

Fidelity

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A Maisie Kaywood Story

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For Alan Black

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Shackled

The day before Christmas Eve, 1998, Fidelity (Fida) Cortez, known at AEA as Penny Fairbairn, was thousands of miles from home. She could never return to Buenos Aires; not after what had happened. This was her third Christmas in Aberdeen, her twenty-first year trotting in his wake around the globe.

Only Fida knew his true identity. Carlos Ortega had many aliases with passports to match, some used only once, now dead and buried, with others still active.

Since Carlos had re-located to AEA (Acorn Enterprises Aberdeen) PLC, Ortega had taken to calling himself "TruMac", a snappier version of his full moniker, Truman McKinlay Hellsgborg III. Despite what the other members of staff speculated, Penny and TruMac had never been lovers, never sexually involved. Their tastes were radically different.

Fida had toyed with the idea of a winter break in Mallorca or perhaps Tenerife. Or maybe she would try the emerging luxury destination of Dubai. Even now, Wednesday 23 December, the last working day at Acorn, all she needed do was to make a few simple phone calls. Her travel contacts would compete to make a place available for her in any five-star hotel, on any first-class flight, wherever she chose to go, free of charge, complementary kick-backs from grateful recipients of her bookings on behalf of TruMac.

But somehow Fida had failed to organise for herself. This had been happening with holidays since she arrived in Aberdeen, and she now had seven weeks accrued. For the others at AEA the maximum which could be carried forward was two weeks, but since Fida was TruMac's trusted Personal Assistant, and outside the ambit of the AEA Personnel System, AEA rules did not apply to her.

The irony in her situation was not lost on her. Fida was super-efficient at organising every detail for her great man, a difficult, mercurial and increasingly secretive personality who dabbled in Oil, Property, Hedge Funds, and Politics. There were of course 'other areas', those that must never be committed to paper, whose details existed only in the ether of double encryption. Carlos/TruMac was a secretive deal-monger, making money at the margins, spinning away before the inevitable hit the fan; smart, Teflon-coated, fleet of foot and mind. But Fida felt the heavy end of the stick always landed on her desk.

Most of Fida's every working day, which meant almost 24/7, was spent serving

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TruMac, absorbed in a hectic round of booking, un-booking and re-booking his travel arrangements in accord with his terse voice-mails, texts or enigmatic emails. On some days it was as if he only existed inside her head, as she ducked and dived, speaking to various Concierges and Maître D's around the world. Normally she used her near perfect Home Counties English, or where required she had competent French and Italian, passable German and was most natural in Spanish, her mother tongue. As he chopped and changed destinations, TruMac would not have cared if she left him booked even though he did not arrive. To him reneging on bookings or even paying late fees and charges seemed irrelevant but this was not Fida's way. She kept faith with these many people she had never met: and she hated loose ends. Discourtesy and loose ends could cause her future problems, reduce their trust in her.

As a self-trained lawyer, her other principal function was to respond to his curt voice clips, emailed from wherever he pitched up, to return them as persuasive, legally water-tight prose. Fida Cortez was at the top of her game. If she had been a footballer, she would have been ranked with Di Stefano or even Maradona. Like these sporting superstars Fida was very well paid.

Currently she was earning US \$430,000 per annum paid tax free to an Isle of Man account from an offshore account. There were also expenses and perquisites which with one or more secret bonuses usually topped her above US \$1M per year. Even though she already had plenty of money, she decided she would negotiate payment in lieu from Carlos for her weeks. More money was always useful. Money could buy most things, though not what Fida really wanted.

Until recently Carlos's trust in her had seemed absolute. However, since her posting to Aberdeen she had had felt increasingly he was drifting from her, keeping things from her. This was making her wary, slightly fearful, apprehensive. The clues were tiny but they were there, niggling at her. Reassuringly she still had access and authority to operate his Isle of Man Master Account, making payments and shifting funds as directed, or as seemed necessary. She had all his codes, all his passwords. She knew all his secrets: or so she still wanted to believe. If he was drifting from her it would mean that sooner or later, he would 'dispense' with her. Hers would not be by a normal retirement: she knew too much about his murky past for him to allow that. To protect herself she had started the process of hiding her money from him.

