adults' class at nearby Bellahouston Sports Centre run by Glasgow Life. The classes were organised by the Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS). Although the class was advertised as 'free', we were encouraged to 'make a donation' of £10 per session or more if we could afford it.

I enrolled midway through a twenty-week course which met at eleven o'clock on Tuesday mornings meaning I would be absent for around two hours. I persuaded the Concierge to act as minders during my absences. They already had my mobile number and knew where I was. For a weekly gift of £5 towards their coffee fund, one of the team would peek through the windows from the deck every half hour to check on them with instructions to ring me if problems arose. I also installed a few extra *Blink* cameras and carried my *iPhone* with me in a waterproof pouch, checking at every opportunity. As the weeks ticked by, I began to relax and trust Phoebe.

By far the youngest in our learn to swim group, I was the first to swim fifty lengths in the 'jogging' lane'. This promoted me to the 'Tuesday Rookies' (a life-saving training programme). After a further six weeks I was awarded a Bronze level certificate.

When I had been under the care of Dr Mena, she had given me a guitar and taught me chord basics but when I was moved to the senior camp under Dr Max, this guitar was 'confiscated' by one of the guards. Later, I heard he had sold it to buy drugs. This memory returned and, as a second hobby, I bought a starter guitar from *Amazon* and enrolled online with a man called James Malcolm who lived in a town called Formby, near Liverpool. After this initial ten-lesson group course over five weeks on *Skype*, I signed up for a further twenty lessons, on a one-to-one basis, meeting three times a week on *FaceTime*. Encouraged by Jimmy, I tried singing and gradually uncovered another minor talent, singing duets with him, mainly adapted versions of Beatles standards.

In parallel, as a very late Christmas present to myself, I went to a shop in the centre of Glasgow called *Biggars Music*, where I took advice and bought an *Ibanez Sunburst* electro-acoustic guitar with all the trimmings. The advantage of this new approach was that by using headphones, I could practice 'silently', well into the night.

I also signed up for a complementary introductory course of lessons held online using *FaceTime*, delivered from a teaching area at the rear of the shop, meeting twice a week with a hippie type older man called 'JD' (full name Justin Davies). Taking JD's advice, I

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watched repeat showings of *Milonga del Angel* and *Ricardo Gallen* delivering their masterclasses, free on *YouTube*.

Unlike swimming and jogging, my guitar playing was a fill-in hobby easily accessed at home, a sort of music therapy used to fill the otherwise boring hours. Now, when I drifted off to sleep, my head was filled with guitar riffs spinning on and on, reducing the frequency and intensity of my nightmares.

My third hobby was off-road adventure cycling, a form of low-key mountain biking. To further enjoy my new freedom, I bought a second bicycle, a hugely expensive carbon fibre hybrid mountain bike sold under the *CUBE* brand. After a long session online, reading user feedback blogs, I bought it from a small specialist firm called *Mugdock Country Cycles* based at *Mugdock Country Park*. Prior to my visit in the Fiat to collect my *CUBE*, I studied this area on *Google Earth*, discovering the park incorporates the start of the *West Highland Way* from *Milngavie* to *Fort William* ninety-five miles to the north, a trekking path billed as one of the world's finest and wildest wilderness long-distance routes, much favoured by walkers and cyclists alike.

After a brief discussion about the features of my new bike, I accepted the offer of a free guided off-road safari with *Darren*, one of the bike-hire team. It was a perfect afternoon, dry, bright and sunny, not too warm. Connected to each other by radio headphones and throat mics, I raced off in pursuit with my guide talking non-stop, filling my head with facts and figures while I did my best to concentrate on the winding, twisting trails while avoiding hazards from rocks, tree roots and low hanging branches.

Now, when *Ralph* and *Gary* arrived at *Oasis*, I would leave at once, riding off wearing a small rucksack to carry fruit and water for lunch and binoculars to study birds, promising to return by four o'clock in the afternoon.

In my first week, I explored *Pollok Country Park*, less than ten minutes away. Using advice from off-road bikers' forums, I developed my own favoured routes around the south of *Glasgow*. After a month or so, remembering the excitement of my time with *Darren*, I steeled myself again and drove the Fiat through the busy *Clyde Tunnel* to revisit *Mugdock Country Park*, where I mounted up and found my way down to *Craigallion Loch* and headed north to explore the *West Highland Way*.

From then on I was hooked and, despite the stressful journey through heavy traffic to get to *Mugdock*, this area became a favourite haunt as I relished my new freedom, enabled by *Ralph* and *Gary*.

Equilibrium

Wendy

In mid-July my life changed again.

I was seated beside Craigallion Loch watching an osprey hovering when a girl carrying a huge rucksack asked if she could share my hillock.

'Hi, I'm Wendy, Wendy Smythe with a 'y' and an 'e'. Are you cycling all the way to Fort William?'

'Hi to you to. I'm Robin, or Robbie, if you prefer. No, I'm just out for a spin. Are you Australian?'

'O no! Most definitely not! I'm a Kiwi. South Island. Outskirts of Dunedin. I'm a teacher, High School, Maths and Computer Science. Boring, eh? And you, Robbie?'

'I'm a nurse.'

'My Mum's a nurse too, A & E, constant drama. What sort of nurse are you, Robbie?'

'At the moment I'm a sort of geriatric nurse, I suppose. But I've always wanted to do A & E.'

'OK, Robbie, what's it like being a geriatric nurse?'

Over the next hour we went on, playing verbal ping-pong, sharing our stories, keeping steady eye contact while ignoring the stream of walkers, runners and cyclists passing up and down the West Highland Way just a few metres downhill.

When she rose to continue, I walked beside her for a while, offering to carry her rucksack balanced on my crossbar, but Wendy refused:

'Thanks Robbie, but no thanks. You see, I've signed up to carry my 30 Kilo rucksack all the way. There's a picture of me with it on my Facebook site, so no cheating allowed, OK? And before you ask, all the sponsor money, every penny, will go to the New Zealand Red Cross initiative to support refugees who come to us for sanctuary. My grandparents were part of the Vietnam Boat People who made it to South Island back in the mid-seventies. So, I suppose I'm a sort of refugee too.'

I felt a weird churning in my stomach.

'Hey, Robbie, you are allowed to say something like:

"Wow, Wendy, you're truly amazing!"

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'Yeah, sorry, I was distracted. I was thinking of a friend. Her name was Astur, she was a displaced person. You remind me of her.'

'You said 'was', Robbie. Is Astur dead?'

'Yes, last year. Tragic. Wrong place, wrong time. Sorry. Too horrible. Can't talk about it.'

'It's OK, Robbie, it's OK. Look, I get it. My Dad died in a crazy accident too. He was working as a contractor, paid by the hour, herding sheep. When he crashed off, he just got back on his quad bike and carried on and so the brain haemorrhage was undetected. That night, he died in his sleep. Mum had to spend time in mental care, recovering. It was the worst year of my life, living alone with no one to share my hurt with. But that was ten years ago, when I was fourteen. I still miss his big bearhug cuddles.'

'Oh, Wendy, how terrible for you. And how awful for your mother.'

'Thanks, Robbie, but life goes on. Actually, in case you didn't notice, it's unstoppable. Grief fades over time and we must look ahead and hope for better things to come. So, here's what happened. I was given a *Lotto* ticket inside a birthday card and *Bingo!*, I won ten thousand bucks. I don't really believe in gambling, so I decided to take a career break and come to Europe. Then I had this idea. As payback for my good luck, I volunteered to do this walk for charity. Any funds I have left from my win, I'll give to the Red Cross as my donation.'

'Hey, Wendy, that's a great idea, so generous of you. I would love to do that walk but I can't, because of Mum and Tasha, as I explained.'

'But maybe I'll see you again, eh? You see, my father's family immigrated to South Island from Glasgow in the 1950s. So, when I finish this trek, I plan to try to dig up any rellies that are still around.'

'Wendy, that would be great. Really great, but please, when will you be back in Glasgow?'

'Well, Robbie, now let's see. I started at the south end of *The Pennine Way*, at Edale in the Peak District ending up in Kirk Yetholm in the Scottish Borders. Officially that's 429 Klicks or 270 miles in old money. Now I'm doing the Scottish National Way from Kirk Yetholm to Cape Wrath, another 864 Klicks or 537 miles. That makes a grand total of 1293 Klicks or 807 miles. So far I'm covering around about 25 to 30 Klicks a day so with around 720 to go that would take me about another 30 days, give or take. So, Robbie, let's target a meet up in a month from now, on 15 August, beside that wee loch back there?'

'Right Wendy, it's a date.'

'Yeah, it'll be like Miss Muffet and her Spider, on their tuffet, eh?'

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'Yeah, or *Spiderman meets The Shepherdess*. Sounds like a title for a Sc Fi movie.'

'Back in NZ I've picked up 532 sponsors through my *Facebook* page and I've snagged another 49 here in the UK during my walk, so far. Look, I know you said you don't do *Facebook* but how about we swap telephone numbers then you can join me on my trek using *WhatsApp*?'

'Sounds ideal to me.'

I watched Wendy Smythe until she reached the turn in the path which led towards Dumgoyne, the distinctive volcanic plug often called the camel's hump. At this point, she turned and waved, blowing me a kiss. My heart thudded and I considered charging after her but decided to trust her promise.

The seed of a new dream had been planted.

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Fallout

Since posting my *Linked-In* data to the Police, I had been checking online newsfeeds for a hint that some sort of purge was underway.

The day after I met Wendy, the early evening television news included a trailer for a special *BBC Scotland* programme to be broadcast nationwide at 10:45 pm. In this snippet, we were told Detective Chief Inspector Janice McNulty of the *Police Scotland Serious Organised Crime Unit* would be outlining recent steps undertaken to crush 'Sex Slavery in Scotland'. Following an anonymous tip-off, a 'ring' had been detected which had been smuggling girls into Scotland from the North of England. This investigation had been underway for several months.

I made sure Phoebe and Tasha were asleep and set the cable box to record the programme so that I could review it after I had watched it. Seconds before the broadcast time, a special announcement was made using an on-screen message:

BBC Scotland apologises for the late cancellation of the scheduled item on Sex Slavery in Scotland. This has been caused by an emergency intervention by a group who have obtained a High Court injunction preventing the broadcast of the planned special report.

DCI Janice McNulty of *Police Scotland* has asked us to re-iterate that any member of the public who thinks they have information which may help their enquiries should contact her. Likewise, any victims should not be intimidated by this set-back and should come forward at once for help, protection and counselling.

Holby City will follow as originally scheduled.

I reached for my iPad to check my usual newsfeeds.

Under the banner, 'Sex Slave Ring Scuppers Showing' I saw a photograph of Professor Philomena Shearer staring directly at the camera, an angry scowl on her face. The image froze my brain. I stared into her eyes for several minutes, trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

I reached forward and pinched the image to enlarge her face. It was very close to my Dr Mena, with the same red hair, presumably preserved with colourant. The ring of freckles across her upper cheeks still visible, untamed by make-up. However, these eyes were

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'wrong', nearly identical, but different. Apart from the vicious anger which I had never seen in Dr Mena's eyes, these eyes were duller, less vibrant, closed, furtive.

I turned away. From memory I conjured the image of the real Dr Mena, the one who had nurtured me, guided me, formed my character, the face of my substitute mother, the face I had carried with me day and night since I was six years old.

When I turned back to the screen I was certain the face I was looking at was that of an imposter. The eyes I was staring at were the wrong colour: the Imposter's angry eyes were blue grey, not the open, honest smiling hazel-green eyes of my Dr Mena.

Although I felt certain I could not be wrong about this, to be sure, I checked the archive of Google images for Dr Philomena Shearer. I found fifty-three dating back to the time when she left Greece to return to the UK, the year after I had moved to the adult camp.

None were of my Dr Mena.

I checked every single image again and again. I checked birth records, looking for other Philomena Shearers born in Glasgow with family roots in Newcastle. But there was only one, my real Dr Mena. So, who could the Imposter be and why?

Working on my laptop through the rest of that night, I delved back into the history of Dr Mena's family. I discovered Philomena and Thomas Shearer had a brother called Patrick, older than Philomena by eighteen months. My research confirmed Dr Mena's story that Thomas had died, aged five. However, the record stated his cause of death was *not* meningitis as Dr Mena had told me but '*brain trauma, caused by a fall*'.

I searched everywhere I could think of for a Patrick Shearer without success.

Almost about to give up, I set up a further trawl in the archive of *The Herald* newspaper available online at the *Mitchell Library* and found a news item which helped unlock the mystery. It was a long rambling piece sent to the Letters page. Although its spelling and grammar were poor and its punctuation misleading, the letter's accusations were astounding.

Someone using the name "*J. Brown*" had cobbled together snippets from local newspapers and Salvation Army records from decades earlier.

Had the author been a former Shearers' cleaning lady or perhaps a gardener?

Eventually I deduced Patrick had been a troubled child who had been in and out of hospital from his infant years. The thrust of the letter from *J. Brown* was that Patrick was almost certainly deranged, a danger to society. There was a history of self-harm and attacks on his siblings. Aged five, Thomas had been discovered with a fatal head wound, on the tracks of a railway line. Although never proven, the suspicion had been that Patrick had thrown his brother from the railway bridge, 'for fun'. After an extended spell of

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'special treatment', Patrick Shearer had been released from Lennox Castle Hospital, discharged as 'cured', consigned to the care of his family. By this stage the Shearers had moved to Newcastle. Patrick did not settle. Aged thirteen, he had disappeared, becoming a missing person, never found. The general view was that he was 'probably dead', that he had 'committed suicide'.

The article concluded with the chilling words:

I dinna baleev Patrick's deed. He's still oot thare an still killin. But jest wach oot coz hees awfay awfay clevar.

As I compared my Dr Mena with her Imposter, a huge surge of anger and despair flooded over me. Tears fell. Although I could not prove it, I was filled with the certain dread that my Dr Mena was dead, killed by her brother who had then stolen her identity.

Was this Imposter the leader of the sex slave ring?

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The next morning, after I handed over to Ralph and Gary, I set off on my mountain bike through heavy rain for the pool at Bellahouston Sports Centre. I had read people who are prone to PTSD attacks think more clearly when exercising. After fifty fast laps of the pool and a strenuous hour in the multi-gym, I sat in the café eating a tasteless pasta dish and stared out at the rain bouncing off the children's play park equipment.

Based on a *YouTube* article I had watched, I used my *iPhone* to help me think by bullet pointing my thoughts:

- One part of me wished I had not stirred the hornets' nest by sending the *Linked-In* data to the Police.
- From what I knew of them, the cabal were not in the least stupid.
- They would know the Marshalls and Sandersons were missing, presumed dead and would already be clever enough to start building the jigsaw to identify me, 'the anonymous source'.
- Then, with sudden clarity, I realised the Police agencies would have shared their information and would have seen that all three letters I had sent were postmarked from Edinburgh.
- If the Police knew this, it was almost certain those on the list would have found out.

The urge to flee presented a solution:

- I would put Phoebe and Tasha in Aytoun House and find a way to get to New Zealand to try for a new life with Wendy if she would have me when she arrived home.

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This would be a betrayal. I owed it to my Dr Mena to deliver justice and to clear her name of any wrongdoing. Only then would I be free of the shimmering image of this monster lurking inside my head. Although his/her evil face scared me, one newsfeed had given an address which I had studied the previous night in *Google Maps* then in *Google Earth*.

In a massive surge of creative thinking, I saw the plan laid out with clarity:

- Drones would be needed to breach the Imposter's security.
- I would need new skills and equipment and meticulous planning.
- To make my plan work, I would need to escape from the responsibility of Phoebe and Tasha for around three weeks, two at a minimum.
- Perhaps I could arrange temporary residence for them at Aytoun House but I knew this disruption would probably cause them to relapse.
- Better still, I might be able to persuade Ralph and Gary to move in temporarily to the Oasis as full-time carers if I compensated them sufficiently?

They talked frequently about their 'dream trip of a lifetime', flying first class to New York to do all the Sights and Shows in the Big Apple then sailing home in luxury on the *Queen Mary*.

Would this level of inducement persuade them to my plan?

- I must not miss my reunion with Wendy but worried if this might put her in danger.

Was this a risk I should take?

Did I have enough time to wait then meet her, explain about Pheobe and Tasha's decline and ask her to wait for me to join her in New Zealand, when I was free?

The options swirled around making me jittery, fearful that the Imposter and his/her gang of thugs would send another version of Ralph Rayburn to eliminate me from the equation?

- But how could they possibly find me?
- Then I realised the key the move Pheobe McKelvie had made from *Redcroft* to *Oasis* was the key. I checked the public records: the details were there for anyone to view, posted by Henrietta.
- If I tried to tough it out, they must eventually find me and despite the excellent security which protected *The Mews*, I could not live out the rest of my life trapped as a virtual prisoner.
- It was clear I must deal with the Imposter and hope that by eliminating the head, the others would be eventually caught by the Police.
- I must tough it out until after my meeting with Wendy and start immediately to list all the items I would need to purchase and make a detailed plan of attack.

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The wind picked up, changed direction, hammering the sleety rain against the glass.

The image of Wendy trudging through rain came to mind and on impulse I tried to call but her service defaulted to a pre-recorded message:

Hiya All, Wendy here and yip, my phone is on but reception out here in the wilds of Bonnie Scotland is patchy. Send a WhatsApp and I'll get back to you soon as. Ciao baby.

It was so nice to hear her chirpy voice I replayed this message four or five times before sending a *WhatsApp* asking her to call me live if she got reception.

Around nine o'clock in the evening, Wendy called back. Perhaps she could guess I was fragile and asked why I was so 'down'. I fibbed, telling her I had just had news my favourite aunt had died. Although I wanted to share the whole story with Wendy, thankfully I was able to hold back and did not mention Dr Mena by name. During the rest of the call Wendy was strangely quiet and our chat quickly ran out of steam. After we said our goodbyes and disconnected, I realised my news must have jerked her back to thinking about her lost father.

The next evening my mobile rang just after nine o'clock. Although I was tense, I was determined to be upbeat and avoid the subject of death and loss. As we talked, the spectre of Dr Mena's ghost appeared, reflected in my wardrobe mirror, frowning, quizzical, shaking her head, as if warning me. I closed my eyes to this apparition and listened to Wendy chattering. After we disconnected, Dr Mena was still in the mirror but now she was smiling, nodding her head, approving.

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Over the following weeks, I tracked Wendy's journey on *Google Maps* as she edged closer to Cape Wrath during these long summer days.

As Wendy pursued her goal, I was also busy, researching and honing my plans using *Google* and *YouTube*, listing the equipment and gear I would need and checking what was available on *Amazon* and *eBay*.

As I refined my plans to eliminate the Imposter, the tension inside me was building, my mood swinging from fear and apprehension at the risk I was taking before edging closer to the certainty that I would succeed, provided I held my nerve.

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Wendy called most evenings, always around nine o'clock if she could get a strong enough signal. If that failed, she would send a text, always the same:

Hi Robin, love ya baby, xxxx. Wendy.

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In our *WhatsApp* sessions, I encouraged her to do most of the talking, finding her voice relaxing, imagining she was lying beside me, near enough to touch, embrace and kiss.

During our very first *WhatsApp* session, Wendy had offered an open invitation for me to visit her in New Zealand which I had accepted although we both understood this was unlikely to be soon because of Phoebe and Tasha.

On nights without a chat, I felt so lonely. It was like being thrown back to the time when I had been first moved to Dr Max's camp and I had no one of my own age to share with. I had been thirteen when my body had changed. From observing the nighttime behaviour and groans of the others in my tent, I had found a new way to comfort myself while imagining snuggling into the soft fragrant breasts of my substitute mother.

Now, thinking of Wendy, these erotic dreams returned, always following a fixed pattern:

In my fantasy, my phone would ring, always around mid-night when I was asleep.

Wendy would whisper with a husky chuckle:

'Robbie, I'm in the street outside your concierge station. They said I was to go away or they'll call the Police. It's because I'm naked. I lost all my clothes when the washing machine at the hostel burst into flames. Please call them and tell them to let me come to you.'

In the dream I would race down with a dressing gown to rescue her and after we had showered together, we made love.

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As the days dragged by towards Tuesday 15 August, I began to build a picture of Wendy's life in New Zealand. I knew she lived with her mother, Helen, on a smallholding on the outskirts of Dunedin, in a secluded valley with its own microclimate. I had her address and Zip code and studied the location and its surrounds in *Google Earth* and *Wikipedia*. I learned Dunedin had been named after Edinburgh and that the weather in coastal Otago was a slightly warmer and drier version of the weather in Scotland with the best months in January and February with the chance for frosts and snow in July and August.

From Wendy's *WhatsApp* ramblings, I knew the Smythes had two horses, Bianca who was Wendy's. Helen, a fearless horsewoman, had Bruno a huge gelding of seventeen hands. Unlike Wendy who grew organic vegetables, Helen was an omnivore and kept chickens, pigs and goats. Pest rabbits were a problem, dealt with by Helen, a crack shot with an air rifle, using this meat to feed Smiffy and Chace their two Border Collies who joined them on their occasional weekend and holiday pony-trekking camping trips.

In the past they had also stabled Nero, a horse who had belonged to her older brother Mark, a chef, who had lived in Dunedin with his partner Eric. When Mark died of blood

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cancer, they offered Nero to an older cousin of Eric's, who insisted on paying a high price for the horse, even though he was a handful.

Mark's illness had 'taken him' within three months of his first diagnosis, his death occurring only weeks after Wendy's father had died from his quad bike injury. The medics had said it was the suddenness and timing of these deaths which had caused Helen's mental breakdown. Following her discharge, mother and daughter and their friends had made a pact never to talk about their loss as doing so risked causing Helen's mental health issues to flare up.

As my meeting with Wendy loomed nearer, I abandoned my alternative plan to send a memory stick to DCI McNulty setting out all the details of the true Dr Mena, hoping to convince the Police they were chasing her brother. I had also put on hold my planning for a direct assault, telling myself I had already done enough, that it was down to McNulty and her team to unravel the mystery, desperately hoping my part in the removal of the Marshalls and Sandersons would never be detected and that my deep cover was secure. If I tried to intervene further, this would increase the likelihood that the *Linked-In* cabal would somehow track me down and I would lose everything, including the possibility of a future life with Wendy. I must just sit tight and be patient.

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Sideswipe

On the evening of Monday 14 August, there was no call from Wendy, no re-assuring text message and no reply to my five *WhatsApp* messages and many texts.

Had she fallen and hurt herself?

Had she slipped and drowned in a fast-flowing river?