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As she tidied up her in-box ahead of the holiday break, Fida was lonely, frustrated and edgy. It was always like this when she was nearing the climax of her cycle. She looked out from the mezzanine office suite that she shared with TruMac, when he visited. Below on the main open plan floor below her the various

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Project Teams were packing up for the Christmas break. Bottles of Brut were being popped, mistletoe was doing the rounds, and canapés were being nibbled or swallowed whole, depending on the lips they were offered to. Intimacies were definitely in the offing. Tomorrow or later today, most of them would travel home or to a holiday destination to be with their loved ones.

But this office partying, this temporary escape from loneliness was not for Fida. She held herself aloof from these minions, as TruMac often called them. She saw them glance up at her then quickly away, to mutter behind raised hands. She knew what they were saying:

"Spoiled, nosy bitch who rakes through our emails looking for error, for lack of fidelity, for weakness."

Good, Fida thought. Who needs them? To them she was Ms. Penelope Fairbairn, GB Citizen (Isle of Man). This identity had been bought, just as most things can be bought, and was one of several names for which she held genuine passports. If only they knew how trivial they were, merely a front for TruMac's other activities. Nonetheless, AEA was a highly profitable front, and they too were all well paid. Otherwise few of them, bar a handful of locals, would have put up with the constraints of living in Aberdeen. Most of these people down there were metropolitans, just like her, she reasoned.

These long hard years had taken their toll: although physically super-fit, Fida was mentally and emotionally exhausted. And she was finding TruMac increasingly difficult to follow, in a business sense. Was this why he had isolated her in Aberdeen, knowing she was much more at home in London, Paris, New York or Tokyo, with people of her own ilk. Was this the first step before her 'removal'?

If it wasn't for the A to Zee Club (The Club) she would have gone mad in the first six weeks. TruMac had insisted she stay here at AEA, to guard the huge IBM Master Console, even converting the under-office, as he called it, the void below her feet, into a luxury serviced apartment for her, providing a comprehensive maid and butler service, everything managed under control of The Club, freeing her of all domestic chores.

The Club chain was another of his co-investments. And she saw the figures. It was minting money here and at other similar locations throughout the world, catering for the world-weary cash rich/time poor who found themselves obliged to travel to far flung places like Aberdeen, where their particular proclivities would be difficult to satisfy. The Club had strict rules : alcohol was allowed only in moderation : no underage or non-consenting 'partners' : and no drugs of any kind, not even so called legal highs new to the underground scene. And no firearms. To breach any of these rules on any A to Zee Club's premises would be to exclude

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oneself from a world of pleasure.

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Bonus

The message beeped onto the screen of Fida's Newton MessagePad.

"F,
Stand down, take a break.
Lift off Jan 5.
Let Santa be good to you.
Check your a/c!
C"

She did. Her account was up by US \$300K. Scraps for his lapdog, she thought. Her visible balance now stood at US \$2.9M which was too high, far too high. She was getting lazy.

Of course this was the account Carlos/TruMac knew of, her 'open' account, the one she allowed him to see, pretending she did not know about his 'visits'. But she had three other accounts plus numerous secret investments, mostly in travel companies and micro-electronics, investments which were doing very nicely for her. Carlos probably suspected that these existed, but he could not know for sure, she felt certain. Perhaps he thought she was still funneling conscience money back to Buenos Aires, something that he himself had done intermittently down through the years, until they had set up Aberdeen, when he had begun to change.

In any case her personal wealth was trivial compared to his. They had made each other rich, the boy and girl from the same slum, Villa Carton, the worst of the *villas miserias* in Buenos Aires. In those days he had been Carlos Montreal Ortega, she Fidelia Santa Maria Cortez, two ambitious, violent rivals who had eventually joined forces as a result of infidelity and inevitable retribution.