Eventually I settled and my mind floated away into a new fantasy.

We were swimming side by side in the sea. The sun was shining and the water was still, no waves. We were snorkelling, laughing, messing about, splashing handfuls of water at each other.

My phone buzzed and vibrated.

I was instantly wide awake. It was 03:50.

Wendy sobbed:

'Robin, I'm in Schiphol Airport. Mummy was out riding Bruno and had a bad fall. Her leg is broken in three places and she has bad concussion. My flight's boarding in a few minutes. I just managed to get a seat. They've been terrific about it, accepted my 'Round the World ticket' with only a small surcharge for late booking. They squeezed me on because I'm an emergency case, but I must go a roundabout route, with a stopover in India. Oh, Robin, Robin, I had been so looking forward to coming to see you and meeting your mum and sister.'

'Wendy, is this real? Please tell me this is a leg pull, that you're outside, at the concierge station?'

'No, Robbie. **No!** I'd never do a horrible thing like that. Look, I promise I'll come back, when Mummy gets well again. I hope you don't mind but I've sent my rucksack to your place. I bought most of the stuff here, when I arrived and it's so heavy. There's a present inside for you, so do open it up. I was saving it to give you.'

'Sorry, Robin, that's the last call for my flight.'

Love you.

I'll try *Skype* or *FaceTime* when I get a chance.'

I was alone again.

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When Wendy's rucksack arrived, I took it to my room. It was plastered with sewn on badges recording her progress around the UK's various walking trails.

After a long period of looking at it, I decided to open the front section to try to find my present. I took everything out and laid the items on my floor but could not see anything that might be a present. Eventually, when I had removed everything I found it, wrapped inside her pyjamas. It was an envelope with a card enclosing a printed voucher for a course of ten riding lessons at the *Ingliston Equestrian Centre*.

The card said,

Robbie, try this as a new hobby. I betcha love it! Wendy, xxxxx.

I lay on my bed and held her pyjamas to my face, inhaled her smell. In that moment I decided, come what may, I must try to find a way to marry this girl who had taken over my thoughts so completely.

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During the days which followed, I checked my devices constantly, obsessively, hoping and expecting to hear news from Wendy.

After the first week of silence and a nil response to my dozens of pleading *WhatsApps*, I began to feel that something very bad must have happened.

Perhaps Wendy had lost her phone with all my details on it and did not know how to contact me.

I wrote to her at once, using a registered airmail letter, giving my details.

After a further week, I wrote again.

Perhaps Helen had died?

If so, had the combined loss of her father, brother and mother caused Wendy to have a trauma breakdown.

Or had Wendy found someone else to share her life with, unwilling to wait without a definite date when I could go to her?

Perhaps one of the handsome medics treating her mother?

Perhaps, Tom Elliot, the older man who had insisted on paying a good price for Nero.

Or maybe Wendy was already on her way back to Glasgow, as she had promised?

With every passing hour, I invented new scenarios; dozens of them, both good and bad.

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After a month of frustration, I remembered what Dr Mena had said while her repeated adoption requests were being blocked by bureaucrats in Geneva:

"Tommy, our lives are full of unexpected hurdles and disappointments caused by circumstances we can't control. Often the best we can do is wait and hope it will work out in our favour.

"But while we are waiting, we must always carry on doing our best and tackle problems we can solve, no matter how hard they seem to us.

"So, stop fretting about the people in Geneva. You have your mock A-Levels coming up soon. You have a very good brain, so use it!

And remember, Education and Knowledge are key ingredients for success, whatever life throws at us.

So, keep your focus and do your best for me, for yourself.

"Will you promise me, Tommy?"

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Surge

Since arriving at *Redcroft*, I had dedicated myself to Phoebe and Tasha in payment for the life I had stolen, always putting their needs first.

Now that I wanted to escape to be with Wendy, I began to think of other possibilities for my patients. With my rational mind I could see all the obstacles but made myself believe I would find a way of overcoming them.

I decided to make a real effort to try to rehabilitate Phoebe to a level of health and stability where I would no longer be needed, a reset situation where, with additional support from Ralph and Gary she would be able to cope at *Oasis* without me. From the outset, I sensed this was probably a futile hope but with Wendy in my dreams, I shut out my doubts and discussed my ideas with Dr Khan who arranged for an Occupational Therapist visit to assess Phoebe.

In a long rambling session delving into her past, Fiona Duncan discovered Phoebe's latent passion for dressmaking and design. Sitting in the background during this session, I learned Phoebe had been a top student at Edinburgh College of Art before joining her father in his business.

Later, from my *iPad*, with its screen views projected onto Phoebe's TV and using the original account I had set up in her name, we sat side by side and ordered a full set of equipment and materials including an all-in-one workshop desk with a corner wrap-around layout table and a central section for a sewing station. In the end, we chose a refurbished vintage Singer sewing machine, a make she recognised. Her goods arrived in a great flood, which excited Tasha who thought it was a second Christmas.

Within a few days Phoebe had a micro-workshop up and running in a corner of her bedroom. The sewing machine needles, scissors and fixing pins were a worry but as far as I knew Phoebe had no history of direct self-harm. I decided to take the risk.

Phoebe's project took hold and once more we visited *Amazon* to order templates and new batches of material which she used as a basis for her own designs, modifying, experimenting, improvising with the templates as supplied, attempting to create the results she was picturing in her mind. She worked slowly, methodically, doggedly and over a period of a few weeks made dresses for herself and Tasha and several doggy outfits for Duke who had recently been renamed 'Prince'. Some of her early dresses turned out to be too small and too glamorous for her taste, more suited to younger, slimmer women.

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Those we judged were good enough, we donated to a charity shop in Albert Road beside the shops where we foraged for our fruit and vegetables and other daily supplies. For our main monthly shopping, I had learned to arrange a late *Tesco* delivery timed to arrive after my patients were asleep, this to avoid another round of whining by Phoebe for alcohol and cigarettes, a craving which seemed to have returned with the reduction in her medicine dosages.

When we checked at the charity shop, Phoebe was delighted her creations had sold out within hours of going on display. Enthused, she redoubled her output, spending several hours each day cutting, pinning together matching edges, making mock-ups, adjusting, then whirring the pieces together with her sewing machine before displaying them on her mannequins.

I bought an *Amazon Alexa Show* device for her room and linked it to our speaker system. By trial and error, Phoebe rediscovered old songs. Free of alcohol and smoking, she had a reasonable high alto voice and could hold a tune. Using the *Alexa Show* to project the lyrics onto her TV screen, we became a singing household with Phoebe, Ralph and Gary belting out The Beatles, Barbara Streisand, Dolly Parton, Barbara Dickson, Don Maclean anthems and songs from the shows. Tasha joined in clapping and shaking her new set of hand-held percussion toys.

Much later, I would regret giving Phoebe unrestricted access to this *Alexa Shaw* device, worrying she might use it to order items such as cigarettes and Vodka.

What none of us recognised was that Phoebe was on a trajectory which medics often call 'the last hurrah', the final spurt for life which comes as a person nears his or her end. This apparent improvement in demeanour is often sparked by a change in body chemistry as a secondary illness begins to take charge, often undetected. While Phoebe's surge lasted, we were all oblivious to what was happening deep inside her body, mis-reading her symptoms of occasional blood spots in her faeces as minor relapses in the long-drawn out recovery process which had begun almost two years earlier when 'Robin McKelvie' had returned from his overseas posting in the refugee camp in Greece.

My daily searches of my favoured newsfeeds reported nothing to suggest that DCI McNulty was making headway to dismantle the 'sex slaves' organisation.

Seeing Pheobe's progress and gaining confidence from the absence of any attack from the evil cabal whose names I had obtained from Dee's memory stick, I reinstated my plan to eliminate the fake Dr Mena before going to New Zealand to join Wendy.

To be sure I would succeed, I must have free time for rehearsals and practice with my drones and other equipment. There would be no room for slip-ups once I started my attack.

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I discussed my ambitions for Pheobe with *Orchard Park Carers* asking for more time each week from Ralph and Gary. In addition to their inputs on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, it was agreed they would also visit on Tuesday mornings from eight until noon to supervise Pheobe as she breakfasted and medicated herself and Tasha before their usual rounds of bathing and physiotherapy. Additionally, every second Thursday they would take charge from four o'clock in the afternoon until around eight in the evening.

As qualified nurses, they were willing to take on the additional duty of supervising Pheobe while she medicated Tasha for the night before medicating herself then waiting until they were both settled and sleeping before departing ahead of my late return from my fictitious wildlife photography club.

To reassure them, I promised I would always be available on my phone and that I would be watching from time to time using the *Blink* cameras which they already knew about.

Through the remainder of the autumn of 2017, we all saw Phoebe McKelvie as a woman who had at last turned her life around.

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Bad News

During the eight-week period since her call from Schiphol, I heard nothing from Wendy, even though I had sent dozens of *WhatsApps*, texts, emails and left voice messages. I racked my brain but could not think of anything else I could do.

Nights were the worst. When I could not sleep, I began monitoring newsfeeds from New Zealand and sought out social media sites based around Dunedin, joining these by pretending to be Phoebe McKelvie, a concealment habit which had become engrained. I took another risk and asked Wendy Smythe if Phoebe McKelvie could become her friend on *Facebook*. I received no reply. On reflection, I was pleased at this outcome, realising I must not link Phoebe and the McKelvie name with Wendy in case my plan for dealing with the fake Dr Mena did not work.

Although it seemed as if Wendy Smythe had disappeared, I convinced myself she was still out there for me and needed the support I could give, if I could find a way to reach her.

To divert myself, I enrolled for riding lessons and added to my package. I was riding for two hours, twice a day, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, constantly checking my phone. I added to my voucher package and kept going, becoming proficient, learning all about horses and how to care for them before changing to a one lesson a week consolidation package. Meanwhile I was researching equine behaviour and watching videos on *YouTube*.

When the message came from New Zealand in mid-October, it was not a phone call or an invitation to participate in a *FaceTime*, *WhatsApp*, *Facebook* or *Skype* session. Instead, I received a long, long text:

"If you are Robbie, this is for you. This is Helen, Wendy's mother. She tells me you are a special friend and that you know I had a bad accident. I am recovering but Wendy has been placed in isolation. The day she arrived home, she collapsed, running a high fever, in great distress, struggling to breathe. Tests have not yet determined what has attacked her immune system. It seems she probably picked up a bug during her stopover in India. In the last few days she has started to respond and is now able to talk. Wendy is still very unwell but she is desperate to tell you she still intends to return to Scotland to visit you to keep your date as soon as she is recovered. Pray to God it is soon. She says you are a nurse like me and will understand what has happened. She asked me to add this message from her:

"Hi Robbie, love ya baby, xxxx. Wendy."

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"Robbie, please let me know if you get this. I am not good with these phones. Everything is too small and my eyesight and hands have been affected by my fall."

Although the news was bad it was a great relief. I replied at once to ask for an address to send flowers and a fruit basket.

The reply came back the following day.

"Robin, no flowers, not yet. She has relapsed. Pray for us. Helen."

An icy cold hand squeezed my chest, causing me to gasp at the pain. I thought I was having a heart attack until I was moving fast for the toilet to empty the contents of my stomach into the WC.

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Boomerang

On Thursday 23 November 2017, a few days before 'Robin's' twenty-sixth birthday, a letter arrived from Newcastle University. It was from Ms Alison Frobisher, the Course Administrator (Postgraduate Studies). When I had first moved to Edinburgh and had settled in at *Redcroft*, I had made an online application as a remote learner for the degree of *BSc (Hons) Paramedic Science* as a mature student, listing Robin's qualifications and experience, citing my current caring responsibilities, asking to be accepted onto their Virtual Learning Environment Programme (VLEP). This was long before I had learned about the fake Dr Mena.

Ms Frobisher's letter stated a last-minute vacancy had arisen and asked me to call her to arrange a date for a face-to-face interview with Emeritus Professor Philomena Shearer, the course intake adjudicator, emphasising the matter was urgent as the next cohort would commence in early January. Professor Shearer was due to travel overseas very soon in her role as a board member of the *Médecins Sans Frontières Comité International*.

My first instinct was to reply by email and politely decline this offer but I held off, to do some checking.

That night, with my patients asleep, I revisited the newsfeeds I had avoided since I made my decision to leave the problem of 'Sex Slaves in Scotland' to DCI McNulty. A new hyperlink led me to another site where I learned from a 'mole' that repeated attempts by the BBC to air the original McNulty programme had been blocked by a well-funded group calling themselves *Freedom from Trial by Tyrannical Television (FTTT)*.

Checking, I discovered all previous references to Professor Philomena Shearer had been wiped from these newsfeed records, including her photo-image. Luckily, I had copied it to my laptop. Revisiting it, I confirmed my earlier judgement that the image was that of the Imposter, the fake Dr Mena, the person I had convinced myself was her deranged brother Patrick Shearer, still missing, presumed dead.

Raking back, I found another newsfeed, from a person based in Dublin, declaiming the ongoing *Sex Slaves in Scotland* debacle and asserting that like many of these stories this one had been quashed by 'The British Establishment' who would ensure the BBC programme would never get an airing. Elsewhere on the Web, the threads from July and August had dried up, many deleted.

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Checking the *Police Scotland* website, I learned Janice McNulty had been moved to Budapest on secondment to *CEPOL*, the *European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training*. McNulty was now a Chief Superintendent. Had she been 'bribed' to go? Or was the move a genuine attempt to tackle the problem of people trafficking on a European-wide scale?

Everything I had already read about McNulty pointed to a tenacious sleuth, a high achiever with a double first in Science and Psychology from Cambridge University, a person who had dedicated her twenty years of policing to fighting crime. Many had tipped her to rise to the very top, expecting her to become Head of Scotland Yard or perhaps take a sideways leap to MI5.

Despite her record, I began to see Janice McNulty in a different light, concluding she had allowed herself to be lured away from the *Sex Slaves* case and the unsavoury associated mass murders which might taint her, blocking her next promotion.

If so, people at the top of the UK hierarchy must be involved and my attempt to prod the Police into action had clearly failed. And given that the BBC with all its powerful resources had failed to even leak what they must know, it seemed likely that sending my information to the mainstream media would also fail to gain traction.

Later, when I tried to sleep, I was visited by the ghost of my real Dr Mena standing at the foot of my bed shaking her head and wiping tears from her eyes. After a few hours of submerging myself under the duvet, when I could not take it any longer, I set up my *Blink* cameras, *iPad* and laptop to relay images to allow me to remotely monitor Phoebe and Tash, changed into my running gear, checked out with the remote concierge, plugged in my *iPhone* earbuds and set off into the mild, wet night.

Even then there was no escape. The BBC World Service journalists were holding a night long-vigil in support of *Amnesty International*. As I ran, I heard voices like my own speaking from dozens of locations, putting their case to the World, asking for relief from suffering, pleading for justice and the right to enjoy freedom of movement with equity of access to the economic benefits and medicines enjoyed by those fortunate enough to have been born in the West.

I ran at a fast-jogging pace, at my limit. For the next three hours straight, I kept pushing myself in spurts then slowing. Exhausted, I showered and fell into bed with the beginnings of a plan. While I could not hope to visit revenge on all of those involved, I resolved to discover who had killed my Dr Mena. At least I could be certain the fake Professor Philomena would not recognise the fake Robin McKelvie and so I could approach her face-to-face, as he/she had requested.

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Softly, Softly

Starting at seven-thirty in line with our usual schedule, my first duty was to supervise Phoebe as she attended to Tasha's nappy change including bathing before towelling her daughter dry. Phoebe then applied the various ointments to her daughter's feet and stump. Watching surreptitiously from the sidelines, I checked as Phoebe took her own medications first before going through Tasha's dosing routine to be sure she was safe and stable, noting her daughter's readings in the daily diary. After Phoebe had showered, I helped her dress. We made breakfast together and my patients settled to watch morning television.

Free at last, I then made the call to Alison Frobisher. We picked Tuesday 19 December, the day before Robin McKelvie's birthday. This choice gave me only a few weeks to make my preparations, tight but doable.

When Ralph and Gary took over, working with my planning schedule prepared months earlier, I had a busy session on the Internet.

For the first time I bought *Bitcoins* and delved into the murky world of the Dark Web, the place where almost anything can be obtained, no questions asked. These hidden sites are mainly used to obtain drugs, weapons, hard-core pornography and the like. However, the Dark Web can also be used to buy equipment and information that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to obtain. Other items I ordered from *Amazon* in the usual way.

The next few days were hectic as my orders arrived to be unpacked, checked and set up ready for use or stowed in the Fiat for my trip.

I took my new sophisticated AI-assisted drone out to a disused farm track beyond Mugdock Country Park, an area I knew from off-road mountain biking. With the Fiat parked out of sight in a small copse of trees beside a secluded field, I practiced flying my new drone in the normal way by maintaining visual contact. I had been studying drones on and off on *YouTube* since Pam Wright had told me of her Drone Surveys back when she first visited me at *Redcroft*. Since settling at *Oasis*, I had been flying tiny fun drones indoors and around the perimeter of *The Mews* from the deck.

Based on an Israeli Mossad design, my new aircraft was a copy of a military spy drone, with a quick charge, ultra-lite, high endurance battery. My chosen version had been customised for wildlife photography and although slow, it was almost silent and could fly in light winds for up to three hours between recharges or battery changes. In addition

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to a second charger, I had two replacement batteries which gave me roughly nine hours flying time in moderate winds without the need for a recharge. In theory, to be legal, I should have a special licence and expensive insurance.

As directed in the manual, I gave my drone a name, deciding on 'EAGLE'.

Following its first recharge, I changed mode. Using a paired VR headset of the type favoured by online gamers which received high quality images from the EAGLE's miniaturised cameras, I made my first remote flight over the hill, back towards Craigallion Loch. Using the onboard AI and GPS hovering features, I maintained an altitude of exactly three hundred metres, a height at which the drone could not be seen or heard by those below. Using its camera and remote controller as if in a video game, I parked the EAGLE directly above our Miss Muffet hillock and studied those walking running and cycling on the West Highland Way. I was amazed at the clarity of the images streamed back to my headset. When I engaged the directional microphone, I could hear them talking, the voice streams filtered by software to eliminate wind noise.

Using the Subway from Shields Road to George's Cross, I made a trip to the Mitchell Library where I used a computer terminal to create a password protected G-Drive cloud storage account, using Phoebe's name and bank account details. The marvel of such an account is that it can be used to store sensitive information which can be accessed anonymously from any location on planet Earth with an Internet service.

By Friday 15th December, I was ready to put my plan into effect. I called Dr Faizal Khan explaining I would be away from late on Sunday, back on Wednesday. I explained I had arranged for Ralph and Gary to make extra short visits during my absence and he agreed this was a good plan. Later, he sent me an encouraging text:

"Robbie, good luck with your interview. You are wise to plan ahead and the remote learning model you described should allow you to manage your domestic situation. Paramedics are always in short supply. Drive carefully, the weather is set to deteriorate and the roads could become icy."

I loaded the Fiat Doblo with both of my bikes and three pre-loaded rucksacks. Under the seat which converted to a make-shift bed, I hid the Ziplock waterproof pouch containing the unauthorised prescription drugs I had purchased on the Dark Web. After a long debate with myself, I decided to take the Maxim 9. This weapon and its remaining ammunition I placed in a flip top manbag, stowing it beside the drugs, overlaid with a travel rug. Over the months since our move to Oasis, I had been on the verge of disposing of this gun many times but now that I had seen the evil in the eyes of the fake Dr Mena, I felt I might need it, hopefully only as a back-up.

Looking back, if I had not taken this gun with me on my trip, perhaps things would have worked out better.

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Since Phoebe had started her dressmaking projects, I had been encouraging her to take her share in caring for Tasha, checking her blood sugar levels, taking her blood pressure, placing a fresh cartridge into the holder of her Continuous Subcutaneous Insulin Infusion (CSII) pump system and so on. I had also encouraged her to help me cook and together we had built up a stock of storage tubs in the freezer, ready for the microwave. Some days I insisted Phoebe should take charge even wheeling Tasha into the wet room to shower her, dry her, sort her hair and make her ready for bed. I was confident she could manage for a few days.

On Sunday afternoon I had a long chat with Phoebe, explaining I was planning to leave very early the next morning and coaching her on what she had to do to care for Tasha. Halfway through my mini lecture, she quipped:

"Ach, Robin, dinnae worry. Remember, son, Ay-wiz lookin' efter hur for years, afore ye came hame tae us. An', as ye said yersel', there's eh-wiz Ralph n' Gary, eh? And they nice laddies ut yon gate hoose tae."

Mid-evening, when my charges were medicated and asleep, I called the offsite control centre and explained I was heading off for a few days, confirming I had arranged with *The Mews* CRS team to check-in with them regularly during my absence. As back up, I gave them contact numbers for Dr Khan and *Orchard Park Carers*, should Pheobe press the panic button or make a call for help.

It was a huge relief that Dr Khan, Ralph and Gary all agreed and wished me well for my trip.

Satisfied I had done my best for Pheobe and Tasha, I refocussed on my plan to deliver justice for Dr Mena.

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Advanced Planning

At 1:00 am on Monday 18 December 2017, I left Oasis heading for Dalkeith. I was tense, worried about driving at night and distracted by the details of my plan which were constantly churning inside my head. Driving at a steady forty-five miles per hour through a light drizzle, I was following directions from *Google Maps* on one of the ten burner phones I had purchased from the Dark Web. As supplied these phones were pre-loaded and 'enabled', registered to untraceable fake owners.

I intended to keep my personal *iPhone* powered down, to avoid possible tracking, especially if things went wrong.

Before proceeding to *Holmcroft*, I parked in a dark corner of the car park of the disused cash and carry warehouse. On the far side, the burned-out shell of Vincent Sanderson's Mercedes was still there, coned off with blue and white plastic "Police Aware" tape.

My first task was to apply dark obscuring film to the side and rear windows of the Fiat to prevent inquisitive eyes from seeing the empty wheelchair and my other gear.

Changed into my darkest jogging clothes and new black trainers, I rode my mountain bike through the drizzle to the farm. At the gate, about two hundred metres short of the building, I hid the bike behind a drystone wall. Checking that the gate could not be seen from the road below, I took a powerful hand torch from my man bag and searched the area thoroughly for clues that the Police had been here in the recent past. In particular, I was worried they might have set up movement-activated cameras and alarms. After a meticulous ten-minute search, I concluded there had been no visit from a cavalcade of Police vehicles. Standing high on the gate, I used the torch to scan ahead. I saw nothing except a scrubby overgrown track and no winking reflective flashes from hidden cameras.