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An hour later Fida's open account was back to \$700,000, nearer her target. She was too tired to do any further financial shuffling. She needed a sauna, a large glass of Malbec and Sven's magical hands on her body; then a special overnight session.

She looked down to find that the main office was empty. She checked the security zones at the master panel - all clear, all secure. She checked the stats on the IBM Console, everything normal.

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"Time for Fida to have some fun", she smiled, checking her make-up.

The Club was an exclusive venue, open 24/7. She rang from her blue mobile phone, the one she used for normal business. The red phone was a direct line to TruMac who might ring at any time, despite what he had said in his message. The white phone was her personal phone, the one that Carlos/TruMac knew nothing about, she hoped.

The Club answered at the fifth ring. This delay was used to screen her number. Unregistered numbers were bumped to a thriving establishment called "Elgin Take-Away Emporium", which offered everything from Noodles and Kebabs to Pizza and Fish Suppers. She merely gave her code and requirements to the auto-voice reader at the electronic booking desk and hung up. There was no need to debate or negotiate. Her needs would be catered for. She was a platinum member, an early gift from Carlos. At The Club this would be one of the busiest nights of their year, but because of her status, they would re-direct resources, if required. Maybe there would be a special Christmas surprise for her?

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The sleet pulsed at the big car as she exited from the underground car park at the anonymous office block. She was driving a new Mercedes G-WAGEN 500 GE, top of the range, enhanced to include every gadget available. This was another more recent gift from TruMac, in response to her moaning about Aberdeen and its dreadful weather. Forty-three minutes later she swung expertly through narrow gates and slowed to negotiate a series of extra high speed-humps and deep diagonal gutters which gave the surveillance cameras a chance to verify her car and its number-plate. Any 'intruder' would be met by two stern-faced security guards then re-directed to the side track that led back to the A-road.

Fida was an accomplished driver, one of her many skills. Her fastest time to the Club was thirty-nine minutes, by the direct route, but the conditions had slowed her, making the car slide out of fast corners, despite its four-wheel drive agility, its Anti-Lock Braking System (ALBS) and fat winter tyres.

Two hundred yards further up the single track road she came to a stop at the shutters to the entry tunnel to the underground car park. She slammed the stick into neutral, and leaned forward to show her face to the camera. Forty long seconds ticked by before the shutter rattled open. Above her, in the converted Castle, a former stately home, things would be happening to make sure her experience was perfect. There must be someone just ahead of her, she mused. Only one car at a time was allowed in the garage area, to maintain anonymity. She drove down the slope then along the passageway to the open area. The light on a parking pod flashed green as she approached. The camera read her number-plate,

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the shutters rose and she drove in. The shutters came down behind her and the security bolts slid into place. State of the art everything, TruMac had insisted, a condition of his investment.

Fidelia tugged her large tote bag across the seat, delved in, switching off her three phones and the MessagePad before locking them in her glove compartment. This was an unnecessary security precaution, she had been assured. Another rule: no comms equipment, video or camera gear inside The Club. As she knew, all internal areas to which she had access were EMI screened, blocking any possibility of unauthorised incoming or outgoing signals to its Clients or members of Staff. All rooms were de-bugged daily, another precaution against blackmail. The Club was a secure location, designed, built and managed to the highest international standards. The concept was that of being marooned on a desert island, aimed at removing external distractions, allowing the 'lovers', complete freedom of expression. Within the rules, every taste was catered for.

Party Night

Taking the clicker from its wall socket, she opened the door to an empty lift lobby, clicked the pod door shut behind her, checking that the LED array showed red, securing her car and its contents. She put the clicker in her tote bag beside the silk purple bag containing her 'honeymoon' lingerie.