I squirted WD 40 into the padlock and at the rusted hinges. From my neck pouch, I used Astur's key for the gate padlock. Although I could not prove it, my impression was this gate had not been opened since I had been here to dispose of the Sanderson's and their enforcer. As I walked slowly up the track to the farm, I checked left and right looking for discarded Police mini traffic cones, empty coffee cups, cigarette ends or tyre marks. I found nothing.

Moving from one hiding place to the next, keeping my eyes focused on the darkened building ahead, I moved slowly forward. One part of my brain told me I was being bold but calm and cautious; in truth I was shivering with fear. Over past months the Sanderson

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nightmares had gradually faded but revisiting Holmcroft caused unwanted images to flash across my mind with ever increasing frequency and intensity.

Only after I had circled the main building twice, checking and stopping to listen, did I pluck up the nerve to try the rear door to the scullery and laundry room. It was locked but after a few minutes fiddling, it yielded to my lock pick. Crouching, holding my breath, I entered and moved through to stand in silence in the kitchen. My hands were shaking so much I dropped the lock pick which clattered on the tiled floor and bounced away. Only then did I switch on my head torch sweeping it around in a full circle, holding the Maxim 9 with both hands and moving for a corner to stand with my rear protected. My breath sounded too loud, as if magnified by a speaker system. After a while my eyes adjusted, and I calmed down, slid the setting to SAFE and put the gun in the man bag, switched on my head torch again, found the lock pick and returned it to my neck pouch.

The air smelled damp and fusty with an undertone of wet and dry rot, reminding me of *Redcroft*. Staring blankly into the darkness, I tried to shut out the images which crowded in of Astur and Zahra held captive here and subjected to the pain and degradation of female genital mutilation and sterilisation at the hands of the woman with red hair and cruel eyes, the person the guards had called 'professor'.

After a long time, I sniffed away the tears and moved forward with my head torch on and the Maxim 9 at the ready with its safety off. I checked room by room to be sure I was alone. There were no signs of recent habitation, no electricity and no water flowed when I tried the taps. I ended my search in the dining room, the room with the metal table which Astur had pointed out to me on our visit a year earlier, when we had disposed of Dee and Zahra.

I shoved the table back against a wall and screwed four eye-ring bolts into the wooden floor which I then used to secure the legs of a heavy carver chair to the floor using stainless steel cable ties.

With this first step completed, I exited by the scullery door and followed the track to the mine shaft. Standing back and using both torches, I checked the door and the surrounds with great care. Again, there was not one shred of evidence that the Police had visited this place.

Why not? Had they totally disbelieved my story that this was the site of a mass grave? Or had an insider removed or corrupted the coordinates and changed the name of the farm? Or had 'The British Establishment' decided the scandal attached to such a heinous crime was too much to reveal to the public?

From my neck pouch, I selected the required keys for the three stainless steel padlocks. Since my decision to leave retribution for Astur and the others to DCI Janice McNulty, I had stared at these keys dozens of times. On one occasion I had stood on Glasgow's

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Squinty Bridge, tempted to end my involvement by dropping them into the Clyde before returning them to my neck pouch. Perhaps this was because I had always known in my subconscious the direct action I was now embarked upon would become my personal imperative.

I squirted a generous measure of WD40 into each padlock. All three keys turned freely and the steel door swung open. The smell was familiar, bringing back memories of my time in the camps.

The words came unbidden:

'Astur, I am doing this for you. And for Zahra and all the other innocents. And for you, Dr Mena.'

I closed the mine shaft door, reset the padlocks and put their keys back in my neck pouch.

Re-tracing my steps, I biked back to the cash and carry site at Dalkeith and sat in the Fiat to gather my thoughts, drink coffee from my Thermos and try to calm myself.

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At 05:12, I re-started the engine and headed for another farm near a hamlet called Pigdon, roughly two-and-a-half to three hours from Dalkeith.

Google Maps advised this should be a journey of one hundred and four miles, five miles from the town of Morpeth in Northumbria, thirty-minutes short of the city of Newcastle. At night and in dull, wet weather, I am not a good driver and settled to a slow pace to give me time to react to anything tricky. This was a route I had studied and tried to memorise but I brought it up on my *iPhone*, listening to the voice for reassurance.

According to the Dark Web details I had obtained, my quarry lived alone at *Isherwood Retreat*, described as a 'modern farmhouse development' dating from 2002. This central half-acre plot was ringed by a three-metre-high stainless-steel fence incorporating a razor wire topping and enclosed by a thick prickly hawthorn hedge. The central area where the buildings stood was on a man-made plateau. The surrounding fields, extending to a further eight acres, were also owned by Ms Philomena Shearer.

A file note suggested that the approval to create this campus of living accommodation, storage units and outhouses on green belt agricultural land had been contentious and suggested undue influence had been exerted on local councillors and officials. Traditionally this plot of land had been used to graze sheep but was now leased to by a conglomerate headquartered in York who farmed it using contractors to grow silage grass and kale as animal feed. In the lease, a copy of which had been supplied by my informant, the proviso had been highlighted:

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'No animals are permitted on these fields at any time.'

Reading on, I learned that the steep private track to the public road was enclosed by a two-metre-high electrified security fence and monitored by a series of infra-red enabled motion-sensing CCTV cameras. Access to this private track from the public road was remotely controlled through a double gate 'airlock' entry system.

A diagrammatic layout showed the remotely controlled entry gate and surveillance cameras linked to an alarm system with a display panel located at the main farmhouse with key parameters relayed to a remote monitoring facility located on the northern perimeter of Newcastle, approximately fourteen miles away.

The fulsome notes from my Dark Web informant also revealed the emergency alarm, if activated, either by the intruder surveillance system or the occupant, would initiate the immediate dispatch of a security patrol from the Newcastle centre which operated 24/7/365. The contractual maximum response time was stated as thirty minutes but attached records showed assistance arrived in about eighteen minutes, on average.

Although the local authority records showed the house was occupied by Philomena Shearer living alone, my source indicated that there were between four and six persons at the house, information deduced anecdotally by contacting the local council's rubbish collection contractors.

The report concluded:

'The locals say Professor Shearer is a harmless wealthy recluse, an academic who values her privacy. It is thought she is involved in secret biological research for a large international organisation who have demanded and funded the robust security measures she has in place. Although she is not part of the local hunting, shooting, drinks and dinner party set who consider themselves to be the landed gentry, she is a generous donor to a raft of local charities and a stalwart supporter of the Newcastle branch of the British Red Cross, remitting £1,500 per month by Direct Debit, this sum earmarked for their international aid work.'

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On Location

At just before eight o'clock on Monday 18 December 2017, as the first lights of dawn were creeping over the horizon, I parked the Fiat Doblo camper van in a very tight passing place near the village of Netherwitton, four miles from *Isherwood Retreat*. I had chosen this spot from a survey using *Google Earth* and hoped its location near a sharp bend would deter nosey drivers from double parking alongside. I had added a large *RSPB* sticker to the rear door, leaving another on the dashboard and a notice *Blu-Tacked* to the windscreen:

'Barn Owl Survey in Progress'

In the field opposite, hidden by a hedge, I laid out all my gear, double checking I had everything I needed. I then made a final inspection of my vehicle, checking from all angles to be sure its contents were fully obscured from prying eyes. Before locking up, I mounted my new trembler alarm in the driver's footwell. Should anyone try to force entry, this vibration sensitive security device would relay an alert to my *iPhone*.

I packed my largest rucksack with a lightweight bivouac tent and sleeping bag with enough food and liquids and all the recommended bits and pieces necessary to last me through the night to come, should extended surveillance prove necessary.

Even when dissembled, the drone was too big for my rucksack, too obvious to carry all the way over open fields to my chosen observation point. Instead, I carried it fully assembled over a hill to the edge of a small stand of trees, a spot out of sight from the road half a mile away.

Using my *iPhone*, I captured the coordinates for this location and entered them into the *EAGLE's* AI system as *BASE ONE*. Earlier, using *Bluetooth*, I had transferred *GPS* coordinates for my quarry's farmstead downloaded from *Google Earth* to the spy drone's AI memory, assigning a 'quick tag' called *TARGET*, this spot centred directly above *Isherwood Retreat*. Wearing my *VR* headset, I flew my *EAGLE* upwards at high speed to three hundred metres before programming it to fly autonomously at an optimum, slower, energy-conserving velocity to the *GPS* coordinates for *TARGET*. Directly above the farmhouse campus, I lowered it slowly through the mist to check I was on location then raised it again, tethering it with autopilot to hover out of sight above *Isherwood Retreat*.

I then continued my overland hike to check out my chosen Observation Point (*OP*), also previously identified on *Google Earth*, a location on the edge of a small stand of birch trees approximately five hundred metres from the rear of the farmhouse. In Dr Max's

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camp, I had read a novel written by a former UK SAS member who said most people tend to monitor the *approach* road leading to their 'safe house' and routinely forget to check for an approach from behind. Another common blind spot was directly overhead.

When settled at my chosen bivouac position, I put on my VR visor and brought EAGLE back to me, quick tagging my current OP coordinates as HOME. With EAGLE directly above me, I pressed LAND and watched the stream of images in my visor as it descended slowly, executing a detailed survey of the surrounding terrain while storing recognition data in its AI memory.

Hovering at 100 metres above my OP, its AI enable software automatically chose a safe landing place, avoiding trees, rocks, hummocks and other hazards. The whole retrieval sequence from its tether at TARGET to landing beside me at HOME had taken around ten minutes.

According to the digital User Manual, this data would enable the drone to land safely even in darkness and during adverse weather conditions such as heavy rain and high winds.

Using the drone's *Bluetooth* link to my *iPad*, I checked the images captured by the onboard Daylight Enhanced and Infra-Red cameras which had now memorised the wider terrain around *Isherwood Retreat* and my OP. According to the drone user's manual, EAGLE could now be retrieved much quicker and, if required, could be flown around the entire target area in terrain-hugging mode, either slowly or at maximum speed at my choosing.

Using laser scattering pulses to 'paint' the terrain below and by collecting millions of random microscopic reflections, the drone's AI software could create an accurate topographical image allowing me to fly it either directly or by autopilot during night hours, should I need to deploy this feature.

I removed the EAGLE's partially spent battery pack and put it on charge using a lightweight solar collector mesh. Unfolded from its small, slim pouch, this flimsy panel measured one metre by three metres. When stretched tightly and clipped onto adjustable angle brackets it became rigid. By entering the GPS coordinates for the panel's location, I set up its orientation and angle of recline using the App on my *iPhone*. In a test on the deck back at Oasis, even in overcast conditions, it had re-charged a fully spent battery in under three hours.

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First Sortie

As noon approached, I was almost ready to fly my first sortie to take a closer look at my quarry's citadel. Lying on a self-inflating thermal bedroll under the tunnel-shaped camouflaged flysheet of my narrow, bivouac tent, I looked down at the farmhouse campus through my new *Opticron* birdwatching binoculars and made a slow inspection of the site.

If discovered, I would claim I was bird-spotting. Since watching the osprey video with Tasha and Phoebe, I had been studying raptors while mountain biking around Mugdock. From *Google*, I knew the Pigdon area was a good place to look for Goshawks in daytime and Barn Owls which usually flew from dusk to dawn. I had swotted up on their behaviours and was confident I could discuss their habits and prey convincingly.

To the human eye, the premises looked dormant, unoccupied. My Dark Web source had sent plans which I had stored on my *iPad* and now I studied the reality to be sure I understood the layout.

Flying using manual control with visor feedback, I again sent off EAGLE to its tether location at three hundred metres above the exact centre of the U-shaped courtyard around which the buildings were clustered. With the drone on auto-hover, I fine-tuned the GPS coordinates for the quick tag labelled TARGET.

My lightweight digital anemometer gave a reading of 15.3 k/h and 3.6 Celsius equal to a wind chill index of minus 0.03 Celsius. Retreating from the icy breeze, I zipped the tent closed. Snug inside a full-length all-seasons parka and wearing insulated walking trousers with long thermal socks inside *Gortex* walking boots, I settled on my dumpy self-inflating camping seat with my legs stretched out in front of me to begin my detailed inspection of *Isherwood Retreat* using my remote controller and VR visor.

My watch alarm reminded me it was two o'clock. In my current regime I was eating light meals every three hours. Eating slowly, I had an orange, an apple and a banana, washing down each mouthful with sips of salt-free home-blended tomato juice with added lemon.

With my drone in place, I activated the Infra-red Thermal Imaging Camera (ITIC). Several buildings lit up showing they were being heated, a good indicator that there were occupants in residence. I saw three noticeable heat plumes, one intense which I took to be the boiler flue and two others which I deduced were a cooker hood exhaust and the outflow from a tumble drier discharge. This thermal imaging camera also showed tiny pinpricks of heat which the software interpreted as scanning CCTV cameras. I counted

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twenty-three but suspected there were others. In theory, an undetected assault on *Isherwood Retreat* would be impossible.

From its tether position concealed in the clouds, I gradually lowered the spy drone on a fixed vertical trajectory until the aircraft was flying in clear air just below the misty cloud. The precision lens of the autofocusing Enhanced Daylight Camera (EDC) provided a razor-sharp view of the buildings clustered on its plateau.

I lowered the drone to a new hover position at eighty metres above the courtyard then used my binoculars to check the position of the drone. Eventually I saw a tiny speck of grey which I judged would not be visible to the human eye.

Following the centreline of the perimeter security fence I moved slowly ahead with the EDC lens pointing inwards at the buildings, zooming in when needed, capturing every detail streamed live to my visor. With the directional microphone activated, I was also listening for voices or the sounds of human activity.

The blinds on every window were closed. I risked flying closer to examine the exterior of the main building in greater detail, taking care to stay above the sightlines of the downward looking CCTV cameras.

My VR headset was a professional model as used by wildlife film makers incorporating a removable 2 TB micro-memory card. When time allowed, I planned to transfer these drone images from this card to my new back-up full-spec *iPad Pro* bought especially for the purpose of reviewing and editing this footage. Later, when time allowed, I would prepare video clips to upload to the secure *G-Drive* account set up at the Mitchell Library.

When the orange warning light showed in my headset, I brought the drone HOME to replace the battery before sending it back out to continue my patrol, watching and waiting, hoping for a live sighting of the Imposter. Nothing happened until mid-afternoon when a few blinds were raised and I at once repositioned EAGLE to hover again above the courtyard, this time at one hundred metres.

As before, I used my binoculars to be sure it was invisible.

Taking me by surprise, a person left by the kitchen door, striding quickly across the courtyard, dressed in a vivid green anorak, dark trousers and black, knee-length boots. A short ponytail of red hair could be seen under a dark green bobble hat. The person entered an annexe by a side door. I knew this building was a garage with space for three cars. I moved EAGLE to get a better angle. A few minutes later a roller door opened and a black Range Rover emerged, accelerating towards the access track at high speed, bouncing down the slope towards the airlock gates. The car was fitted with reflective privacy glass and I did not get the photo shot I had hoped for.

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Using the drone's onboard AI, I 'locked-on' to the heat of the vehicle's exhaust and set EAGLE to auto-track. Now on the public roadway, the Range Rover chose the indirect route towards Morpeth. Increasing height, I tracked its route, driven at a reckless speed along narrow, twisting country roads until it joined the A1 trunk road leading to Newcastle.

EAGLE flashed a signal to my headset:

'Vehicle out of range.'

I returned the drone to its TARGET position above the courtyard at a height of eighty metres then checked with my binoculars. It was not visible in the failing light as dusk approached.

Now, at last, my long cold wait for firm evidence was rewarded.

Two tall, slim attractive girls emerged from the kitchen door and crossed the central courtyard to an outbuilding behind the garage. Repositioning EAGLE, I zoomed in to get a close-up view and listen to their chatter. It was a sing-song language I did not know. They were a darker brown than Astur had been, dressed in pale blue tracksuits, walking with bouncy steps on pink and white trainers, pushing at each other, laughing and giggling uncontrollably as if high on drugs. I judged them to be in their early to mid-teens. Using a keycode, they entered a side door of the building designated on my informant's plans as 'Sauna and Spa'.

A few minutes later, a third female emerged from the kitchen door. She was dressed in a uniform comprising a dark purple jacket with matching trousers and a canary yellow open-necked shirt. She stood close to the sidewall, sheltering from the rain, smoking guiltily, cupping it in her hand, inhaling deep drags until the cigarette was done then stubbing it out and wrapping the remains in a tissue which she slipped into her jacket pocket. During her smoking break, I took a series of photos each of which appeared on my *iPhone* as untitled *WhatsApp* messages from EAGLE. When the woman had returned inside, I checked these snapshots, confirming the yellow letters on the patch pocket of her jacket displayed *EHSCS*. Pinching out these images, I saw a woman who could have been a sister to Astur but ten years older, her face long, thin, gaunt with furtive eyes filled with a mixture of despair and anxiety, reminding me of the time I had found Astur beside the bodies of Dee and Zahra at *Redcroft*.

As I had been doing at every opportunity since leaving Pollokshields, I again powered down my *iPhone* and removed the SIM card to prevent anyone tracking me.

With the fake Dr Mena well removed from her lair, I moved EAGLE to a hover at fifty metres above the main building then activated a two-minute salvo of high-energy magnetic pulses mimicking a series of intense lightning strikes. The specification for the

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drone promised this wideband capability would disable all computers, phones, electronic appliances such as washing machines, dishwashers and boiler controls although my primary target was the alarm system and CCTV cameras.

Minutes later the woman in the purple uniform ran across to the gym and returned with the girls trailing in her wake. They were wrapped in fluffy towels, their hair wet and dripping. The older woman shooed them indoors. Moving to her previous spot against the wall, she lit up and once again smoked greedily. After a few minutes they re-appeared wearing pink shell suits and fluffy blue slippers. They called the older woman Miss Maria, and begged her for cigarettes, which she lit for them with a cupped match.

All three stood huddled at the door, staring down the track, watching.

Twenty minutes later a security van arrived, a silver colour.

I re-positioned EAGLE closer to the airlock zone, keeping it a one hundred metres.

The van's logo stated *SECURIT 24-7-365*.

Two men checked the outer security gate shaking their heads. The smaller chubby man made a call on his mobile phone.

The girls had retreated indoors but the woman in the uniform stayed at her spot, chain smoking.

A third *SECURIT 24-7-365* van arrived, a bronze-gold in colour. This older man behaved like a supervisor, taking charge, talking on his mobile phone. When he waved towards the house, Miss Maria immediately scurried inside.

The light misty rain became heavier and the men retreated to their respective vans, keeping their engines running to fend off the cold.

About an hour later two further men arrived in a white van with a green logo:

'Morpeth Electro-Technical Services (METS)

They worked on the outer gate with tools, eventually getting it open. They were working on the second airlock gate when the Range Rover arrived. The driver got out. I focussed the microphone. This voice was not my Dr Mena's high Alto. It was noticeably deeper, more mannish. I took a series of snapshots through the EDC lens then started my *iPhone* to check the images. Although the structure and colouration of this face was similar, I saw again its eyes were wrong. If further proof was needed, the Imposter accepted a cigarette from one of the men from *SECURIT 24-7-365*.

My Dr Mena was a vehement anti-smoker.

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The *METS* men released the inner airlock gate and Range Rover drove up the track at speed.

In the courtyard, the garage roller shutter door did not open. After inspecting it, the Imposter gave up. Maria ran through the drizzle and reached in through the rear door of the car. Two young dark-skinned girls tumbled out dressed identically in oversized green anoraks, black drainpipe trousers and long black boots. Maria grabbed their hands and hauled them out of sight through the kitchen door. I caught this action on video but did not get time for photo shots. The Imposter stood under the eaves at the spot Maria had used and lit up a long thin, hand-made cigarette, possibly a cannabis spliff. and made a call on her mobile phone.

With the call over, she finished her smoke, spat on the ember then placed the remains in a plastic bag taken from her pocket before disappearing into the kitchen leaving her vehicle beside garage.

Minutes later, all the blinds were fully closed against the approach of night.

When I checked, the bronze-gold van had left.

After a brief chat, the supervisor drove off leaving the other two on sentry duty, their silver *SECURIT 24-7-365*. van now parked across the entrance. Zooming with the EDC lens, I saw they were both eyes down on their phones.

Now that I had the direct proof I needed, I was about to press HOME to land EAGLE when I spotted a Barn Owl flapping lazily towards me. I focussed the EDC lens. The huge bird hovered above the recently harvested field of kale, using its eyes and ears to locate its prey. From *YouTube* I had learned this amazing raptor has hearing so acute it can detect even the heartbeats of mice and voles. The Barn Owl dropped like a stone and stayed down. I zoomed in on her, snapping a series of shots of her eating a vole, a set of intimate, crystal-clear images to add to my raptor collection.

By clicking HOME, I brought EAGLE to its landing site where I fitted a fresh battery pack before sending it off to land itself at BASE ONE.

With my gear re-packed, I set off into the freezing fog, following the 'retrace' guide on my *iPhone*.

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Diversion

I was in the Fiat by seven-thirty and on my way to *Border Forest Holiday Park* where I had booked a lodge online, an out-of-season one night rental for Mrs Phoebe McKelvie.

Just before eight o'clock, with the rain easing to a drizzle, I arrived and parked near the entrance with my lights off, checking. At the far end of the holiday park there was one other unit with a Jeep Cherokee outside, lights on, blinds closed. Later, checking the holiday park website I saw that the remaining cabins were 'available' therefore unoccupied. Although this was not essential, it was helpful as I planned to leave again early and hoped my visit would pass undetected.

Keeping my lights off, I parked the Fiat behind my cabin, well hidden. To gain entry, I used the code which had been sent to Phoebe's email address when I paid using her bank account. Once inside, I turned the fan heaters to full blast. Keeping lighting to a minimum, I drew all the blinds. The cabin was well-insulated and heated up quickly.

I had a large portion of spicy veggie casserole with me, taken from my freezer at Oasis. It was now fully defrosted and, while a handful of brown rice was cooking, I brought my essential kit and everything that was wet inside, draping the tent and flysheet over furniture. The holiday park website had promised the Wi-Fi connection to the Internet would be 'excellent' and the bed 'super comfortable'.

After I had eaten, I took a long hot shower then settled to check my evolving plan on *Google Earth*. However, after a long hard, cold and strenuous day I could not keep my eyelids from drooping. Since deciding I must take direct action against the Imposter, I had not been sleeping well. Further, I had been up from early morning on Sunday to attend to my patients at Oasis. I set both my watch and *iPad* alarms for three hours and by ten o'clock I was under the duvet, hoping for sleep.