There would probably be around forty others here, she estimated from the wetness of the garage floor. No doubt others would arrive, filling The Club to its maximum of forty-eight: but she would see no one, except Sven: or Thor; or Helmut. These men were her 'type', each was as good as the other, all scoring high on her personal scale, all in the nineties. Crucially, each of these men had been snipped, voluntarily, and were tested weekly for cleanliness, as a condition of their employment. Ditto their female counterparts, Fida imagined. Had she wanted a female of a mixed pair or whatever, this was available: but Fida was a traditional client, 'man over woman, one man at a time', her only special request was to demand no protection sex, or as the tick box had termed it, 'Fully Natural Love', a requirement The Club found easy to provide. Fida was an attractive woman with no odd or vicious predilections, unlike Carlos. She had a trusted reputation among the male harem of The Club and her partners came to her willingly, eager to please and ready to be pleased in return.

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Fida leaned across his magnificent body and checked her watch. Twenty minutes before two in the morning. They had coupled five times and she was ready again. Ivan was a new guy, from Serbia, he had explained. Average score 83, so far - a raw recruit, by her standards. Not as good as Sven, who tended to lose points for smugness. Sven had once scored a 98, perhaps because her period was due the next day. But Ivan's puppy-like enthusiasm made up for his lack of expertise.

Mid-way through the evening they had played her game. This was her usual routine and The Club was prepared for her. Gourmet food was ordered from a touch screen. They ate nude, sipped frugally at champagne, followed by a little white wine then red. She hated to spoil sex with too much alcohol. The food was delivered to the entry hallway on a hostess trolley by unseen hands, without intrusion. Ivan was a trained waiter and served her expertly, attentively, standing close to her shoulder, so that she could feel his heat, and the occasional touch of his ready presence. As she ate she watched a selection of romantic clips from her favourite movies, "Love Actually", "Pride and Prejudice" and "Sleepless in Seattle".

They danced to her favourite selection of songs, all slow romantic ballads,

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some in English, some in Spanish, most in Italian, most sung by Andrea Bocelli. Ivan, if that was his real name, had whispered his love at first in broken English, before falling into his mother tongue. It had felt real and she had been moved, to which he responded tenderly, softly smoothing away her tears with his long slim fingers, gently kissing her lips, the tip of her nose, nibbling at her ears. The tears fell even harder as the memory welled up. As the deep sobs came, he lifted her in his arms, carried her to the bedroom, lowered her on their bed, then dimming the lights.

Andrea sang on....

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Definitely different, was how she had rated their first encounter. It had felt almost like Pablo, from all those years ago, a fragment she had thought had died with his violent death, his death a violation of the code of clan fidelity, a death that still filled her with guilt. Despite her betrayal it was Pablo who still came to her in her loneliest moments, in the darkest hours in her many beds around the world. Pablo, the only man she had loved, still loved, who, despite her treachery had loved her in return. Pablo had been small, wiry, clever, determined, and energetic. Pablo who was no more: Pablo, who had died at her behest, shot in the head before her eyes by Carlos, her ticket out of the slums, as his junior partner.

At thirty-nine Fida Cortez was still gym-fit, sculpted, looking more like a woman in her late twenties. Despite her apparent youth, she had long accepted that she could never have won these beautiful and accomplished men to her bed by allure alone. But she was willing to pay, and very unwilling to attract the debilitating emotional entanglements and risk of pregnancy that came with real lovers. Pablo was proof of that, and his bastard child had been aborted without compunction, as demanded by the youthful Carlos, who did not want to leave a son behind who might seek to revenge his father's blood in later years.

Pablo her co-deceiver, who had worked with her to run an inside scam, betraying the Syndicate that Tomas, the father of Carlos, had headed. It had all bust wide open when Tomas was gunned down in yet another coup, from another more powerful syndicate, after which she had fled with Carlos, who had accepted her version of events.

Over the last two decades so much had changed for her: but it was her yearning for Pablo that still haunted her.

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She would ask for 'Ivan' again, she decided, although the rules were that particular requests were seldom accommodated: part of the fun, they said. He was

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still with her now, and she had him until eight o'clock when they would enter the final sequence to share breakfast then kiss away their tears of good-bye, simulating an end to their fantasy romance in which the lovers must leave each other and return to reality.

'Shower-time, Ivan.'