Looming, pressing down on me was my selection interview at 10:00 am next day when I was due at Newcastle University. According to information volunteered by Miss Frobisher, the Imposter was due to depart from Manchester Airport in the early afternoon, first stop Paris, eventual destination Geneva. I had used a Dark Web source to confirm these bookings.

By midnight, wide awake, I was on my *iPad Pro* studying the video footage captured by EAGLE's cameras of the departing Range Rover as it set off in the direction of Morpeth. Alongside, I used my laptop to run *Google Earth* for the same area, looking for a location where I could create a diversion. I found three possible forest tracks which I thought

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might suit my purpose. Fortunately, they were close to each other, so I decided to defer my decision pending a physical inspection.

I ate a large early breakfast, a double portion of muesli and yogurt with a large handful of raisins then two bananas, chewing slowly and washing each mouthful down with sips of whole orange juice from the three-litre batch I had blended at Oasis on Sunday evening.

At three-thirty, after checking the cabin to be sure I had left nothing, I drove away quietly into the darkness of a moist mild and cloudy morning, pleased that the cold snap had passed.

Two hours later the Fiat was hidden in a forest clearing about five hundred metres from a closed gate from which I had removed the padlock and chain, these now in a plastic Tesco bag stowed in the undergrowth. I used my *iPhone* to capture the GPS coordinates for this forest clearing, entering this data into EAGLE's AI system as BASE TWO.

My chosen spot was just shy of four kilometres from *Isherwood Retreat*.

By eight-thirty I had EAGLE at TARGET, one hundred metres above the courtyard. With only the EDC lens mounted and all weaponry removed to reduce weight, the drone was now stripped down to 'endurance mode' to maximise flight times between battery pack changes.

I soon realised I should have been on station at *Isherwood Retreat* sooner because very shortly after EAGLE sent back its first image to my visor, the Range Rover pulled out of the garage and headed off at speed down the track.

The airlock gates were now operational again, showing the *METS* people had been busy repairing the security system during the hours of darkness. The Range Rover turned as before heading for Morpeth by the narrow loop road which twisted through the forest avoiding the longer, busier route which the security and technical services vans had used. In my experience most people stick to fixed routines and the Imposter was no exception. I set the drone to follow the exhaust heat bloom and watched as the car raced towards me.

Unlike the speeding car which was constrained to negotiate a longer winding route on a narrow C-class road, EAGLE used a more direct flight path by employing 'intelligent positional tracking' (IPT) and 'terrain hugging altitude control' (THAC) to fly one hundred metres above and two hundred metres behind the target vehicle providing my headset with a clear bird's-eye-view of the Range Rover's progress.

Placing the visor in its protective plastic box, I put on skin coloured latex gloves and opened the gate to give access to the forest track. Moving out onto the metalled road, I set out a line of cones and flashing yellow lights to block the path of the approaching car. As my final touch, I set up an advisory notice:

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ROAD CLOSED

Serious Accident

Temporary Diversion

HGVs wait here and call Police Control on 0800 505055

I retreated up the forest track, over the hill, out of sight, put my visor back on and watched the Range Rover skid around the last bend of the loop road, slow almost to a stop at the diversion sign then swing onto the forest track to accelerate towards me. I punched the controller, putting the drone into 'tethered mode', changed my visor for a Police cap and removed the clipboard and special pen from my manbag.

Dressed in a high viz jacket and wearing the full paraphernalia required for modern policing, I stepped into the centre of the forest track, my heart pounding, my mouth dry. The Range Rover decelerated then stopped. As the driver's window buzzed down I stepped forward with my clipboard poised and scrutinised a face uncannily like Dr Mena. The stop-start engine shut down.

Her face was smiling but her eyes were angry.

'Yes, officer, how can I help?'

Not Dr Mena's warm voice.

I swallowed and dropped into the stronger Geordie accent to make the short speech I had been practicing for this moment.

'Good morning. Sorry to delay you, this should only take a minute. Can I ask if this is your vehicle? We have a report that a car of this description was involved in a hit and run accident. May I see your driver's licence, please?'

'Oh, eh, not sure I have it with me. I do have my passport though.'

The Imposter turned away towards her handbag and I reached forward and stabbed the syringe pen into the nape of her neck, injecting a massive dose of powerful fast-acting anaesthetic. She was under within seconds, slumped forward over the steering wheel.

Everything now had to be done at great speed.

I ran back to the gate, switched off the flashing lights and tossed the diversion gear into the undergrowth. The C-road was now open again for traffic. Closing the gate, I raced back to the Range Rover, dragged the Imposter out onto the ground, trussed her hands behind her back with cable ties, trussed her ankles together and heaved her into the boot then pulled the privacy screen across. I drove the vehicle off the track into the woods behind the Fiat and covered it with dead branches.

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My watch showed eight-fifty-two.

The syringe pen was a *CIA* device and my supplier had guaranteed my patient would be under for at least three hours, maybe up to five depending on how her body metabolised the drug. I was tempted to add a little extra shot of *Propofol* but held off, worried this might tip her over into a coma.

I changed out of the police uniform, pulled on a dark grey boilersuit and slipped on wellingtons. I drove the Fiat down to the gate, parked it in a layby fifty metres beyond the entrance to the forest track, ran back, closed, chained and padlocked the gate, this time using a padlock of my own, one that would be difficult to open without a key.

I ran to the clearing I had designated as *BASE TWO*, landed *EAGLE*, disassembled it, packed it into its carrying case then stowed it out of sight.

At the Fiat, before heading off for Newcastle University, I changed into my interview suit and tie, taking on the persona of what I hoped would seem the perfect mature student candidate.

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By 9.50 am I was waiting in the reception area outside Ms Alison Frobisher's office, pretending to play with my *iPhone* (it was off) while sipping a cup of scalding black coffee and three sugars, which she had kindly provided. On the telephone she had seemed remote, unfriendly and I had imagined her as a small, shrewish woman in her later years but in person, she was large, plump and motherly in her mid-forties, reminding me a bit of Phoebe.

At 11:09 by the wall clock, Ms Frobisher offered a sincere apology, temporising by saying Professor Shearer had been unavoidably delayed by heavy traffic, adding in a stage whisper:

'Look, Robin, I don't think you should worry too much about your application. Actually, I shouldn't say, but the faculty committee had already approved you. It's just, well, I shouldn't say, but our Visiting Professor is a bit sticky about males in nursing. Now, please, Robin, promise me I didn't say that. Did I?'

I shook my head and smiled, glad to escape, fearing my captive might be awake, shouting for help.

Driving faster than usual, I made it back to the Range Rover at 11:54 and changed back into my overalls and wellies. Thankfully my patient was still under. I injected a shot of *Propofol* to keep her out and set a three-hour reminder countdown alarm on my watch for a further top up.

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With a huge physical effort, I moved my patient to the Fiat and secured her into Tasha's wheelchair, strapped her into the full harness and secured her wrists and ankles to the wheelchair with Velcro straps, as I sometimes did to Tasha for her own good when she became agitated. In my first plan I had intended to torch the Range Rover but instead decided to sterilise it using baby wipes. Wearing fresh latex gloves, I took great care to wipe all the surfaces I had touched and despite my urge to get away from this crime scene, I forced myself to repeat the wiping process three times. When I was satisfied, I locked the Range Rover, tossed the ring of keys far into the undergrowth and made my escape in the Fiat.

Free of the crime scene, I was surprised it was only 14:03. Until then I had been working against the clock, checking my watch every few minutes without really taking in what I was looking at. My plan was to approach *Holmcroft* in darkness which, according to my schedule meant I had time to spare.

I wanted to help the women trapped at *Isherwood Retreat* but without getting directly involved. As I ate a snack, an idea presented itself, almost fully formed.

Before leaving Pigdon, I found a secluded spot with a good view over *Isherwood Retreat* and flew off the drone, hovered it fifty metres above TARGET and once again zapped its electronics. I then brought the drone back to me, disassembled and packed it away, probably for the last time. In theory EAGLE was classified as military contraband and if caught with it, I would be in big trouble.

With my *iPhone* powered up for a few minutes only, I looked up the telephone numbers for the nearest Police station and the Newcastle Social Services refugee unit.

Using a second burner phone, I sent text messages claiming that sex slave women were being held inside a high security fenced compound, giving the postcode for *Isherwood Retreat*. I stressed the matter was urgent and that the girls were in danger of being subjected to FMG. I then trashed the disposable phone.

With my back to a line of trees, I watched Maria and the four girls standing outside the kitchen door, smoking, looking down the track towards the airlock gates.

The silver *SECURIT 24-7-365* van was first to arrive, followed by a Police car then an unmarked grey Transit people carrier. A large woman eased herself out of the passenger side and engaged in discussion with the two men from the security firm. I watched and waited.

Only Maria remained outdoors, chain smoking.

The rain began to fall lightly at first, quickly turning to heavy, sleety rain.

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The METS van arrived. The same two men from the previous day got out and worked on the gates. When they were open, a cavalcade of vehicles drove up to the cluster of buildings and parked in the courtyard. Everyone went inside.

I had done my best and must hope Maria and the girls would be rescued.

I headed back to the Fiat to check on my captive and head for Dalkeith.

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Bad Choice

During the trip north, the heavy rain reduced then stopped entirely as the clouds shredded then disappeared. A pink glow on the horizon shaded to purple black revealing a star-studded clear night sky. The temperature on the campervan dash dropped sharply towards freezing as a stiff crosswind buffeted, snatching at the steering wheel.

By 6:33 pm I was five miles from my destination, parked beside a small, fast-flowing river, in a hollow, hidden by high bushes, below and out of sight of a busy commuter road, waiting for the traffic to abate. I had soon realised my choice was a poor one, close to a bend where vehicles braked and accelerated noisily. I got out and walked up the slope to see lines of traffic hurtling past in both directions, horns blaring, jostling aggressively for superiority, attempting to overtake or bully others into exceeding the speed limit. I decided to wait it out, unable to face the thought of trying to force my way back into the traffic while gently blipping the accelerator to help the automatic gearbox hold the front-wheel drive Fiat on the slope without stalling, a skill which Astur had demonstrated but which I had failed to master.

In my revised plan, I decided to delay my approach until around 9:00 pm, long after the evening traffic surge had dwindled, minimising the risk of someone grabbing a dashcam record of the Fiat on the track up to *Holmcroft*.

With the engine off, the camper cooled rapidly. I was being careful to manage my fuel reserve knowing that most filling stations recorded the visit of every vehicle and driver on their CCTV monitoring systems, all readily accessible to the Police. To avoid the need for such visits, I was carrying two reserve five-gallon containers of diesel, each individually sealed in thick plastic sheeting to prevent them stinking out the van.

I avoided using the onboard Propane gas heater, an add on which Mr Grayson had fitted as a DIY project. Astur had used it once and it had 'boomed' explosively on ignition, frightening us both. Instead, I decided to tough it out by putting on extra layers. In the end I was dressed in my jogging suit over thermal underwear, wearing a thermal hat and a thick black puffa jacket, making me feel like an Italian mafioso. Despite these many layers, I was feeling shivery, which I hoped was not the onset of another viral chest infection.

My captive was under several blankets with one of Tasha's many Hibeas Bunnets on her head. I was worried she might lapse into hypothermia before I could complete my planned video interrogation. Although her temperature was marginally elevated from the drugs, she was otherwise stable, occasionally mumbling in a deep, husky voice. In delirium,

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probably due to mild dehydration, her words were meaningless. My latest injection had been a general analgesic given as a 'spinal block' in a dose estimated to freeze her solid. Then when the earlier general anaesthetic drug wore off, her brain should become active enabling her to answer my questions, I hoped.

Although I had little appetite, I forced myself to eat another double helping of muesli with yoghurt and two further bananas washed down with the last of my fresh orange juice.

Wearing my head torch, I went through her handbag, checking her personal possessions, looking for anything odd, unusual. Without passwords, I could not get into her *iPhone*, *iPad* or *MacBook*. I was surprised that the remaining items in her tote bag comprised only a Zippo lighter, three twenty packs of Dunhill cigarettes (unopened), a packet of paracetamol capsules, two missing, a drinks flask which smelled of coffee and a small bottle of still water, unopened.

In addition to her flight tickets and her passport, she carried a wallet type purse which held two credit cards, one debit card, three hundred pounds Sterling, five hundred Euros, one thousand Swiss Francs and a small pouch containing a variety of coins in different currencies. My captive carried no other paper documentation whatsoever and I imagined her to be someone fully committed to the digital age, with everything she needed stored on her devices.

She had a small carry-on luggage bag containing a selection of blouses (all in shades similar to the one she was wearing), six pairs of identical crimson-coloured knickers, two pairs of heavy tights in shades of green, a dark green tweed skirt and a pair of formal dark green shoes, almost black, with low heels. The shoes were larger and broader than Dr Mena's dainty feet had required. There was also a spare bra, with full-sized padded inserts, the sort used by women who have had double mastectomies.

Before concluding my search, I re-checked every nook and cranny and searched for false pockets in her handbag and case but found nothing sinister or secret.

Finally, I stared at the Imposter's passport photograph and checked every detail on every page. All the data tallied with what I knew of my Dr Mena but yielded no clue about the Imposter or why she had chosen to take over the life of another person.

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Waiting out this period in darkness while listening to the eerie mutterings of my captive was unnerving. I kept remembering her angry eyes and I am not ashamed to report that her presence created an evil aura which scared me.

At this juncture, while she was fully sedated, I had planned to check her genitalia, expecting to confirm this person was male and most probably Patrick Shearer, Dr Mena's

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deranged brother still officially missing in the records, presumed dead. However, I found I was unable to touch her. Perhaps later, after I had injected the truth drug, she would confess, tell me everything.

To divert myself, I used a third burner phone to check newsfeeds for anything on the sex slave girls. Although there was nothing so far, this did not surprise me. Over recent months, reading up on similar cases involving children and minors, I had learned that operating in the UK's 'blame culture', the various authorities always moved carefully, wary of being caught out and pilloried by the media. I suspected their immediate priority would be to locate and interview Professor Philomena Shearer, the owner of *Isherwood Retreat*. When I sent them the evidence from her confession, that would help, surely. Hopefully they would carry out a full forensic inspection of *Isherwood Retreat* and closely interview Maria and the four girls. Then, with this evidence, the Police and Social Services would discover the truth of their stories as victims, offer protection and a proper place of refuge and give them time, training and ongoing support to adjust to a new life in the UK. While I knew that this was not a guaranteed outcome, it was the best I could hope for.

Shivering violently, I began to sneeze. My nose was dripping, my head was thumping and I was sweating up. I was tired of the questions which had been chasing round in my mind as they had been for hours in a constant jumbled loop.

Who was this woman, this imposter?

How deeply had she been involved with the Sandersons and Marshalls?

With them gone, was she now the head of the organisation?

Or had she simply been 'a client'?

Had she 'bought' her slaves by performing illegal surgical procedures at the farm?

Was this sex slave ring still operating?

Was she in contact with any of the others on the pen drive list?

What did they know about me?

Could I kill her in cold blood?

Was my current 'infection' actually real or was it a psychosomatic illness, a precursor to another full-blown PTSD breakdown of the sort which had put me in hospital in Edinburgh?

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Jeopardy

At nine o'clock precisely I started the engine, defrosted the windscreen then eased the Fiat up the slope. Unabated, the traffic flashed by in both directions. Planning to turn right, edging forward inch by inch with the front bumper sticking out onto the road and every second or third car blaring its horn at me, I waited my chance. After a long wait, I decided to turn left instead, even though this was away from Dalkeith.

When I saw a lull, I went for it, slewing out into a gap in the flow, the front wheels spinning, the gearbox whining.

My rear-view mirror blazed as a car came up hard behind me with headlights on full beam, its horn sounding aggressively. I floored the accelerator pedal. The engine was racing but the Fiat felt sluggish. The steering wheel felt odd, too light in my hands. A surge of acid fear rose in my gullet as the van began to wobble and wander. I took my foot off the accelerator and felt the tyres regain contact. Back in control, I forced myself to take deep breaths and exhale fully. It was then that I realised I was driving on a sheet of ice.

The car behind pulled out crazily to overtake at a blind summit. Seconds later there was a sickening crunching sound followed by the eerie whoomph of an explosion.

Reacting automatically, I was braking hard when I crossed the summit. Once more the van began to wobble, slithering, straddling the central double line. I took my feet off both the brake and accelerator allowing the vehicle to coast as the automatic gearbox fought to re-engage with the front wheels. When I felt the tyres grip, I pressed lightly on the accelerator and gently steered across to my side of the road, glad I had not been rear ended.

The scene ahead of me was like a disaster movie.

Flooded with adrenaline, my brain was racing with every thought speeding up while every action seemed to be happening in slow motion, as in a dream or nightmare, the terrifying images searing into my brain.

The car which had overtaken me was embedded into the front end of a petrol tanker, being pushed along but slowing rapidly as it got nearer to me. Behind the petrol tanker, a conga line of cars was in the process of concertinaing into the rear of the tanker and each other. The tanker and car combination slewed off the road into a ditch and jack-knifed, falling onto its side. Fuel spilled and ignited and a river of fire spread into the field, spooking a flock of sheep which had settled for the night.

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Up ahead I saw a long, empty layby. Slowing gingerly, I pulled in and slithered to a stop just as space ran out. I doused my lights and switched off, watching in my driver's wing mirror.

My first instinct was to go back and render assistance to the dozens of people who had been caught up in the train of cars which had slammed into each other in the aftermath of the head-on collision. In the passenger footwell I had the emergency rucksack of medical supplies I always carried should Tasha or Phoebe need urgent attention. I also had my replacement antique Gladstone bag containing the cache of unused drugs I had accumulated over previous months at Oasis plus the backup drugs purchased on the Dark Internet.

Whatever was happening three hundred metres behind me had interrupted the flow of traffic travelling in my direction. On the lane opposite, a line of vehicles was building up, most with their hazard lights on, the line stretching into the distance, increasing as new vehicles arrived. Because of the icy road there were a few rear end bumps; horns blared in protest, angry drivers shouting at each other, taking snaps of the damage on their mobile phones.

Others were now standing on the roadway near me, staring ahead and chatting, holding mobile phones high, videoing the scene of carnage behind me, This was making me nervous in case any images of the campervan might be recorded and uploaded to social media sites which I had learned were now closely monitored by the Police and other law enforcement agencies.

A teenage driver with dreadlocks in a beat-up red car covered in decals buzzed down his window and released a cloud of vaped smoke, the sound from his boom box filling the air with reggae music. A middle-aged woman in very high heels who looked as if she was dressed for a night out, ran towards the crash scene, her large bottom bulging out of a mini-skirt, folds of flesh wobbling at her bare mid-drift. As she ran, she was attempting to shrug into a fluorescent pink fleece, hampered by the mobile phone she was clutching in one hand, her purse in the other. Calling after her, a younger man with a shaven head and wearing an orange jumpsuit ran past but when he realised the extent of the carnage ahead, he stopped, shook his head and stabbed at his mobile phone.

The vape driver vented his frustration by sounding his horn. Soon others joined in the cacophony. A few cars began to use the empty part of the layby behind me to make turns to head away from the blockage, clearly intent on finding an alternative route to their destination.

Approaching from ahead of me, I heard the undulating sound of sirens racing closer. Then I saw a small cavalcade of blue lights flashing, driving towards me on my side of the road. This meant the Police would soon be on the scene, looking for witnesses and garnering

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dashcam footage. I realised I would soon become trapped as part of this nightmare, a situation which would put me in jeopardy.

I saw an open gate about thirty metres ahead on my side of the road. Leaving my lights off, I started the Fiat, eased through the small crowd of onlookers and turned onto a farm track. Seconds later a Police car, Ambulance and Fire Tender arrived, their sirens now changed, yelping and piercing to clear the crowd from the roadway. I negotiated the steep bumpy track at walking pace, constantly checking in my rear-view mirror. Thankfully no one seemed interested in me.

Beyond the hill, out of sight of the roadway, I came to a gate secured by a chain and padlock which I used my lockpick to open, closing and re-locking it behind me. Fifty metres beyond this gate I found a large rectangular cul-de-sac used to store farm machinery. I parked out of sight behind a combined harvester and switched off the engine, aware that I was probably trapped here for at least two hours until I could resume my journey to *Holmcroft*.

Dr Mena's face appeared on the far side of the Fiat's windscreen, tears streaming, her head shaking. Even behind tightly closed eyes I could not escape her accusation and knew I had no choice but to try to help at the scene of the accident in whatever way I could while trying to remain anonymous.

Moving into the rear of the vehicle, I checked my patient was secure and subdued. Although louder, her mumblings were still meaningless.

Standing in my Wellingtons, wearing my grey boilersuit over my other clothes, my medical rucksack on my back, my Gladstone bag in one hand and a powerful lantern torch in the other, I ran back to the crash scene and joined the other first aiders.

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During my time at the crash site, I had been gradually displaced by professionals as the worst of the victims were taken into care. A string of ambulances and two helicopters were ferrying emergency patients away. Eventually my role was reduced to offering reassurances to those suffering from shock and utter disbelief at what they had witnessed.

A swarm of disorganised Police officers with notebooks and on-body video cameras appeared to be recording random clips of the scene while interviewing dazed people. First attempts were being made to get the traffic flowing but I saw that the first twenty vehicles which had stopped behind me had been quarantined, these occupants the focus of Police enquiries.

It was midnight when I slipped away into the darkness near the empty make-shift helicopter landing pad, hoping no one would notice as I trudged away across the muddy field past the flock of sheep which had settled again, chewing the cud while watching the

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chaos which had interrupted their slumbers. As I crossed the roadway to the farm track, traffic flow was light, intermittent. Looking back at the tanker and the Police vehicles, the scene was fully illuminated, busy with people wearing viz clothing; as I had suspected, I would have to plot another route to Dalkeith. Without doubt I had had a lucky escape.

As I approached the Fiat, from about twenty metres away, I could hear my patient, cursing loudly, spitting expletives in a high falsetto, intermittently pleading for help in a lower bass tone while threatening retribution. Involuntarily, illogically, I looked over my shoulder to check if anyone was listening but only the glow of distant floodlights dominated the dark, cold, moonless night.

I steeled myself then opened the rear door with a second smart pen held at the ready. Her ponytail wig on the floor, my captive was now bareheaded, revealing tight, short curls of grey and red, a duller red than Dr Mena's had been. As I reached from behind to stab at her nape, she tried to turn towards me but could not, snarling the words:

'Whoever you are, I promise you I'll slice out your eyeballs and feed them to my goldfish, you *bastaaaaa*. . . .'

As my captive went back under, I heaved a sigh of relief. First off, I checked the Velcro ties were secure. Her temperature was slightly low, her pulse and heart rate verging on dangerously high. As I held her wrist, the pulse began to drop. Now that her 'rage' had been calmed, she was slowly returning to normal.

I fired up my third burner again and checked *Google Maps*, entering the location of the derelict farm near Dalkeith. The App returned various alternatives, the shortest seventeen miles, time estimated at forty-three minutes, ETA 2.37 am.

Refuelled, I drove off, still without lights, re-locking the gate behind me.

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Dress Rehearsal

Using a fresh burner phone, I set out to follow *Google's* directions but once I was moving, I was soon being diverted to avoid road closures due to jack-knifed lorries and similar shunt and bump incidents. As a result, I arrived at the locked gate leading to the farm buildings at 03:29. If I am honest, although I was very wary of hitting further icy patches, I also knew deep down I had been driving much slower than necessary, dreading the interrogation to come, my mind performing a dress rehearsal, checking through every detail for one final time.

Browsing pay-for-view sites in the Dark Web, I had studied the interrogation methods used by the CIA, FSB (KGB), MI6, the French DGSE and the Israeli Mossad. It was the Israeli's who led me to my rather dramatic solution.

Once I had chosen my approach, I used the links provided and purchased the recommended complementary sedatives and stimulants used by the CIA and the latest truth serum developed by Mossad scientists. Then, after a long debate with myself, I bought a single dose of the Russian punishment drug used by the FSB as their 'final solution' for those who would not kowtow.

Based on the Israeli approach, my plan was to confront the Imposter at *Holmcroft*, the scene of her crimes while strapped into the chair I had set up facing one end of the operating table, keeping her under sedation until I had arranged my fully articulated anatomical model in place.

'Dolly May' was a tall, slim girl not unlike Zahra, with beautifully toned dark skin, long black hair with careful, lightly applied permanent make-up. Seen naked, she was highly realistic in every detail, even in good lighting. I had found her on a conventional website in the USA, purchased from an agent who offered a wide selection of such models to clients world-wide, mainly to medical schools but also to stunt and photographic modelling agencies.

In my plan, Dolly May, wearing a surgical mask, would be laid out recumbent on the 'operating table' at *Holmcroft*, her upper torso covered by a green surgical sheet pulled up to her chin, hair arranged in a top knot, details based on the description Astur had revealed on the night of our visit to dispose of Dee and Zahra.

The centrepiece of this arrangement would be the model's legs, fixed akimbo, her feet in white high-heeled stiletto shoes with a shaved vagina smeared with pig's blood in front

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of which there would be a small mound of what looked like human tissue lying below, surrounded by a pool of blood.

Obtaining these grotesque items had been easier than I had envisaged, supplied by a Dark Web agency which provided props to weirdos making snuff movies.

In my plan I would arrange dramatic stage lighting to complete the effect, all as rehearsed during earlier dummy runs while locked in my bedroom in Pollokshields.

Only when I was satisfied with this setting-up stage, would I inject my cocktail of drugs to bring the Imposter back to consciousness while using a top-up spinal booster to ensure her lower body remained paralysed below the neck. Focussed to ensure this operating theatre was never seen by potential viewers of the Imposter's 'confession', my three independent cameras would also be invisible to the subject, hidden in the darkness behind a bank of bright lights, where I would be seated but off to one side, wearing my boilersuit and a full ski mask., my eye sockets blacked out.

The continuous live streams from the video cameras would deliver images to my laptop, providing a long shot, a head-and-shoulders view and a third camera set to capture those evil eyes.

My three voices would never be heard as part of the recordings of her responses as my scripted questions would be delivered to the Imposter through tiny in-ear buds hidden by her wig. As recommended, to add confusion, intimidation and disorientation, I would use a voice-changer to give the impression I was a trio of people, changing between posh Geordie, rough Edinburgh and a refined Pollokshields accent, switching pitch from my natural baritone down to a deeper bass and up to tenor, also varying the speed at which I would speak.

Her responses would be captured by a radio microphone concealed in a black pendant I had brought with me for the purpose. Its output would be streamed separately to my laptop.

I had rehearsed and refined my interrogation script, peppering it with questions deliberately framed as if speaking to the real Dr Mena. This was a bullying approach aimed at provoking the Imposter, relying on the Mossad truth serum mixed with a CIA additive of hyper-caffeine, in a concoction designed to release her tongue and provide me with every facet of the sex-slave operation.

When I was sure I had every iota of information from her I would administer the 'punishment drug' and immediately withdraw to avoid the screams which this would induce. I had watched a few seconds of the clip which came on the accompanying pen drive and those earie sounds still haunted me. This punishment might take up to two hours to run its course, the clip had warned.

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I had already accepted the forthcoming interrogation would revisit me with nightmares for years to come but saw it as a price I must pay to provide justice and retribution for Dr Mena, Astur, Babsie and all the others whose lives had been marred by this selfish monster and her collaborators.

Later, back at Oasis, I would edit and merge the video and sound files to give the appearance of the Imposter's 'true confession'.

When I had polished the final output, I would add it to further pen drives to be sent to the same three enforcement agencies as before but offering them one final chance to take the initiative and smash the sex slave ring. In my introductory message, I would add the threat that if they continued to refuse to act, I would send copies of these memory sticks to every Westminster MP and Holyrood MSP with parallel copies to the editors of all UK national and provincial newspapers and to the production teams of all national and regional TV news magazines.

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The Final Act

Parked outside the side door at *Holmcroft*, I checked my watch. It was 03:35. I sat for several minutes, planning my next moves, staving off the moment when I must act. Mist swirled around the Fiat reminding me this was the hour when most of my patients back at the camp usually died.

The complete silence was marred only by the ticking of the engine cooling.

I felt a hand touch my shoulder and twisted round in panic but there was no one there except my captive, her head facing rigidly forward, her neck muscles in spasm, her eyelids closed. Thankfully she had not uttered a sound since I had stabbed her with the smart pen.

My heart began to thud. My brain fizzed, shouting at me:

THIS HAS TO BE DONE. GET ON AND DO IT!

I put on my head torch and moved to the rear of the Fiat, avoiding possible eye contact.

Kneeling, I reached out to check her pulse.

Her wrist was cold, her pulse non-existent.

I checked her neck: no pulse.

I flicked her ear lobes in turn: no reaction.

I focussed my headtorch, eased up each eyelid in turn: no response.

Fiddling with a pair of tweezers, I checked for contact lenses: none.

My planned video interrogation was now impossible as my captive was long dead, probably since I stabbed her with the smart pen hours earlier.

I noticed the tiny red-blond bristles on her upper lip and chin. I removed a surgical glove and tested the skin around her chin and jawline to discover the beginnings of a beard. I checked the facial skin very closely and saw the tiny tell-tale scars of facial surgery, almost certainly professional.

Forcing myself, I felt between her legs probing into her crotch to discover a resistant hard lump where there should have been an opening into the vagina. Was this a remnant penis?

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In death she was no lighter than she had been when I first drugged her. I carried her into the farm over my shoulder and laid her out on the operating table then sliced away her clothing, stuffing it into a bin bag. On her back, almost fully naked, her head still rigidly fixed forwards by the effect of the spinal analgesic, she appeared to be staring intently at the ceiling which had witnessed torture under her previous regime.

I stared at the smallish breast enhancements, saw the scars. Gradually the idea took hold that Patrick Shearer had carried out this surgery on himself.

The thick flesh-coloured knickers were wet, stinking of urine. I cut this item away to discover a slim G-String truss made of tightly fitting flesh-coloured elasticated material. I sliced it away to reveal a small, crumbled penis. It had been held in place by the truss, pointing backwards towards the anus. I eased it forward. It was child-sized, akin to that of a boy aged about six. This penis had been circumcised, an expert piece of work, unlike my own ugly version. I squeezed the tiny scrotum but could detect no testes. I leaned forward and checked very carefully before concluding the penis was real, not a clever prosthetic and not a surgical confection conjured out of relocated skin and fatty tissue.

Confounded, disappointed but also relieved, I sat in the interrogation chair, switched off the head torch and closed my eyes, considering my options.

Dr Mena's face hovered in front of me:

'Tommy, leave the Newcastle Police and Social Services to unravel the situation at Isherwood Retreat. Gladys Stimpson is your best hope now.'

My mind began to surge forward into churn mode as I reformulated my next moves. But I knew I must leave this further planning till later. My priority must be to dispose of his corpse and make sure there were no traces of my presence to guard against the remote chance the authorities decided to visit this derelict farm.

This meant jettisoning my illegal drone, camping equipment and all the other bits and pieces I had purchased while planning my abduction and interrogation operation. However, I kept a few items of the new clothing I had purchased and my new birdwatching binoculars. I also had the drone images on my laptop, now encrypted and password protected as I might need them to persuade Gladys Stimpson to cooperate.

I was reluctant to give up on my original plan to expose Patrick Shearer as Dr Mena's imposter. After a long debate with myself, I decided to keep his *MacBook*, *iPad* and *iPhone*. I had already removed their batteries to prevent tracking. I was very aware that keeping these items placed me at great risk and, by unscrewing panels, I found suitable hiding places within the carcass of the campervan for the various components. Back home at Oasis, I would visit the Dark Web and purchase software to try to gain access to the information they held. If this failed, I might send them to Janice McNulty.

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I also kept his fake passport.

Even though the eyes in the photograph were a good match to Dr Mena's, this could have been down to the use of cosmetic contact lenses used for the passport photograph. From long embedded memory I could see the features in this photograph were not those of Dr Mena and, since it had been issued only a few months previously, it must be a clever fake. By checking back through previous versions of Dr Mena's passports using central records, the authorities should be able to prove when Patrick Shearer made the switch. I was acutely aware this risk also applied to me but to a lesser extent as my face was a better match, I hoped.

Hoping to use Dark Web sources to gain access, I also kept his bank and credit cards as his transactions might also yield evidence of his misdeeds. If this failed, there was the option of sending them to Janice McNulty.

Meantime, together with what they might find at *Isherwood Retreat* and by interviewing the rescued girls, I hoped there would be enough incriminating evidence to spur the Police to act and smash the sex-slave ring once and for all.

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By 06:05 every shred of clothing and every piece of my special equipment and the remaining illegal drugs purchased from the Dark Web had joined Patrick Shearer's body at the bottom of the mine shaft. The final items to go down before I slammed and locked the door had been my grey boiler suit, wellies and latex gloves. Every part of the farm I had touched had been washed down and then wiped with bleach. I had been tempted to torch it but rejected the idea as this would attract the fire service and other authorities. In any case, it was well on its way to ruination.

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At the end of the track from *Holmcroft*, with the gate re-chained and padlocked, I was edging towards the loop road to Dalkeith when my watch alarm sounded my regular 06:30 wake-up call which heralded the start of my daily routine at Oasis. This reminder caused a surge of guilt. Despite my intention to call the CRS team two or three times a day, since settling Phoebe and Tasha on Sunday evening, I had not thought about them, not once.

During my journey I had avoided using my *iPhone*, deliberately keeping it powered down to avoid possible tracking. I switched it on to check for messages, appalled to discover there was a huge batch, dating back to Monday afternoon with four emails from the concierge service at *The Mews*, a long email from Pam Wright and a short WhatsApp from Wendy.

I read the message from New Zealand first:

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Hi Robin, out of 'jail' and back home with Mum. We are both in recovery, walking up to five clicks at a stretch. Thinking of you every minute.

Who loves ya baby?

Wendy xxxx

Pam's terse email had been sent at 03:57. Reading it my mind flashed back to the sensation of a hand touching my shoulder just before I discovered my captive was dead.

'Robin, not good news.

Phoebe is in Gartnavel, suspected overdose, critical.

Other complications suspected.

Poor Tasha is in QEUH undergoing emergency surgery on both arms.

They kept stalling, reluctant to operate without your signature but I pushed them into it by claiming I was your cousin and signing the agreement in your stead.

Bloody Medics!

My hospital insider says you must prepare yourself for the worst.

Least said, eh?

Robin, where the hell are you? We have all been trying to get in touch for hours and hours. What the hell is the point of a phone if you keep it switched off?

Hey, are *YOU* all right?

Ring me NOW!

Pam Wright

Wright first time, every time!

I scanned back through the other emails and text messages searching for the detail of what had happened to cause this crisis then switched off the *iPhone* again, unwilling to transmit from this particular location.

I checked my watch: 06:43, started the engine and set out for Glasgow.

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By nine o'clock I was crawling through the M8 underpass at Charing Cross heading for the Kingston Bridge and the turn off for the QEUH. Pam had kindly agreed to go to Gartnavel and be there for Phoebe.

After a minor delay, I was directed to Children's A&E where I made myself known.

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The waiting room was crowded. Every child waiting for attention seemed to have at least two, sometimes as many as five or more adults and other children with them. Sitting next to me was an Asian woman weeping over a sickly baby. She was being comforted by her husband. Two other vociferous Asian men came and went, making repeated requests to the triage nurses, offering special pleading in English before returning to the parents to advise what had transpired, now speaking in what I took to be Hindi. Clearly the hospital planners had not catered for the families and friends attending with the ailing children.

As the morning turned to afternoon, the swell of new cases rose to a crescendo and I relinquished my seat to a young mother with a pushchair containing a toddler suffering with a dry rasping cough. With her eyes filled with tears she told me in a whisper this was her third visit in as many days. So far, the medications prescribed had not worked.

I again went forward to the desk and enquired after Tasha to discover she had been moved to Intensive Care. Mrs Myra Guthrie, the administration assistant, promised to try to find out what had transpired but she was not hopeful because the surgical team were now working on a further emergency. She inclined her head; I followed her eyes to the couple who were seated directly behind where I had been sitting. I had heard them muttering angrily about whose fault it was that their toddler (Jack) had been allowed to climb up onto the worktop and pull the chip fryer onto himself.

By agreement with Mrs Guthrie I went outside, explaining I needed to make a phone call, promising to return soon to find out what she knew about Tasha. Standing well apart from the smokers, I called Pam but she blipped me off, an action I was familiar with. I waited. A few minutes later she sent a *WhatsApp*:

'Robbie, not good news. I'm on my way to QUEH. Wait there, please.'

A premonition convinced me that Phoebe was dead.

From behind, I heard someone shout my name. It was Tess Allan, the senior nurse in charge of Children's A&E. She beckoned, ushering me back inside to her cubby-hole room, flicking the switch to illuminate the 'Do Not Disturb' sign before closing and locking the door. Her face was blank. I knew the look. I had done this job myself, many times over. To make it easier for her, I took the initiative:

'I've had a message from my friend Pam who is at Gartnavel. I'm nearly certain from what she said that Tasha's mother Phoebe is dead. But please, how is Tasha? Will she pull through, do you think?'

'I'm so sorry about your mother. Pam called me earlier, told me your mother had a massive stroke and did not recover. Pam's my cousin and you are the saintly son, Robbie McKelvie, the person who has put his own life on hold over these last few years to care for his mother and sister.'

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'Not so saintly. No, not at all saintly. But Tasha?'

'Robbie, the news about your poor sister is not good either. The surgeon who operated on her is my husband, Vincent. The amputations were completed an hour ago. There was also great concern about the circulation to her legs but they were forced to defer treatment as her heart was struggling. Sadly, Tasha slipped away ten minutes ago. To be honest, this was not unexpected. All through the procedure they were fighting her blood sugar levels but the trauma was too great. Our condolences. Here is a card giving the number and website for the Family Support Group. I've written Tasha's case file number on it for you. Will you be all right? You look like death warmed up.'

'Yes, thanks. I just need a shower, some hot food and a good long rest.'

'Pam sent me a *WhatsApp* a few minutes ago, she's just parking. Wait here, I'll send her in. Would a hot chocolate help? The stuff from the machine is surprisingly good.'

'Yes, thanks.'

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Re-Boot

Pam arrived at QEUH and took charge. She refused to answer questions about Phoebe:

'One problem at a time, Robin. You are my priority now. Look at you. What have you been up to? Did one of that Sanderson gang come after you? I just knew it wasn't over.'

I shook my head, said nothing, accepted the key and did as I was told, drove the Fiat to her penthouse having been warned not to go near *The Mews* until she had checked it out and cleaned up the mess at Oasis.

When I had first arrived at her penthouse, we had hugged as I wept, my body shuddering with relief and grief. Commenting on the stink from my clothing, she had ushered me into the bathroom where I stood under the drench shower for over an hour, expunging the smell of death from the mine shaft. When the tears stopped, I switched off the scalding hot water.

My *Auchrannie* dressing gown was still hanging beside Pam's. I tried to remember when I had last been here. Probably the week after Wendy had called from Schiphol when I was at my lowest. Inevitably, we had ended up in bed although our lovemaking had stalled.

Pam refused to explain about Pheobe and Tasha, saying I was not ready to face what was known, insisting we move on to discuss our futures. She had made me a huge mushroom and bean risotto which I ate too quickly, giving me mild heartburn and reflux. Over endless cups of Red Bush tea, I spent hours talking to Pam about Wendy. Although she tried to hide her disappointment, Pam had been great about it.

Later, I had slept fitfully in one of her other bedrooms. When I was roused by my watch alarm, Pam had already left for the day.

Checking in the freezer section of her fridge, I found a frozen double portion of hot and spicy vegetable curry I had prepared when we were still 'just-sex buddies'. I prepared a large mound of rice and heated the curry in a pot. I ate my fill, drank a half-litre of V8 juice and curled up under the duvet, switched off the bedside lamp and hoped for sleep.

In my dream my first visitor was Dr Mena. She was a girl, wearing a school uniform. By her side was an older boy whom I took to be her brother Patrick. He was wearing a girl's bathing costume and making a strange face at me with his lips pouting as he made little curtsies. Dr Mena smiled to me and blew me a kiss. The boy copied her but kept blowing kisses to me as these images faded to be replaced by a bright yellow field of corn dotted with thousands of poppies. The light began

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to fade as the sun dipped out of sight and a Barn Owl flapped lazily above the field, twisting and turning. It swooped and stayed down, lost from view.

I waited, staring at this spot, but the owl did not re-appear.

The scene changed.

From the far side of a field of brightly coloured flowers, I saw a horse cantering towards me.

A conversation pinged back from a discussion with Wendy about gorse and lupines which had been imported by well-meaning settlers many years earlier but had turned rogue in New Zealand, taking over swathes of good productive land.

The rider stopped, stood up in the stirrups, waved and shouted:

'Hi Robbie, who loves ya, baby?'

I tried to stand up, to wave and call back but in my dream I was frozen, unable to move a muscle.

Although the horse and rider seemed to be making steady progress, they did not get any closer. The rider's face was in shadow and I could not be sure the person was Wendy.

This scene faded very gradually until there was nothing but shimmering greyness.

This too dimmed and became inky black.

Slipping, I tried in vain to stop myself falling into the stench of the abyss.

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The next days are missing from my memory.

When I came back to consciousness, I was in a hospital bed with a drip attached to my arm. I was strapped into the bed, seated in a upright position. The monitor beside me was humming and beeping. I read the screen. My readings were in the normal range. In my peripheral vision I caught a light blinking at me. Looking up, I saw the eye of a CCTV camera. Beyond the door, a choir was singing Christmas carols. I glanced back at the monitor and saw it was 20:23 on 25-12-2017 which meant it was Christmas Day.

The door opened and a male nurse came in. His name badge told me he was Hectore. I would learn later he was from Toulouse, his father originally from Sierra Leone, his mother from Angola, thrown together in the swirl of mass immigration to France in the 1970s. He had been in Glasgow for twenty years, first as a student at Glasgow University where he had met his wife Katie, a girl from Crail, which I soon learned was a fishing

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village in Fife where everyone spoke a dialect only local people could understand. But all this would come later, over the next week as I recovered.

'How is you feel today, Mr Robin McKelvie, sir?'

'Good, thanks. Where Am I?'

'You is in The Nuffield Hospital. Pity you is a vegetarian, the turkey dinner is mighty good. Yummy, yummy, mummy, in my tummy.'

His chuckle was infectious and disarming.

'I'm in Edinburgh?'

'No, you is in the Glasgow Nuffield. You think you need to pee?'

'Come to mention it, yes, thanks.'

'This is good, no more nappies. You think you is able to walk?'

I was shaky on my legs but Hectore was a big guy, towering over me, built like a rugby player, which I would learn later he was. He talked in a slow deep rumble the whole time he helped me undress and supported me when I wobbled in the shower and almost fell.

'Hey, we get you on the walkin' machine and the rower'n machine and build you up as good as new in no time. That chest infection you had, it was a bad, bad beast. My advice is you get away from this damp climate and go to someplace nice and warm. That's what me'n Katie's doing. Leaving for Sidney next month, end of January. Her brother is out there already. He sponsor us in.'

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By midnight I had had my further Phoebe/Tasha conversation with Pam.

From her I learned that on Monday afternoon, shortly after Ralph and Gary had left for the night, Phoebe suffered a seizure. From what was found, her stroke occurred while she was preparing to change the cartridge on Tasha's diabetes insulin pump. When Ralph and Gary had made the extra call at five o'clock on the Tuesday evening they found Tasha unconscious with Prince curled on her lap. Everyone hoped Tasha had slipped into her coma without distress.

I am not aware what they gave me but shortly after Pam left, my eyes felt heavy and I slept without dreaming until Hectore roused me at eight o'clock.

'How you is feelin' today, Robbie?'

'Good, Hectore. Really good. Thirsty and hungry, as usual.'

'You need to pee?'

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'Yeah, but stand back, I'm sure I can do this for myself.'

'You been cheatin' on me, read in my notes?'

'Hey, they're my notes too!'

'OK, Robbie, go for it but I'll hover behind you, just in case.'

During the course of that first day, with the aid of a Zimmer, I ambled to and from the mini gym on three occasions. The next day I did five sessions and on the third day, Hectore and I went out for a walk, making it to the local shops hoping to buy V8 juice. Having failed, I ordered six cartons from *Amazon*, causing the chef to come up from her den to scold me.

'Mr McKelvie, if you want me to put a jug of V8 or anything else of the kind in your fridge, just ask. Please don't go behind my back again. *Please.*'

On the fourth day when Pam arrived for her early evening visit she seemed a bit down, which was so unlike her I had to ask.