She always began again with a shower, then a massage, then...

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It was nearly nine o'clock on the morning of Christmas Eve.

Ivan had left, their ersatz good-byes exchanged, performed with all the genuine feeling she could muster. She always felt down when it came to these final moments. Her visits to The Club had been tailing off over these past months. She knew this was her biological time-clock: it had been ringing its alarms for years now, telling her that her chance of a child was receding. She had considered IVF a few times, a way of making the child, a boy - it must be a boy - fully hers. But she knew for certain that TruMac would object, unwilling to suffer the down-time and distractions that child-rearing would entail.

Ivan gone, she changed out of her flimsy red silk nightie and panties back into her black pencil skirt, dark green blouse, and shrugged into a genuine silver fox fur bolero jacket. She hopped up onto her four-inch heels. Using the mirror she checked her make-up, always minimal, and set her face to 'business as usual'.

She would go to the gym later, that always helped.

The ache would pass, it always did.

Intercept

Fida reversed her entry process, now leaving anonymously by the exit tunnel screened by dense foliage, accelerating along the departure track which curved around in a long three mile loop to rejoin the A-road running below. The actual exit to this public road was by a snaking path through a copse of rhododendrons. This exit was very hard to spot, deliberately. As with the approach to entrance, this exit was made over extra high speed bumps and monitored by CCTV.

When Fida reached the overgrown turn off to the concealed single-track road, she swerved past the discrete sign which read: "Private Property: do not enter". Now climbing steeply she floored the accelerator. The rough track led up into the mountains of the neighbouring Estate. This longer and much more difficult route to AEA HQ had become Fida's favoured route, allowing her to enjoy her rallying skills, allowing her to defer the loneliness that lay ahead.

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More than a mile away, high above her, bivouacked under a camouflaged sheet, David Abernethy, the lay prone inside an all-weather sleeping bag, his small slim frame relaxed. Using high-powered binoculars he was tracking the G-Wagen, his high-powered rifle at his side wrapped in a waterproof bag. When she spun off the official route clear of the masking trees, he re-focused to see the car race up the Estate track towards him. This is what he had been hoping for, expecting, although he several other options.

He pressed his voice-tab.

'Tag Two exiting, timed at 0913 hours. ETA at Position One, 0957 hours.'

'OB One, can you delay Tag Two until 1200 hours say, or later?'

'Will do. Listening, out.'

He packed his gear into his rucksack and set off at a steady trot, up and over the hill, heading for his lay-up above the favoured intercept point.

'Biscuit' Abernethy, aka The Ferret, an ex-SAS sniper, spread out the waterproof sheet behind his chosen scrubby birch, and settled prone, breathing deeply to help his body recover and relax. He unsheathed his weapon, a marksman's rifle, set it on its tripod, and adjusted the telescopic sight to bring the stone post by the side of the track into sharp focus. He would have about eight minutes to wait, he reckoned.

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As the G-Wagen dipped over the hill and raced towards the narrow bridge over the gorge, he had a clear shot over an approach of three hundred yards. He must acquire and then hit her before she started to decelerate into the narrow bridge. As the car approached the stone post, at eighty yards from the bridge, the high velocity bullet left the rifle, travelling to a point ahead of the speeding vehicle.

The front left tyre exploded, tugging the steering wheel out of Fida's hands. The car lurched sideways. She stabbed on the brakes and felt the judder of the ALBS bounce under her foot, heard the frantic whirring of the four-wheel drive gearboxes as they sought to re-gain traction through the remaining three tyres. But the big car sailed on, its speed undiminished. Black ice under the slush, flashed through her mind as the front left headlight exploded into the protective bollard at the side of the bridge, flattening it then partially demolishing the side of the bridge, decelerating the car from around sixty mph to near zero almost instantly.

The momentum caused the big car to buck upwards, sending it sailing into the air to land on its nose, before toppling slowly over onto its back, to lie upside down, just beyond the bridge, pointing backwards towards the original direction of its approach.