'OK, Robbie McKelvie, man of mystery, here's the gist of it. It seems the police have been looking for you and eventually they turned up at *The Mews* and demanded to speak to the registered owner of the Fiat in your garage. My insider contact- *no, don't ask!* - tells me they have only circumstantial and anecdotal evidence the Fiat was at or near the scene of a traffic pile up on the outskirts of Edinburgh last Tuesday. They also claim to have video clips of a man dressed in a boilersuit who claimed to be a paramedic and worked for hours alongside the official medical team. They claim to have a witness, a rather flamboyant spring chicken who calls herself *Genevieve Scholar*, who says you were driving the Fiat and that you pulled out in front of the car which then overtook you and caused the initial collision. My contact has revealed this lady is not in fact a 'barmaid' as she first claimed but a lady of the night who is well known to our Police colleagues in Edinburgh where she runs a small-time 'evenings only' massage parlour. Her real name is *Mags Teacher*, a woman who has been dealing in crack cocaine on and off for the last decade."

Her eyebrows were up, inviting a response.

'OK, so you are playing shtum. So be it. Well, to continue, I made a few calls, pulled in a few favours and hinted at the possibility the *Scotsman* might run an expose on Mags and her clients from the local Police who slip into her massage parlour for a 'quickie' and to escape from the late-night bedlam which passes for civilised high jinks when Hen Nights and Stag Parties get together on Rose Street and bottles start to fly.'

As I knew I must, I closed my eyes to her gaze and waited her out. To share what had happened would expose her to possible prosecution as an accomplice.

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'Robbie, the bottom line, no pun intended, is that I think the matter of further Police enquiries about your alleged involvement at the scene of the tanker crash near Dalkeith can be considered as side-lined, at least for the present.'

Her eyebrows were up again, inviting my response but I held my ground and said nothing.

'Just as I thought. Indeed, just as I hoped. But, Robbie, this business trip of yours, whatever it involved you in, must stop. **Now, please!** Not tomorrow or next week. **Now.** Will you please give me your promise on that?'

I smiled, nodding:

'No more birdwatching trips away in the Fiat, I promise.'

'Birdwatching? Really? Well, whatever, that's good to hear, very good. And the other good news, is the medics say you are fit and well enough to go home when you feel up to it. But just to warn you, I won't be around for the next few days. I'm off to Tenerife for a bit of winter sun with my new friend, a rather dishy central defender called Arturo who is recovering from a hamstring problem. Wonderfully, all the other parts of his rather magnificent body are in very good working order. See you next week for the funerals, OK?'

She leaned forward, pecked my cheek and rose to leave.

'Pam. Before you go. First, thanks for trusting me. You will never know how important that is to me. Now, you know everything there is to know about me and Wendy, which, basically, is nothing, well, not in that sort of way. Look, what I'm trying to ask is. Do you think I should go to New Zealand, take a chance, see what happens?'

'Ah ha! True love for Robbie at last, is it? OK so, a fresh start. Good idea. Leave it with me. I'll find you a buyer for *The Mews*. You'll turn a pretty penny on that deal mainly because I let you have at a rock bottom price. Ah, my dear, dear, dear Robbie, if only we could have made it last, yeah?'

'Yes, Pam, for a while it was special, very special.'

'But to get into NZ you'll need a sponsor, right?'

'Yes, I've made a start at looking for my Mum's sister, Hilary McKelvie, my aunt. I found her in Sidney, but when she moved to Auckland, her trail runs out. I just hope she has not actually expired. I might need to hire someone over there to find her for me. Do you know anyone who might be able to help, feet on the ground in Auckland?'

'Mmm, sorry, nothing comes to mind. But you could go and look for her yourself, go in as a tourist, find your aunt and try to persuade her to sponsor you. The only downside is you would have to return here to start the application process and it could take a year or

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more, from what I've heard. A much quicker alternative would be if you could persuade Wendy to come back here and if she is willing to marry you, you could gain entry as her husband, especially with your nursing qualifications and experience. But be warned, even then the emigration process is slow, or so I've heard.'

'No, I don't want to ask Wendy to leave her mother so soon after her accident. Anyway, I think I have had it with Scotland for various reasons so I want to make the move as soon as.'

'Pity. I'll miss having you around.'

'Pam, I hope you will always be my friend, my very special friend.'

'Ditto Robbie, and there's always *FaceTime*, right?'

I watched from my window, saw her drive away. I recognised the man beside her as a Ranger's player, who looked very like the one I had seen with Becca all those months ago.

The current social media rumour suggested both Man United and Liverpool were bidding to sign him which, if true, would mean he would move away, and Pam would be a singleton again. Did she deliberately choose younger men like us, reliving the dream of her failed marriage?

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My *FaceTime* call from New Zealand was due in a few minutes. I moved to the bathroom to check my appearance. I doused my face and combed my hair, pleased by eyes were no longer bloodshot. The haggard look was gone and I looked almost like my former self.

I sat up on my bed, checked my watch then fired up my *iPad*. Two days earlier I had opened an account with the newly launched Kiwi version of *Amazon*, using it to send Wendy a delayed Christmas present of the latest *iPad* with both Wi-Fi and Cellular capability, adding an extra for express delivery. From yesterday she had sent me her first ever email and after a flurry of emails pinging back and forth, we had agreed she would find an internet café with good Wi-Fi to facilitate our *FaceTime* meeting.

The incoming call sounded, and her beautiful, smiling face appeared.

Sitting beside her was Helen, with a slightly puzzled expression on her face.

Two hours later, we ended the call. Wendy called again a few minutes later and this time she was alone:

'Hi Robin, who loves ya, baby?'

Kissing the screen, she switched off again.

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As you might know, the open Internet never sleeps and neither the Dark Web.

Using my laptop, I renewed my online search for Robin's Aunt Hilary McKelvie and once again found nothing. I switched to the Dark Web, found a search site based in Sidney Australia and, claiming to be looking for the aunt of Natasha McKelvie, I entered all the information I had, which was sparse:

'Hilary McKelvie, perhaps antiques dealer, perhaps Sidney, Australia, perhaps born Scotland.'

Pheobe had been fifty-seven when she died which prompted me to add:

'Possible age range, fifty-two to sixty-three.'

I paid the fee in Bitcoin equivalent to £213 and waited, my eyes glued to the screen.

A few minutes later, I received an email to Natasha's account, the one I had opened when we first started shopping online for clothes for her:

'Dear Natasha, search in progress. This may take a few hours. When I have anything, I will post it to your account which you can access using the code: HMck5263. Jessie.'

Two hours later, I visited the website and entered the code.

'Dear Natasha, I am very sorry to report I have been unable to find any record of your aunt either in Sidney or in Auckland. If you have any other details which might help me to find her, please initiate a fresh search. Thanks for your business and goodbye for now. Jessie.'

In desperation, I sent off a request to Pam Wright explaining I was finding it impossible to contact my aunt, passing on the details I had already used.

I waited but received no reply then realised she would probably be in mid-flight with her phone switched off.

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Spooked

On Thursday 18th January 2018, in the immediate aftermath of the double cremation for Phoebe and Tasha, I found myself back at *The Mews* tidying everything, sorting items to be donated to charity shops or sold. I was still wobbly from my further bout of viral pneumonia brought on by stress and long hours of teetering along the edge of hypothermia.

Pam had warned there would be a delay in processing the paperwork for the sale of Oasis because of the need to formally wind up the Estate of Phoebe Felicity McKelvie, explaining that Debs McInnes was doing her best to speed matters along.

I had been into the Dark Web and had purchased password cracking software in various versions which I used to attempt to access Patrick Shearer's *MacBook*, *iPad* and *iPhone*. After hours of trying with these different packages, I was forced to admit failure.

As *Armitage Steven* were obliged to do because of the payments being made to Phoebe's bank account by Akif Jalbani, they had written to her ex-husband through the conduit of his bank, explaining the situation of both deaths. Unfortunately, with her usual efficiency, this had been done before I could ask them not to reveal my recent involvement. At my request, Debs McInnes sent me a copy of what she had sent him, outlining my involvement in glowing terms, a document which also included a brief synopsis of the sale of *Redcroft* and our relocation to *The Mews*.

When I first moved into *Redcroft*, I had searched for Robin's father online without success. Now, with my laptop in protected mode, I visited the Dark Web and paid to learn that Akif Jalbani was a spider at the centre of a corrupt web of nefarious businesses, drugs, prostitution, arms sales and body organs harvested from unwilling donors.

Of course, I could not tell *Armitage Steven* what I had discovered and was obliged to wait in trepidation, fearing some sort of malign outcome from this repugnant monster from Robin McKelvie's past.

However, nothing happened over the next few weeks but then, very early one morning, while I was still in bed, still drowsy, my phone rang. Caller ID showed 'UNKNOWN'. Looking back, I should have hung up, removed the SIM card and chopped it up. Although wary, I received so few calls I was curious. Perhaps it was Pam using her new boyfriend's phone because her own was out of battery.

I pressed to accept and said, quietly:

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'Hello, who is this?'

'Robin, Robin, at last we speak. It's your father here. Where are you now, my dear boy?'

The pompous voice spoke in perfect cultured English with a very slight sing in it.

'Oh, I'm in London at the moment, on my way to Reading to sign up for another spell in the refugee camps.'

'Robin, Robin. Always the contrary. Look boy, an awkward situation has arisen and as you know, any difficulty always throws up opportunities. Now you are free of your mother and sister, I have a job for you. It is very, very well paid and UK based, with lots of side benefits.'

He chuckled, causing a ripe smoker's coughing spasm.

'Well Robin, how does that seem to you, are you up for the challenge?'

'No thank you. I have my own plans.'

'Robin, Robin. Look, hear me out. Do you remember that time we went to see those girls, at that big house in Glasgow, for your eighteenth birthday? You enjoyed that, did you not? You can't deny you like a good arse-fucking session, can you? I looked it up online and it's still operating, a few streets from your place at *The Mews*. If you want, we could buy it, build it up, make it like my other places in Newcastle and Manchester which are so much swisher, all fresh young meat, mainly from Africa.'

'This is a wind up, right? You're not really my father, are you?'

'Robin, Robin, why do say this? You are indeed my son Robert Akif Jalbani. I could never forget that truculent childish voice of yours, not ever. Robin, Robin, it is time to grow up and accept that you are flesh of my flesh, with the same instincts, the same desires. Why deny yourself again? Come into the business with me. Now the odious Sandersons and Marshalls have disappeared, we can grow our share, get me back on track. As you know, those bastards stole my Scottish girls, disrupted my cocaine supply chain and somehow got me onto the Interpol list, trapping me here in Karachi without a good supply of nice ripe, pink Scottish arses to screw. I thank God every day that there is no extradition treaty between the British and Pakistan.'

'No, Akif Jalbani, if that is who you are, I will not become your lacky. I want no part of your corrupt world. This conversation is ended.'

I removed the SIM card from my *iPhone*, my hands twitching, my face red, my breathing coming in short gasps, an inner voice screaming:

'RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!'

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How much does Akif Jalbani already know about me?

If he knows where I am living and has my mobile number, does he also know about my visits to the Dark Web?

Has he paid someone in the Dark Web to gain access to my Bank Account, my bank and credit card transactions, my Bitcoin account?

Has he already hacked into my FaceTime and WhatsApp accounts?

Does he know about Pam Wright? About Babsie?

Does he know about Wendy? Is she safe from his reach?

While these thoughts had been racing around my head, I had been changing into my jogging gear, my default behaviour when under stress.

I ran full out, heading for Pollok Country Park where I knew I could run in safety, free of traffic. Minutes into my run I dropped the chopped-up SIM card from my *iPhone* into a litter bin. I was not sure if I would keep running and try, somehow, to get to Wendy without being caught.

In my rucksack I had packed all my important documents, my devices, money and cards, passport and driving licence. I had about £15,000 in cash, mainly Scottish notes, only a few hundred from the Bank of England and a handful of coins. I also had Patrick Shearer's Euros and Swiss Francs.

My brain slowed and engaged with the issues I needed to assess and resolve:

What power did Akif Jalbani have?

If I used my cards or passport, would he be able to use the Dark Web to track my movements?

Would Debs McInnes or Pam Wright report me missing and instigate a Police hunt?

Two hours later, physically exhausted, I turned back towards *The Mews* with a plan.

After a search, I found a public telephone which accepted coins and had not been vandalised. Using the voice-to-text service, I sent a message:

'Wendy, I will be out of range for a few days but please do not worry. I love you, with all my heart. Robbie.'

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Back at Oasis, wearing latex gloves, I retrieved the various parts of the Imposter's disassembled *iPhone*, *iPad* and *MacBook* from their different hiding places and carefully wiped every surface three times over with sterilising wipes. My hope was that with their

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greater resources, the Police or MI5 experts could access them and retrieve the incriminating data I was sure they held. I also added her passport and bank and credit cards. I toyed with the idea of adding another letter of explanation but decided this consignment would have better effect if it was sent by the Imposter, as a sort of plea for help. It was the best I could think of, given my previous more explicit information had been seemingly ignored, for whatever reason.

Wrapped individually in cling film, I placed these items in a new Tesco shopping bag then added them to my rucksack beside my own devices which were already turned off with their SIM cards removed.

Free of any responsibilities, I told the concierge team I was heading for Aviemore to try skiing and would probably be away for a week or so. Using the M74/A69 route, keeping well clear of Pigdon, I drove the Fiat to a Park and Ride at the outskirts of Newcastle and caught the Metro.

In the main Post Office, in a Newcastle United football top wearing gloves and sunglasses and speaking in my thickest Geordie twang, I purchased a suitable heavy duty transit box and a roll of bubble wrap. On advice, I collected the appropriate forms for international postage then took everything to the Newcastle University library, found a quiet corner free from peering eyes and assembled my package and completed the necessary paperwork.

The label was addressed:

Chief Superintendent Janice McNulty

Personal Item

C/O

CEPOL

European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training

Budapest

Ó u 27, 1066

Hungary

SENDER:

Professor Philomena Shearer,

Isherwood Retreat,

Equilibrium

Pigdon,

Northumberland,

ENGLAND.

Dressed in items from a series of charity shops, hoping to pass for an older hippy female by wearing green wellingtons, green gloves, cosmetic glasses with darkened green tinged lenses, my head covered with a dark green floppy rain hat and wearing a long black raincoat, I returned to the Post Office and sent my package, paying cash and signing the forms with a fair copy of the Imposter's scrawl.

While pounding along in Pollok Country Park, I had puzzled to find a way to point a finger at Akif Jalbani without creating a trail which led back to me, his fake son. In the end, I could not think of one. I would have to trust Janice McNulty would figure out how to make this link, this notion based on the assumption that Jalbani would show in the data held on the devices I was sending her.

I knew this approach was flawed, lacking the incisive thrust I wanted but it was the best I could come up with.

However, I still had a final avenue to investigate and, if required, I must deliver my own version of justice on the person who had been complicit in ruining so many lives.

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Gladys

It was Monday 21st January 2018.

On my return journey from Newcastle, I stopped for two nights at a town called Castle Douglas near Dumfries in the southernmost part of Scotland. I parked the Fiat in a side-street and transferred my basic gear to panniers on my mountain bike. Through the Tourist Information Centre, I found a comfortable B&B in the village of Gelston a few miles away, a place which catered for birdwatchers and offered vegetarian evening meals.

I was now a touring cyclist called Wolfgang Weiner, speaking a mixture of English and German and hoping to 'bag' overwintering waders on the Solway Coast. The elderly lady was pleased to accept cash in advance, preferring Euros as she was booked on a winter-sun holiday to Tenerife in a few weeks' time.

The last known address I had for Dr Gladys Stimpson was on the outskirts of Kirkcudbright about an hour away using back roads, avoiding the lorries and other ferry traffic on the busy A75 heading for Stranraer and Northern Ireland.

By the evening of my second night, I was ready to act. I explained to my landlady I would skip breakfast next morning as I must make an early start, aiming to cycle to St Abbs Head on the east coast of Scotland.

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It was dawn, misty, the weather forecast promising another cold but sunny day with gentle breezes from the north-east. I was hidden in shadows on the edge of a wood, in a camouflaged bivouac hide high above the cottage which stood in the grounds of a much grander house now up for sale, a mansion which I learned from the Estate Agents website had once been owned by the Sandersons.

I was now an avid birdwatcher out in all weathers but well clad, determined to stay warm at all costs. I made a final check for possible security cameras and once again concluded there were none. I had flown my smallest camera drone around the premises several times and had seen the two dark-skinned girls who tended a middle-aged lady now calling herself Francine Mercier.

As I had proved with the Imposter, people are creatures of habit and Gladys aka Francine was no exception. At ten o'clock she left the cottage and made her way towards me, a small white dog running ahead, barking for the ball to be thrown. As they climbed the gentle slope, the dog caught the scent trail I had left for it and sniffed along it heading

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into the thicket a few paces to my left, its nose leading it into the depth of the woods where it would find a treat laced with a sedative.

Gladys/Francine followed, shouting:

'Bianca! Bianca! **Come Here!** Bianca, come to Mummy for a treat.'

When Dr Gladys Stimpson stepped into the shadow of the woods, I came from behind and stabbed downwards into the nape of her neck with a smart pen. She slumped to her knees, her head twisting round as she fell forward. I ducked away, desperate to avoid the accusation in her eyes, knowing it might haunt me forever.

To complete the deed, I pulled down Gladys's pants and knickers then injected the morphine overdose deep inside her anus. I held my fingers on her neck until the pulse faded and stopped. It was a more serene death than she deserved. I tidied her pants, pulled down her anorak and checked. She looked very much like a woman who had suffered a massive heart attack or stroke but that would be for the Coroner to puzzle over. To add pathos to the scene of her apparent demise, I collected Bianca and nuzzled her under Stimpson's chin, checked I had not left anything behind and retreated through the woods to the farm track where I mounted my bike and sped off to Castle Douglas to collect the Fiat.

I had thought of taking Stimpson's corpse to the mine shaft at *Holmcroft* but decided I did not ever wish to go there again. Perhaps if the package I had sent to CEPOL had enabled CS McNulty to gain traction on the investigation, she would make the connection between Gladys Stimpson with the Sandersons and Marshalls. It was the best I could come up with.

Since killing Robin McKelvie back in the camp, Gladys was the only overt act of murder I had committed. Of course, I had intended to dispose of the Imposter but her death prior to the planned interrogation had been accidental when I had hit her neck higher than intended, injecting the sedative directly into her spinal column.

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Departure Planning

I left Castle Douglas just after eleven o'clock and reached the outskirts of Ayr by mid-afternoon. During this long drive on quiet country roads, my mind was churning, revisiting the scene of the premeditated murder, running over the details again and again, as if watching unknown actors in a tragic film.

Despite what I had done, I felt no remorse, no elation, just a dull feeling, a sadness brought on by thinking about Astur, Zehra and Babsie and about Pheobe and Tasha, and all the many others who had been damaged and exploited by Gladys Stimpson.

What would happen to the two girls left alone at her cottage?

If they made their escape, would they find safety at Blairgowrie?

Or would Social Services find them and help them re-settle?

These were issues I could not solve but I knew from my careful online probing there were many refugee organisations willing to help, good people whose efforts were restricted only by limited funds.

Just short of Ayr, I stopped in a quiet layby where I cleared out the Fiat, wiping it down before leaving it in a busy Tesco car park with the keys in the ignition. Using their charity recycling centre, I disposed of the other items I no longer needed then bought a new SIM card for my iPhone, with a new number.

Using Google, I eventually found what I hoped was the most appropriate agency called *Shakita Women's Aid*, based in Edinburgh. From the local library I used an ancient PC to send an emergency request for help, giving brief details of the girls and their location, signing myself, as 'Patrick Shearer'. It was the best I could think to do for them.

Cycling five miles towards Prestwick International Airport on back roads into a blustery headwind took nearly two hours of hard effort, time I used to finalise my escape plan. Eventually I returned to my earlier conclusion. Pam Wright was the key to enabling me to leave my old life at Oasis in an orderly fashion with minimum risk of being tracked down by Akif Jalbani or anyone else whom might eventually uncover my many secrets.

Short of the airport in the town of Prestwick, I found a Costa Coffee outlet with good Wi-Fi. Using my laptop in protected mode, I checked yet again on the Open Internet and, as expected, I found only good things in Pam's record, including her long list of charity sponsorships, her voluntary service with The Samaritans, her support for the Rape Crisis Centre and service on the steering committee for the Edinburgh Citizens Advice Bureau.

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For a further final time I checked her out on the Dark Web, relieved when once again it returned:

NO NEGATIVE FINDINGS FOR THIS PERSON OF INTEREST

This confirmed my personal experience: Pam Wright had never once let me down. On this basis I made my decision to ask her to enable my future by accepting the role as my 'authorised person' under a Power of Attorney mandate.

Using my new telephone number, I called her:

'Hi, Pam, it's 'you know who' here. I have a big, big favour to ask you. Could we talk about it on *FaceTime*, please? It's very urgent.'

After a short silence she put me on hold, using the excuse she must reply to an urgent email. During the further longer silence which followed, I suspect she was checking the number I was using in case it was owned by someone holding me hostage.

'Right, 'you know who', I'll call you back from my Edinburgh flat around seven o'clock. Bye.'

Using my *iPhone* and my *Tesco Credit Card*, I booked a room at the local *Travelodge* for immediate entry. While riding to my destination, I spread the chopped-up bits of this credit card over a series of litter bins as I had no intention of ever using it again. As part of her duties, I would ask Pam to settle and close the account for this card. Ditto my bank card and other credit cards.

Two hours later, I was set up in my room, waiting for Pam to call.

While waiting for her, using my laptop in protected mode in the Dark Web, I set up an untraceable email account, password protected and encrypted, the type used by terrorists. I scheduled it to be sent to her with a delay of six hours and the basis that if she refused to agree to my request, I could delete it, unsent.

I sent a copy of the direct access hyperlink to Pam's private email address explaining this gave her access to an untraceable dead drop email service where she could leave messages after my departure, should the need arise. I promised I would check it regularly during the days, weeks and months ahead, giving us a means of sharing and solving any issues which might arise. I also asked her to store this long string of gobbledegook alphanumeric characters in her personal *Google Drive* cloud storage account and then delete all reference to it from her various devices.

The dead drop account was pre-paid and would expire in two years by which time I hoped I would be well established in my new life, provided I could find my Aunt Hilary and persuade her to sponsor me. I would start my search in Sidney (population 5 million). If I drew a blank, I would move on to Auckland (population 1.5 million). I knew this approach

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was a long shot but unless Wendy and Helen suggested another way, it was the best I could think of.

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Pam called me on *FaceTime* at seven 'clock on the dot and immediately launched a salvo of questions at me. Later, when she had calmed down, I learned she had been trying to contact me urgently about a series of calls taken by the CRS team from Akif Jalbani, asking for a contact number. Her worry was that I had been kidnapped.

Despite her repeated probing, I refused to divulge details of my recent activities, saying only that I had been 'birdwatching'. Eventually we moved on and I finally convinced her that while I was sure I was no longer in danger from the cabal run by the Sandersons and Marshals, my new concern was Akif Jalbani, 'my father'. I told her everything I had learned about him, relating verbatim our short telephone conversation and his desire to involve me in his disgusting criminal activities.

I went further, stressing that now I knew where his wealth had come from, I did not wish to benefit from any part of my mother's estate and in particular the funds accrued from the sale of *Redcroft*, money used to purchase and set up Oasis.

Pam tried to re-assure me that I need not give everything up, stressing repeatedly she could find a secure and secret place to hide my money. One thing I had learned since escaping from the camp was that money transfers, particularly large amounts, can be used to track senders and recipients. At every turn I resisted her advice. My priority was anonymity, not wealth.

In my closing appeal I said:

'Pam, I need your help to leave behind the fear, loss and trauma I've suffered over these last horrible, horrible months. Some of this you know about but there are other parts which I have deliberately kept from you, for your own safety. I ask you to accept that everything I did was unavoidable, forced on me by external influences. With my mother and sister no longer needing my help, I dare to hope this sad and lonely part of my life is behind me.

'But more than that, I need to escape from this new threat from my father. If I don't duck below his radar now, he will pursue me and try to bend me to his will, pull me back into my old life as Robin McKelvie the dope addict, the wastrel. My time at the refugee camp changed me. In fact, it made me a different person entirely and I don't want to go back to that hellish life I lived before.

'Please, Pam, will you help me to do this and keep all the details of my new life secret.

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'I have checked my father out as best I can and now know he is a powerful, dangerous man. I want to escape from Akif Jalbani forever. When I reach my new chosen location, I plan to change my name, if I can, drop the name McKelvie and choose a new one. Maybe Brown or White or Green, any which fits for my new situation.'

She took time to consider this plea then said:

'Robbie, we all deserve a chance to change and make amend as you have done with Phoebe and Tasha. And yes, I agree you deserve a chance to make a fresh start, free from your legacy. So, Robbie, I give you my word that I'll do my very best to help you because I am sure that whatever you decide to do with your future, you will be successful. You are a good man. I only wish we had managed to make it as a couple. However, it was not to be.'

Then, as is in her nature, Pam resumed probing until I confirmed my plan was to travel to join Wendy. Although Pam knew Wendy was from New Zealand, she did not know her surname or where she lived and although she asked several times, I refused to give this information.

At eight-thirty, we ended our discussion to allow her to contact Debs McInnes and we provisionally agreed to meet again on online in Skype at around ten o'clock.

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During this waiting time, I transferred £30,000 from Robin McKelvie's RBS account to my Caxton travel card, an account I had opened online soon after I met Wendy. I chose this sum because it was the amount Robin had received for his one-year contract at the refugee camp. Looked at another way, I reckoned £30,000 was a reasonable payment for the many months round the clock care I had given to Phoebe and Tasha.

The Caxton card is a multi-currency preloaded debit card favoured by those who travel for business and pleasure, accepted throughout the world. My research suggested it was a card which would be difficult to trace. This left a residual amount of £25,593 in Robin McKelvie's RBS account, money to be used by Pam to pay off my linked credit card debts before using her Power of Attorney to close the account and transfer the balance to my estate.

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At ten o'clock sharp, flanked by Debs McInnes and Henrietta Hopewell, Pam invited me to join her on *FaceTime* from the offices of *Armitage Steven*. It was clear Debs and Henrietta had been briefed and so without any preliminary chit-chat, we made an immediate start. Working in unison, we examined the credentials of a long list of Scottish-based charities working to support refugees during their first months of trauma seeking asylum and hoping for a new and better life in Scotland. After an hour, we had the list whittled down to four, those who appeared to be the most effective, led

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by trusted people. During this process I was very tempted suggest *Shakita Women's Aid* but resolved to say nothing, fearing a possible link to Gladys Stimpson's death. Thankfully, Pam had insisted this charity be added because she knew the founders and personally gifted money through a monthly standing order.

Moving on, we agreed the outline of the '*Oasis Trust Fund*' with the object of dripping down funds from my estate under the trusteeship of Pam, Debs and Henrietta.

Just after eleven o'clock, we concluded the business part of the meeting when I added my electronic signatures to a raft of enabling documents ceding full control of my inheritance to Pam with immediate effect. At a near estimate, the fund would benefit by around £1.8 M Sterling.

With our business concluded, it was clear that Pam had briefed them on my personal situation and there was no unnecessary long goodbyes or parting statements. In conclusion, we agreed a minimum period of two years silence, said our final goodbyes then signed out.

I felt sad I could not tell Debs and Henrietta I was about to cut them out of my life forever. However, now my longed-for freedom was at hand, I focussed on terminating my electronic life, closing all my online accounts and deleting all my emails except the secret one I used for *FaceTime* calls with Wendy.

It was just after ten o'clock when my *iPhone* pinged, signalling a *WhatsApp* message from Pam:

Robbie,

I have attached a document confirming everything I know about your Aunt Hilary including her email address for FaceTime calls.

You were right, your aunt was hard to find. When you asked for my help several months ago, you told me she was a spinster. However, that was incorrect and like you, I got nowhere fast. Then I rooted around on social media and unearthed one of her Edinburgh schoolfriends who keeps in touch with her. Annie Sinclair lives in Bournemouth but when I explained who I was and why I was looking for Hilary, she told me everything she knew about your aunt and kindly gave me her FaceTime contact details.

Using that information, I did some further delving.

Here is a synopsis but for the full chapter and verse is in the attached document.

Hilary Alicia McKelvie was married twice, first in Sidney to John Boulton where they operated a bookshop until he died in a boating accident. As you told me, she moved to Edinburgh where she lived briefly with your mother and sister at

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Redcroft. The sisters did not gel and Hilary moved back to Sidney before moving to Auckland where she married an older man called Neville Schrader. When he died of a stroke, she inherited Schrader Antiques and ran it by herself until she was diagnosed with PPMS (Primary-progressive Multiple Sclerosis).

She sold up and moved to Lyttleton in South Island, close to Christchurch where she owns a petting farm for kids and rears rare breed sheep and alpacas as a hobby business. Fortunately, her PPMS is very slow moving and sporadic. Mostly she is fine, living life in the slow lane.

Robbie, while you were missing during your 'birdwatching' expedition, I took the liberty of contacting her on FaceTime. I had to break the sad news about Phoebe and Tasha then we had a long chat about you. On your behalf, I asked if she would sponsor you under the Skilled Migrant Worker Visa scheme and she agreed without hesitation. Hilary did not have any children and it seems you are her only living relative.

At my prompting and to satisfy the emigration authorities, she sent me a job offer inviting you to come to live with her as her Personal Care Assistant and Assistant Business Manager, emphasising she has known you from a child and that you are a person of good character. Henrietta adjusted the letter to meet the criteria required by the Immigration Authorities and when the offer letter was polished to perfection, Hilary signed the revised version and sent a facsimile to Henrietta while the original was in transit by air mail to Armitage Steven, ready to be submitted with your application.

A copy of this job offer is attached. Please read it and understand why it is phrased in such stark terms.

The original salary Hilary suggested was over-generous and after a bit of online research by Henrietta, we agreed to reduce the amount to fit with local market conditions. The adjusted amount is equivalent to £31,000 Sterling (gross before taxes). The hours and particular duties have been deliberately kept vague but crucially she is willing to have you registered at her residential address, which is why this position comes with included accommodation at her farm.

Robbie, you are a fortunate young man. Your Aunt Hilary is a very nice, accommodating lady and is very much looking forward to meeting you. I strongly suggest you contact her on FaceTime. I'm sure you will like her and that she will like you.

Hey, but what's not to like, eh?

Equilibrium

If you do decide to accept Hilary's offer, you must complete the attached forms by filling out the remaining blanks giving brief details of your nursing experience. On completion, sign and email these documents with the job offer acceptance letter Henrietta has drafted for you. Henrietta already has certified copies of your birth certificate, passport, driving licence and nursing qualifications. As your Notary Public, Debs will authenticate these documents and lodge them on your behalf.

You said you intend to immediately drop below the radar to escape your father and if any supplementary issues arise, I'll exercise my Power of Attorney status to progress your application as quickly as possible.

Robbie, I doubt there is anyone in the UK better at fast-tracking this sort of paperwork than Henrietta - she seems to have a knack of cajoling officials to her way of thinking. Be warned however, the approvals process is slow and even with Henrietta chasing them, social media posts suggest it may take a few months to obtain approval of your migrant status.

So, here's what I suggest:

- Fly to NZ as a tourist and visit Wendy and your Aunt Hilary and let things develop naturally.*
- When Armitage Steven have your visa, I will forward it to the untraceable email account you gave me.*
- To re-enter New Zealand under your Skilled Migrant Worker Visa, I suggest you fly to Malaysia or Singapore then return a few days later.*
- I also suggest you ask your Aunt Hilary and Wendy to meet you when you land as additional proof you are who you say you are.*

So, Robbie, if this is what you really want, please let me know and I'll do my best to make it happen for you.

LOL,

Pam.

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After a long debate with myself and before settling to follow this revised plan, I replied:

Pam, thanks. You are a star! Truly my best friend ever.

I'll try to catch Wendy first on FaceTime and see what she thinks.

If it's a 'go' with her, I'll try Aunt Hilary on FaceTime and see how we get on. If it works out as you predict, I'll get the forms etc to Henrietta as a priority, send

Equilibrium

you a confirming WhatsApp. By this time tomorrow, I hope I'll be well on my way to freedom.

Please accept my sincere and grateful thanks for all you have done for me in the past and for agreeing to be my 'prime enabler'.

If anything comes up, use that special email address which I'll check as often as I can get online access during my travels.

LOL,

Robbie.

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It took less than ten minutes to complete the required information and sign off the documents to be sent to *Armitage Steven*.

However, at the last second, just as I was about to press the button to send the file, I held back, wary of my apparent good fortune, unnerved by the thought that somehow this action might endanger both Wendy and my Aunt Hilary.

I stood under the shower, disappointed the flow was frugal and the temperature tepid. I soon gave up, dried off and slipped under the duvet. My mind was churning, trying to make the best sense of my new situation, unsure if what Pam Wright had said in her *WhatsApp* could possibly be true.

Operating in protected mode and using one of my batch of single use email addresses, I found a link to '*Schrader Petting Farm*' website and studied the face of Hilary Alicia Schrader nee McKelvie. There was a strong likeness to Phoebe. It was a professional portrait shot and I sensed the photographer had airbrushed her image to make her seem more glamorous.

For me the most telling part was her kind hazel-green eyes, so like Dr Mena's.

After a long period of studying Hilary's face, I was inclined to agree with Pam Wright's assessment but before I was prepared to commit to a future as Hilary's nephew, I knew I must meet her face-to-face.

To create back-up insurance before my journey, I uploaded copies of all my crucial files to my cloud storage accounts at *Google Drive*, *Apple's iCloud* and *Microsoft's OneDrive*. Each provider claimed their gateway access was totally secure; although data breeches were not unknown, they were few in number and hackers tended to focus on commercial entities or government agencies, not anonymous individuals like me.

Accessing the cut-out mailbox, I deposited this email to Pam Wright:

Equilibrium

Pam,

sorry, there is a change of plan!

I have signed the documents for Debs and Henrietta. They are safe in a protected cloud file server, ready to be downloaded and put into the system when I am sure it is safe.

I have not been in contact with my Aunt Hilary. My worry is Akif Jalbani might guess I am heading to see her. He might hire someone to get there ahead of me. This person would coerce her into revealing what she knows of my travel plans and use this information to waylay me. The monster is capable of anything to get what he wants.

Please do not tell my aunt about my plan to marry Wendy if she will have me. That might put Wendy in harm's way.

Please, no matter how much you might want to help me, it is better to leave everything to me. Trust me to do what is necessary to keep everyone safe.

Thank you.

Meanwhile, please go ahead and disburse the funds to the various charities, as we agreed. And take care to make sure that no one knows where the money came from as this could put the three of you in danger.

Again, my dear friend, thank you for everything.

Two days from now when this email is released for you to read, I will be long gone.

I will be in touch again when I have reached the next safe point on my quest for freedom.

LOL,

Robbie.

From my new iPhone number I sent this text to Wendy:

Dear, dear Wendy, at last I am free to leave Scotland and come to you. My travel details must remain a secret. I know this will be hard for you to understand but to keep us both safe, this is what must happen. Until then I must remain silent, no FaceTime meetings, no emails, no texts, no live calls.

As I travel to you, I will hold you in my heart. Please wait for me.

When I reach you, will you marry me?

Robbie.

Equilibrium

I then did the unthinkable and systematically trashed my *MacBook*, *iPad Pro* and my *iPad Mini* and finally my *iPhone* and its new *SIM*. Over the next hour or so, with the pieces in my rucksack, I walked through the wet, deserted streets of Prestwick depositing my debris at random into litter bins, convinced that without these devices I would be less likely to be trackable.

For the first time since taking possession of Robin's smartphone back at the camp, I was without a comms device and felt strangely uneasy. However, I felt sure that by jettisoning these items meant it was much less likely I would be challenged as I crossed borders.

I would be a nomad, a poor student, anonymous, footloose, with no ties, no secrets, no history, a nobody but with a UK passport and enough money on my *Caxton* card to fulfil my plan.

On the morning of Thursday 25 January 2018 with my arrangements completed and my watch showing 03:37, I set out for New Zealand, wheeling my bike out into the smirr of warm rain and pedalling off into the darkness.

Equilibrium

Travelling Light

Before arriving at Prestwick Airport, I transferred my passport and driver's licence, cash, Caxton card and all my other travelling light essentials plus my binoculars into the internationally compliant Samsonite rucksack-cum-carry-on case I had bought online while still at Oasis, before setting out for Castle Douglas.

While the airport was still asleep, I abandoned my mountain bike at a bike rack and draped its security cable-lock complete with its key on top of the litter bin beside the smokers' cabin.

I had already wiped both bike and lock clean of fingerprints and DNA, just to be sure.

Wearing my reversible anorak grey side showing with the hood up, I moved casually through the steady downpour jettisoning unwanted items from my panniers, sharing these between litter bins in the vicinity before heaving the panniers into a large skip beside a builder's compound occupying a cordoned off area within the long-term car park.

I reasoned that if I was being tracked, this false trail might mislead those hunting me into thinking I had flown out of Prestwick International on a false passport.

This done, I moved onto the second phase of my escape plan. To minimise my digital footprint during my forthcoming odyssey, I planned to pay with cash, reserving my Caxton card for situations where cash was declined.

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From the airport rail station, I boarded the first train of the day, changing at Glasgow for Edinburgh. Travelling in a generally southward direction using a random mix of local and mainline trains, I eventually reached St Pancras International where I caught the last Eurostar train of the day to Brussels Central station.

Using a mixture of trains and buses, I headed for Moscow where I caught the weekly long-distance train to Beijing.

From a busy internet café, I downloaded the file containing the package of signed documents destined for *Armitage Stevens*. After reading them through for a final time, I emailed them to Pam Wright using the dead drop cutout service, adding a request to keep these documents on ice until I gave her the final go ahead, saying I hoped to settle everything within a few more weeks, perhaps a month at most.

Equilibrium

From Beijing I forged steadily onwards down through the countries of Southeast Asia towards the equator, arriving in Singapore on Sunday 25 February 2018. Unlike air travel, moving at this slower pace while crossing many borders and time zones I had gained around twelve hours. As these changes had been gradual, I felt no jet lag. While travelling, I met dozens of others, old and young, learning their stories, hearing of their successes and difficulties, realising like me many were lonely. Most were craving for a fresh listener to enjoy their war stories and give approval to their life choices.

If asked, my personal tale was short and simple: my passion was bird-spotting; my home was Newcastle, England; my round-the-world trip was being funded by a small inheritance from my grandmother's passing and when the money ran out, I intended to return to England to resume my nursing career, unless something more interesting turned up. I found that my fellow travellers readily accepted this partial fiction, keen to return to telling of their own adventures and experiences.

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Throughout the entire journey from Scotland, whenever an opportunity arose, I had checked my dead drop email service but merely as an observer, refusing to respond to Pam Wright's repeated requests for information about where I had reached on my journey to New Zealand. What pleased me most about her newsy messages is that they made no reference to any enquiries by Akif Jalbani. With each additional 'no news' report, I began to accept he had given up on me.

From Moscow onwards my trauma dreams had become less intense. After Beijing, I was sleeping soundly to wake relaxed and ready for the day ahead, no longer filled with a vague feeling of impending dread.

By the time I reached Singapore, I felt 'normal', accepting my mental health was at long last in equilibrium, starting to believe I was as deserving as the next person and looking forward with increasing confidence to what my future might bring.

It was while sitting at an outdoor café on Orchard Road in Singapore, just another tourist among thousands of others, that for the first time since escaping from the refugee camp I began to believe in myself as a worthy successor to Robin McKelvie whose miserable, hedonistic life trajectory I had inherited and transformed. If I had not replaced him, he may well be already dead of drugs. Without my intervention, Pheobe and Tasha would not have survived and the Morrisons, Sandersons, the imposter Patrick Shearer and the deviant Gladys Simpson would still be ruining lives with their sex-slave and drug supply businesses.

It was in that moment that I accepted I had fully earned my new freedom and that I must go forward and enjoy it with confidence.

Equilibrium

Sadly, this euphoria would not last.

Equilibrium

Wobble

Still keen to avoid air travel, I investigated a passage on a cargo vessel to take me to New Zealand. I later learned that this was a ploy that many illegals of various kinds had used in the past, one the border control authorities had clamped down on fiercely.

After many unsuccessful enquiries, I eventually bought a one-way seat on a *Singapore Airways* flight to Melbourne to join a small cruise ship called *Ocean Life*. This vessel carried just under two hundred wildlife enthusiasts. The blurb promised excellent sea-life and bird-spotting photo-opportunities.

Before leaving Singapore, I bought a Canon EOS camera kit. After long discussions and negotiations with the salesman I struck a deal, paying the equivalent of just under £3,000 Sterling, debited from my Caxton card.

This low-end professional photographic package included the camera body, four lenses, a carry rucksack and six 1TB ultrafast memory storage cards to record my images. As a bonus, the salesman added a camera bag and a lightweight tripod.

From a separate department in this huge digital superstore, I bought a top of the range *iPad Pro* pre-loaded with a digital photo-editing software pack. I politely declined the salesman's offer to register my purchase with *Apple* and complete the set-up of this device with my Internet provider, explaining I preferred to do this myself, later.

Now on my final leg, I was not yet willing to reveal myself online to anyone, not even *Apple*.

Once again I paid for these purchases with my Caxton card, leaving me with a balance of just under £10,000 Sterling plus a smattering of notes and coins in a variety of currencies with a combined value roughly equivalent to a few hundred pounds.

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From Melbourne we first sailed south to visit Hobart and the coastline of Tasmania then west across the Tasman Sea. At the southernmost tip of the New Zealand archipelago, we circled Stewart Island before making our way up the west coast, heading for Auckland where the cruise ended.

On the day we drifted offshore along the rugged coast north of Dunedin, I focussed my binoculars at the area where Wendy and Helen lived. Unfortunately, we were too far offshore watching for sperm whales and albatrosses to see more than a faint smudge of the coastline I hoped would soon become my new home.

Equilibrium

When we anchored in Christchurch to pick up fresh supplies, I took a local ferry around the peninsula to Lyttleton Bay hoping to catch a first sighting of the area where my 'aunt' Hillary Alicia Schrader lived. Described by our tour guide as 'alpine', the scenery was stunning and not unlike Scotland.

Later that evening as we continued our journey to Auckland a sudden horrible thought occurred:

Did Aunt Hilary know Akif Jalbani and had she already told him I planned to move to New Zealand?

During the rest of that evening and through the night I stood at the stern of *Ocean Life* staring south towards Christchurch and Dunedin, my mind racing, trying to solve this new problem.

Then I remembered the 'chapter and verse' report that Pam Wright had attached to her *WhatsApp*, a lengthy document I had merely skimmed before sending it to cloud storage. Internet access from *Ocean Life* was poor and I knew I must wait until we reached Auckland to read Pam's memo more carefully online.

Equilibrium

Landfall

Two days later, on Wednesday 21st March 2018, we docked in Auckland. My tourist entry visa obtained in Melbourne and my associated paperwork was accepted and my residential address in New Zealand recorded as:

Care of Mrs Hilary Alicia Schrader, Schrader's Petting Farm, Lyttleton, Christchurch, South Island.

It was just over twenty-seven months since I had slipped through border control at Heathrow hoping for a life of freedom but determined to make amends for stealing Robin McKelvie's life.

Since arriving in the UK, all the wonderful people I had met and the many amazing experiences I had been through had changed me. It was as if that long-ago unwanted refugee called Ahmed Goran from the province of Jabrayil in Azerbaijan was an entirely different person.

With each new challenge, the memory of that fateful night in the refugee camp faded, losing its potency. When it returned to haunt me, I trained myself to picture Phoebe and Tasha as they had been when I last saw them at Oasis, telling myself that the real Robin would never have cared for them as I had done.

Since leaving Scotland on Thursday 25th January, I had been moving constantly for two months, heading steadily east and south across dozens of border checkpoints where my UK passport had been accepted without question, often without any paperwork or electronic records being used to mark my transit.

This replacement passport did not show my Athens to Heathrow flight, nor any of the real Robin's previous journeys around Europe nor his repeated trips to Ibiza when he may or may not have been a drugs mule for his father.

Crucially, my current passport displayed *my* face, not his.

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Sheltering from a heavy shower of warm rain under the canopy of the exit from the maritime passport control building, I edged my way to the periphery of my group, shaking hands and listening to what others had planned next. In my cover story I would stay in New Zealand for a while longer to try to bag a full set of the country's two hundred indigenous birds, particularly the New Zealand Falcon, the Swamp Harrier and the Morepork or Ruru, an owl-like bird with a distinctive two-pitched call.

Equilibrium

Although it seemed highly unlikely if not impossible that I could have been tracked by anyone, I was haunted by the feeling I might be heading into a trap. Following my earlier plan when in Singapore and Melbourne, I walked around for a while until I found a modestly priced aparthotel near the docks.