Just ahead of impact her seatbelt had tightened. At impact the massive deceleration forces on her brain caused Fida to pass out. Carlos had ordered the car to be fitted with the added safety pack which included the latest innovation of all-round air-bags. These exploded into action, cocooning her for a few micro-seconds until they deflated, leaving the passenger hanging fast, limp, held upside down by her seat restraint.

"Bugger, bugger, bugger", The Ferret muttered to himself.

Had the vehicle been travelling any faster she would most certainly be dead. It would have carried onwards through the sharp bend to plunge over the cliff edge and down into the deep loch beyond. But that had not been his intention. He had planned only to disable her vehicle, making sure she was delayed until Maisie had completed her work at Acorn HQ. A benign interpretation of what had occurred, which did not immediately strike him, was that if he had not caused her crash, then the underlying black ice might have caused her car to slide on into the loch anyway.

He had not been authorised to kill her, not yet anyway. They might still need her alive. Maisie was confident that her computers would do the work of hacking into the IBM Console but the back-up plan was to take this woman into custody,

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subject her to a truth drug. Now she might well be dead or severely injured. He must check.

Eighteen minutes later, The Ferret was kneeling ten feet from the car, listening. What he heard was silence, apart from the low whine of the wind. He inched at a crouch towards the car then, stretching up, leaned forward, reaching his left hand through the smashed side window. He placed two fingers at her throat. Her pulse was strong, normal. Her perfume was light, spicy and flowery. As her eyelids flickered he ducked away, returned his small silenced pistol to its holster, and began his retreat, crawling rapidly backwards on all fours, ready to stop and roll, ready to retrieve, ready to enable and aim his weapon on the roll, ready to stop aim and fire, ready to deal with any threat she might generate; as he had been trained to do, courtesy of HM Government.

At twenty feet from the car he was out of her eye-line. As he rose to leave, he glanced back through the scrub. She was suspended, seemingly still unconscious, dangling like a rag doll. What he knew of her crowded into his mind and he hesitated for a longer look. Her legs were dangling, naked, muscular. Her feet were tiny.

This was the closest he had been to Tag Two, although he had been tracking her for almost three months, day and night, watching her every move. Thorough in-depth profiling of targets was a hallmark of the XCD team.

The Ferret knew almost everything there was to know about Fida Cortez and her life in Aberdeen. She was a smidgeon over five-five, a regular at her gym, slim, and fit with short dark hair. Her face, though not conventionally beautiful, spoke of strong character. It was a face that he had studied many times through his binoculars, reminding him of his of his own Aileen, lost with their baby in hospital, after the teenage drunk had mounted the pavement and smashed into her. She had been flown by helicopter to die alone in Glasgow, while he was hiding under a discarded tractor in County Fermanagh, watching and photographing a remote farm building, a PIRA meeting place.

Intrusion

At AEA HQ, thirty-three miles away as the crow is said to fly, Maisie was inside Fida's office. She sat cross-legged beside a coffee table with a half-full Thermos of strong black coffee, her face bathed in the green glow of a monitor. She was humming to herself, unaware that she was off key. Her mind was fully engaged, oblivious to everything else, her fingers playing Fida's keyboard like the virtuoso Jazz pianist that she was.

As Maisie already knew, AEA was registered in the Isle of Man, and that was where the Acorn master bank account was homed. This made her task more of a challenge. The Isle of Man Banking System was often used by HMG Departments to 'rest' some of their clandestine funds and so had extra layers of security. Carlos must have paid someone very well to be allowed this privilege. Perhaps he might even have a 'blessing' from someone in the HMG Foreign Office, given his political connections and donations.

When Maisie Kaywood had been 'retired' from MI6/GCHQ, there had been a great deal of inter-departmental haggling about what to do with her and her Carpe Diem Team. Unknown to her superiors she had read all their emails and the minutes of their meetings. The Powers had made the mistake of giving her three months at her desk to twiddle her thumbs before eventually closing her down. It had been a window of opportunity that Maisie had used to the full, setting up numerous portals which by-passed their rigorous security systems, some of which she herself had designed during her early years working in the Computer Executive Group at GCHQ.