Showered and changed, I set off back into the city centre and rented a private booth in a busy Internet café where I accessed my *G-Drive* cloud file. Settled with a large coffee and organic cheesy muffin, I spent several hours studying the information Pam had garnered about Hilary Alicia McKelvie and her two marriages.

Three years younger and jealous of her more glamorous sister Phoebe, aged newly sixteen Hilary had absconded from Edinburgh with an older boy called Eric Dalglish and another couple in a VW camper van with the intention of travelling to India to seek 'inner peace'.

I checked my other files to confirm at this date Phoebe was a student at Edinburgh College of Art, noting she did not meet and marry Akif Jalbani until she was twenty-two.

Pam had no record of what Hilary had done over the next decade.

Hilary next re-surfaced in Western Australia as a twosome with a man called Derek Johns, whom she had met in Thailand where he had worked as a tour guide. Johns was an Australian, originally from Albany. Now they were in the Margaret River area picking grapes and working in a winery where they remained for two years.

Hilary then set off alone, moving first to Adélaïde, then Melbourne.

After another long gap in the record, she settled in Sidney, now married to John Boulton until his death five years later.

Hilary Boulton now had a busy *Facebook* account, communicating with friends around the globe, making her much easier to follow.

Her brief trip to Edinburgh had occurred when Tasha was ten, eight years after Pheobe's divorce from Akif Jalbani, a milestone which had been finalised just before he moved to Pakistan.

Checking and re-checking, I concluded it was most unlikely that Hilary Alicia McKelvie had met Akif Jalbani, unless they were in touch online.

I re-activated Pheobe's *Facebook* account and searched for Hilary. To my surprise, I learned Hilary had resigned from *Facebook* shortly after her trip to Edinburgh, at about the time she moved from Sidney to Auckland. Searching all the other major social media sites I could find no trace of her anywhere.

Equilibrium

Before leaving the Internet café, I went back on to the website for Schrader's Petting Farm and found the head and shoulders image of my aunt and again studied her kind, hazel-green eyes.

Re-assured, I signed off and headed back to my motel where I changed into shorts and a tee shirt and set off for a long run wearing my new trainers, part of a completely new wardrobe I had purchased in Melbourne two weeks earlier while waiting for the *Ocean Life* to arrive on its reverse loop from Auckland.

After a long hot shower, I searched the area on foot and found a vegan café serving spicy vegetable curry.

By ten o'clock I was back on track, once again the new Robbie McKelvie, my confidence restored, dreaming of Wendy.

In the early morning, just as I was waking, I felt a presence. Dr Mena was standing near the bedroom doorway, smiling at me. In my head her soft kind voice said:

Tommy, you have made it to safety at last. Well done. You have a bright future ahead but only if you are willing to change.

You must stop living alone, clinging to the past, constantly looking over your shoulder, refusing to fully trust anyone. You are oppressed by loneliness, punishing yourself for your sins. The life you stole has gone. You must accept you can never bring it back.

Remember what the Bible says: Life is for the living: Jesus will judge the dead.

Tommy, please forgive me. I misled you about God. I was wrong. God did not desert me. It was me who turned away from Him but when Patrick stole my life, Jesus was waiting for me. Please, turn back to God and ask Him for forgiveness and He will give it freely and bless everything you do. Learn to accept yourself and build a new life based on Faith, Truth and Charity. Study your Bible. Trust in Jesus.

Remember what I taught you from the start? That God works through other people? To please God, you must start to trust His other children by always looking for the best in them then praise them and build them up. Strengthening their faith will strengthen yours.

What you did setting up the Oasis Trust was a good start. Well done.

Continue this good work alongside your Aunt Hilary, Wendy and Helen and their fellowship. They are good Christian people but not perfect. You must learn to take chances with them and others you will meet in the months and years ahead. Remember, like you and me, in our life here on Earth, each one of us is flawed. But

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when we fail, we must ask and accept forgiveness then start again, try harder and move forward, always trusting for the best.

Here on earth, problems are always part of life and with each new challenge you overcome, you will grow stronger.

While you are here on Earth, I want you to model yourself on Barnabas.

Tommy, make me proud of you.

I look forward to seeing you when you come to join me in Heaven.

God Bless.

That was Dr Mena's last ever visit, a memory I will always cherish.

Equilibrium

Aunt Hilary

At just after ten o'clock on the morning of Saturday 23rd March 2018, I called my aunt. I had been rehearsing my Morningside accent to myself as I shaved and showered after my morning run. Although I felt nervous, I also felt sure that the day ahead would be special.

'Hi, Schrader Petting Farm, Connie speaking, how can I help?'

'Hi Connie, I'm hoping to speak to Hilary Schrader, if she's available.'

'Not sure, hold on. Hey, are you Scottish?'

'Yes.'

'Let me check on how she's a-doing this morning, OK?'

I waited, as the hold sequence linked me to The Beatles playing 'Yesterday'.

'Yip, she's feeling fine. I'll patch you through.'

'Hello, Hilary Schrader speaking, how can I help?'

'This is Robin McKelvie. My friend Pam Wright spoke to you.'

'Robin? Oh, my Dear Lord, you sound so like your Mum. Oh, Robin, we've been expecting you every day for weeks.'

'Aunt Hilary, I wondered if it would be OK to pay you a wee visit?'

'Sure, sure. When should we expect you?'

'Well, I'm in Christchurch Bus Exchange and . . .'

'Oh, my Dear Lord - NO! You're pulling my leg, Robin, right?'

'No, the next bus for Lyttleton leaves in ten minutes, I could be with you in about an hour. Would that suit?'

'Oh, my Dear Lord, Robin, I thought this day would never come. Yeah, hey I'm tearing up here. OK, OK, there now, here we are. So, I'll send Connie in our shuttle bus to collect you from Lyttleton. Oh, my Dear Lord, this is an answer to our prayers. Hey, look at the time, Yes, yes, just enough to get showered and glammed up, eh?'

'Great. So, Aunt Hilary, there's the bus loading now. See you soon.'

Equilibrium

'Hey, Robin, none of this aunt stuff, eh? You're making me feel ancient. Just 'Hilary', please, OK, Robin?'

'OK, Hilary. Must go. Bye-bye.'

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Although happy to see me, Hilary was frail, unsteady on her feet, needing help to walk, hanging on my arm as Pheobe had done on our outings back in Pollokshields. I suspected she was being boosted by her meds, taken to help her cope with the extra effort of entertaining me.

From browsing her website while back in Prestwick and more recently when in Auckland, I knew the Schrader property was vast, extending to 43,000 acres (17,500 hectare) incorporating around a mile of shoreline on Livingstone Bay. Rising in the distance behind her property the Port Hills range reached around 1600 feet (500 metres).

As the website had claimed, the entire Lyttleton Area was indeed 'a tranquil, unspoilt, verdant landscape'; 'a spectacular oasis of peace'. The only sign of human activity was a few trekking trails, making a stark contrast with my experiences in Brussels, Moscow, Beijing, Singapore and even Auckland, places where traffic noise and the press of rushing, jostling people had been dominant.

I compared this magnificent estate with the small and rather bleak ramshackle steading where Wendy and Helen lived, images I had studied in detail using *Google Earth*. From my *Skype* and *FaceTime* calls with Wendy I knew they did not own this land. It was a property they had continued to occupy rent-free, an informal act of kindness by the husband-and-wife sheep farmers her father had worked for before his tragic death. In return, Wendy and Helen and their dogs helped this couple with their flocks at busy times of the year.

'Well, Robin, what do you think of our little slice of paradise? Are you up for it? Will you accept the challenge and take it on when I am no longer here? You'll need to build a team to help you but I'm sure Connie and her family are up for it. What do you think?'

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Over our evening meal, Hilary eventually revealed her predicament:

'Robin, when I spoke to your friend Pam, I held off telling the full story about my health. I did feel a bit guilty but after what you went through with Pheobe and Tasha, I didn't want to spook you again. Do you remember the time you ran away to Ibiza to avoid meeting me?'

Since I had no knowledge of what Robin had done, I bowed my head and said nothing.

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'Anyway, all that stuff is in the past. And yes, Robin, I do have PPMS and yes, it's mostly benign as I explained to Pam. But what's got me now is a tumour in my spine. They killed it off up in Auckland the last time, or so they thought, but its back again and with secondaries. I've had the chemo sessions in Christchurch, but now they want me to go back to Auckland but I turned them down. Actually, I think they know it would be a waste of time and money. Far better they use these resources to help others with a better chance of survival. Anyway, I've had enough of hospitals. So, Robin, I'm going to tough it out to the end right here. Nine months maximum, they say, probably less. Are you up for that? Will you stay and look after me, please? And take on the farm business, drive it forward?'

'Yes, of course I'll look after you. And thank you for your fantastic generosity but I really don't deserve this gift. Is there no one else in your life more deserving?'

'Robin, when I came to Edinburgh that time, I was hoping to persuade you to join me here in New Zealand. My idea was to persuade Pheobe to sell up and move here to join me, a fresh start for us all. But well, obviously the time wasn't right. It seems that God had other plans.'

'Honestly Hilary, you look amazing. I think you'll fight your way through this. We'll do it together. I helped my Mum to overcome her addictions before she relapsed and, well, you know, so sad it ended the way it did.'

'Yeah, well this gorgeous hair is a wig and yes, the new meds have bucked me up too. But the best part is you coming. And don't worry, there will be plenty of time to hand over the place to you, eh? In fact, I had a session with my solicitor Donald Mackie last week. Don is the leader of our Skype Prayer Group. He came down here from Lyttleton last week and we signed all the papers. When I pass, this place will be yours as my sole heir. Connie and her husband Karl witnessed the documents as my Executors, so it's all done and dusted.'

'Hilary, what if I had not made it in time or if I had gone off somewhere else?'

'No, I was certain you would come. You see, I know you have a girl here in New Zealand. A girl you met in Glasgow, when she was trekking for charity, a girl called Wendy, right?'

'Yes, her name is Wendy. But how do you know that?'

'By any chance is she Wendy Smythe and is her mother Helen?'

'Yes. But how do you know them?'

'That Skype Prayer Group I mentioned? Well, it's part of a New Zealand wide organisation called 'Methodists in Action'. Wendy and Helen were here three weekends ago when a

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crowd of us gathered for a hands-on meeting to pray for me. Afterwards, when the others had left, the three of us prayed alone for your safe arrival.'

'Wendy and Helen were here, right here? They *told* you about me coming?'

'Yes, in this very room. And clearly our prayers were answered because here you are. But no, I didn't have to drag it out of them because I already knew all about you and Wendy from Pam.'

'Hilary, this is *ultra, ultra* important. Who else here in New Zealand knows I am from Scotland?'

'No one, apart from Wendy and Helen, just you and me and Pam. And Connie must have guessed, I suppose because I've talked about you coming for ages. Why must it be a secret? What's wrong, Robin, you look as if you've seen a ghost.'

'Does Pam Wright know I'm actually here, that I've arrived?'

'No, not yet. I thought we might *FaceTime* her together, maybe tomorrow. Robin, what is it? Please tell me what it is that's frightening you, I promise you can trust me.'

'Please, Hilary, please, please don't tell Pam I'm here, not ever. Please. I've travelled all the way from Glasgow overland to Singapore trying to lay false trails at every turn, in case he sends someone after me. All the way here I avoided flying because they always record your transit. In Singapore I tried to get a passage on a freighter to anywhere in New Zealand, but it proved impossible. In the end the best I could think of was to fly to Melbourne where I joined a wildlife cruise to Auckland, making this my port of entry to New Zealand. Hilary, it was a risk I had to take but it means there is a flight record for me from Singapore to Melbourne. However, I'm hoping the New Zealand maritime entry system is not linked to the worldwide air travel system because if it is he I'm sure he will be able to find me here, track me down. Nearly everything about anyone who travels on airlines can be purchased on the Dark Web, or so I've been told.'

'Robin, who exactly is chasing you? Who is it you are so afraid of?'

'My father, Akif Jalbani. He is a very powerful gangster. Nowadays he's based in Pakistan. He tracked me down in Glasgow, even called me up on my mobile phone. He wants me to join his criminal enterprise, to take over his businesses in the UK. He does drugs and smuggles young girls from Africa to sell as sex slaves. I refused him point blank and hung up on him but I know for sure he won't let it rest until he finds me. Jalbani wants to take me back into my old life. I think he sees me as his prodigy. He won't give up at any cost. Oh, why, oh why does this all have to go wrong at the last hurdle. I begged Pam to keep my secrets to herself and she promised she would. My worry is he might be tracking her devices, listening in on what she is doing. There's nothing about me in her *Facebook* account, I hope, is there?'

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'Robin, shush, calm down please. Now you've made it to New Zealand, your safe. Your father can't get at you here. As you know we have very strict entry requirements. This is the safest place in the world to live, especially here in South Island where we have almost no crime.

'And trust me, I know all about Akif Jalbani from your Mum. When I was in Edinburgh, Phoebe told me what he did to her. He's a despicable monster, a sodomist. The man is sick, his mind twisted by drugs. Your mother told me he gave her heroin and other pills. She thinks this is why Tasha was damaged.

'Your friend Pam told me you were a saint, looking after them so well. Did you know she checked into your past life? Before you did the stint in the refugee camp in Greece, you were heading in the same direction as your father, dealing drugs and womanising. Whatever happened in that camp changed you to a different person, Praise the Lord!

'Look, Robin, Pam told me everything you've been through during these last two years. The day after our prayer meeting, she called me up on *FaceTime*. We talked for hours. She told me everything about Astur, the Morrisons and the Sandersons, your PTSD attacks and your bouts in hospital with pneumonia. She also told me about the *Oasis Trust Fund*. What a wonderful gesture and what a way to underline your commitment to a new, better way of life.'

'NO! NO! Hilary, this is all wrong, all wrong. Pam promised me she would keep my secrets. If she's told you, who else knows?'

'Robin, Robin, please, calm down. You are safe now. Look, I have a plan. Hear me out.'

'**No, Hilary, no!** I can't stay here a minute longer. I can't risk Jalbani finding me here, finding out about Wendy and Helen. I would be putting them in danger, you too, and everyone here at Schrader's. You have no idea what he is like.'

'Robin, Robin, please. You must understand Pam's situation. She called me because she was dreadfully worried about you, because you had not kept in touch as you promised you would. She thought you might have had a mental breakdown, that you might be here with me or in hospital somewhere and wondered if I could try to help her find you.

'No, Hilary, I'll be gone tomorrow. I can't take a risk with you and Wendy.'

'Robin, wait, wait. I have a plan. Hear me out first. Trust me, this could work.'

'Hilary, have you told Wendy about any of this stuff from Pam? About my past?'

'No, no, of course not. But here's my suggestion. These papers I mentioned earlier. My proposal is that I adopt you as my son and that we change your name to Neville Robert Schrader. But it will still be necessary to complete the other paperwork to make you

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officially a New Zealand citizen as Robert McKelvie, port of entry Auckland. But, according to Don, even while that is in process, we can go ahead with the adoption.'

'Hilary, please tell me you haven't discussed my entire situation with this man Mackie?'

'No, Robin, no. Don only knows the basics. Anyway, he is very discreet. Client confidentiality, all that stuff. Trust me, your past will soon fade away, the bad bits anyway. Look, without going into detail, I too have a murky past but when I found Jesus and accepted His forgiveness, all that guilt and weakness was washed away. I've told Don that my husband Neville always wanted a son. That's true, actually, Nev and I did try for a baby but nothing came of it. D'you know, Robin, with your Mediterranean skin colouring, you could easily be Neville's real son. So, from tonight we will start calling you Robin Schrader.'

'Yes, come to think of it, since I arrived here at Schrader's no one has asked me what my surname is. So yes, from now on I'm Robin Schrader but it will take a bit of explaining to Wendy and Helen, I suppose.'

'Look, we must avoid direct lies, they don't work, trust me, I know. I tried that a few times and it's so easy to get caught out. You've no idea. So, here's the plan. We'll stick close to the truth. We'll say you've been in Oz working as a wildlife photographer, right? So, starting now, we should work on your accent, try to drop the Scottishness, nice though it is. What do you think?'

'Yes, Hilary, I think it might work. But what about Wendy? And Helen? What do we tell them?'

'Only that I have asked you to be the son I always wanted and never had. I'm sure they will accept that, don't you?'

'Yes, but what about everything else in my past?'

'Well, I think the whole truth about Astur and what happened in Edinburgh would be an unnecessary burden for them to carry. And anything before that is long gone, right? Remember that like you they have suffered a double tragedy in their lives, losing Wendy's father and her brother just as you have lost your mother and sister. So, they'll understand if you have your ups and downs, mentally.'

'Yes, I can see that saying as little as possible would be for the best. Does that mean it's just you and Pam who know my whole story?'

'No, Robin. Pam and I only know what you have told us. Only God knows your whole story. We all have dark secrets, our weaknesses, cravings, failings, sins that we hold close but if we're prepared to confess them to God with a penitent heart, we can approach His throne of grace and be cleansed and start afresh knowing that Jesus has already paid

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the price for our sins. Remember, Robin, our time here on Earth is transitory and that we can look forward to joining Jesus in Heaven and share in His glory.'

'Hilary, will you help me do that, please? I don't know how to ask.'

'Robin, would you pray with me?'

'Yes, please.'

'Right then, down we go. On our knees, side by side. You'll need to help me to get down and up again and afterwards, you'll need to help me into bed.'

'Then, after that, I suggest you use my *iPad* to try for a *FaceTime* with Wendy. Tell her please, if she's free tomorrow, she is most welcome to visit us here. Helen too, of course.'

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Schrader Family Adventures

The last months since I arrived in New Zealand have been amazing. Only Don Mackie and Wendy know that I arrived in Auckland as Robin McKelvie. To everyone here I am Rob Schrader although Wendy still calls me Robbie when we are alone.

The day after I arrived at the Petting Farm, Wendy and Helen joined us early. There were lots of hugs and tears and Hilary needed to rest after the surge of emotion.

Wendy and I went for a long walk along the shore, sheltering in a beach bathing hut when the rain started. I explained myself as Hilary had suggested, sticking as close to the truth as I dared. I told Wendy that after losing Pheobe and Tasha I had been suffering from depression and had used the long overland trek to 'sort my head'.

I also told her about my long conversation with Hilary and her plans for me to become her adopted son. I then revealed I had given my heart to Jesus. We prayed, hugged, kissed and wept together, gradually becoming more intimate. Afterwards, we tidied ourselves and made our way back to join Hilary and Helen who were attending their Skype Prayer Group.

After lunch, the four of us spent the afternoon in prayer, reflection and thanksgiving. During this period, Hilary explained her plans for me and what she hoped I would achieve to make a new life here in New Zealand.

During the weeks which followed, we held a series of planning meetings with Hilary leading us and hammered out the first outline of our business plan, with every member of our team given an opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas.

It took around a month to complete our pre-planning in detail and since then we have all been working non-stop, slowly growing to twenty-three full-timers and around a dozen or so part-timers at weekends and holiday periods.

Wendy and I have been busy, expanding Hilary's original petting farm operation, renaming it *Schrader Family Adventures*. The petting farm side is still thriving and we have expanded to coffee shop to include a vegan/vegetarian self-service counter, an addition which has proved very popular.

We grow our own organic vegetables and fruit in a new polytunnel garden and have plans to expand this operation to sell our produce at nearby farmers' markets.

There is a mini adventure obstacle trail with climbing frames and donkey rides for younger children and a safe harness climbing wall. For older kids and adults there is a

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seven hundred metre zip slide and a tree-top trail with a series of 'Tarzan' harness swings for the more daring.

On the adventure side for adults and teenagers we have added pony trekking, mountain biking ride-outs and coastal snorkelling safaris. Carla, a friend from Wendy's school days has moved up from Dunedin and together they run our family trekking operation. Currently we have ten ponies with extra stalls in our new stable block for a further ten. Jensen, Connie's older son (until recently an inshore fisherman) and his fiancée Mary-Beth, (a marine biology graduate), run the snorkelling side of the business.

Connie's husband Karl, who is a multi-skilled handyman, has become our resident full-time Mr Fixit and the pair have moved down from Lyttleton to live in a new kit house he has built. He has also recently completed a slipway, jetty and harbour for our snorkelling RIB.

I still occasionally lead mountain bike ride-outs but now I have Darren and Olivia as my deputies this has freed me up to ensure our operations run smoothly.

If you visit us, most days you would see me moving around picking litter while chatting to people, making sure everything is working as it should, intervening when needed.

My most recent venture is a website called *Schrader Drone Tuition* where I offer drone flying courses. Last month I completed training for a batch of seven farmers keen to use camera drones to check on their flocks and herds the modern way, saving time, effort and fuel needed for physical checks by riding out on ATVs.

Planning and working with Connie and Karl to help us, Wendy and I have renovated the original farmhouse, adding a communal kitchen, washrooms and large seminar teaching space and bunkhouse accommodation for twenty self-catering guests. This offering has proved popular with church and community groups where I often present slide shows of my raptors and other birds.

Helen has moved on in her life and has a new partner, a widower called Joshua Knowles. Josh is a lay preacher and works for the *Open Arms Foundation*, a charity based in Wellington, helping refugees to settle and rebuild their lives. His older daughter Hope is a Dermatologist who lives in Auckland and his younger daughter Charity is a Midwife based in Christchurch.

Hilary died six months after I arrived, three months after Wendy and I were married.

In the week after our wedding, Hilary faltered and began to fail badly. We thought she might die within a few days. To buck her up, we promised her we would call our first baby 'Hilary' or 'Neville', if a boy. Under heavy pressure, I promised Hilary I would send a message to Pam Wright including a photograph of the wedding party. In this cropped shot, I have Wendy on my left arm and Hilary on my right with Helen also supporting her.

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I used our dead drop cutout service, thanking Pam again for everything she had done for me. I also explained that Hilary had terminal cancer. I promised Pam we were safe and thriving and that I would be in touch again when we were ready to resume normal contact, perhaps in a year or two when I was fully established and unfindable by Akif Jalbani.

Last week we visited Charity Knowles at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Christchurch where Wendy was scanned. Baby Hilary Schrader is thriving and is due on 31 January 2019.

If all goes well, we might ask Pam Wright to visit us and be a godmother to our baby.

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Now I can see a bright future ahead, I will seal this encrypted file record and store a copy on my OneDrive and G-Drive cloud accounts where no one can access them but me.

Taking Hilary's advice, I plan to allow these uncomfortable memories from my old life to fade away.