To crack Acorn's Master Console she had linked it to the GCHQ Mainframe, enabling the latest double-encryption decoding software to deploy its sequenced permutations, seeking to crack the Acorn security codes. In parallel Maisie paged through Fida's personal files. Although clever, these were much simpler to crack. Very soon both Carlos and his acolyte would discover that they were back at the bottom of the heap, both penniless again. Soon their wealth would be moved on, dispersed, taken on journeys through various intermediary cut-out accounts, to rest finally in secure and anonymous holding accounts in banking havens around the world.

Later, this money would be re-deployed to serve good causes, some to the slums of Argentina, some to other needy locations and some to the families shattered by the many 'small wars' through which the World Powers fought out their struggles for global control. But this phase was yet to come, to be completed

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later, from the relative anonymity of the new Computer Science laboratory at Strathclyde University, Glasgow, where Maisie was a self-funded part-time Post-Doctoral Research Fellow.

There were many ways of disposing of valuable assets, even during the traditional Christmas period when the financial world appeared to have shut up shop. If required, Maisie was willing to accept fire sale prices in exchange for speedy cash, before Tag One (Carlos) re-activated himself after his blow-out in the boy brothels of Cairo. Maisie knew exactly where he was: his limo driver was Alberto Shariff, one of her off-shore XCD members.

Maisie was not alone at AEA. Her back was well protected.

Hamish John McIver, aka "Sumo", (Ex-Royal Marine, Ex-Special Boat Service), her OB Three, was guarding her escape route, sitting at the foot of the stairwell seven floors below. Sumo had wedged shut the fire escape door at each level, so Maisie could skip down to him, if required. Sumo carried a small silenced weapon, a Taser and a CS Spray; but his body was his most lethal weapon, and his physical strength was legendary.

Tom Farquharson-Wright, aka "Dopey", (Ex-Royal Marine, Ex-SAS, Ex-MI6 Intelligence Officer), her OB Two, was in the darkened building opposite, a Grampian Council Building. Tom took his moniker Dopey from his lazy way of moving, a mannerism which had taken many of his opponents by surprise, most of whom were now dead or maimed for life. Dopey was sprawled, his long thin legs spread-eagled, knees up, heels on the widow sill, tipping backwards on an office chair, elbows on his chest, chin tucked in, his binoculars ranging slowly over the facade of the Acorn building opposite. He worked his focus across the rows of empty darkened windows then along the offices at pavement level to come to rest again at the shuttered entry to the underground car park. He moved back to the main front door, to start again. Dopey did this over and over, checking for differences, a glint of light, or a small movement. He had been doing it for many hours and he would continue to do it for as long as Maisie was in the building.

Dopey was also checking Reception, monitoring the very sleepy night security guard who manned the premises. The elderly man had inadvertently doped himself when he drank a cup of strong instant coffee to which he had added three small pills from his clicker of substitute sweeteners. The small canister he had used was identical to his own but had been swapped from the pocket of his uniform jacket, when he was jostled by the tall friendly man (Dopey) who had been running for a bus. The guard had been asleep for two hours, and might sleep for another six. Sumo had since paid the security guard a visit to swap back his original canister of normal un-doctored sweeteners.

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Dopey and Maisie had almost made it as a couple and they were still lovers, intermittently. Both clung tenaciously to their separate other lives. Tom had his horses at stud in the Cotswolds, breeding steeplechasers, and rode out with the hounds at every opportunity. Apart from her computer software research work, Maisie's life comprised her writing, her charity work, mostly through anonymous giving, her itinerant career as a bit-part actress, and piano which she played for fun but to a professional level, guesting with various Jazz groups UK-wide.

All four of XCD Team were mic-ed up, able to speak to each other, as required. As usual, chit-chat was zero. They were professionals, the core of the original but now disbanded Carpe Diem Team, part of the elite group that had served MI6 from an operational base inside GCHQ, acting quickly to eliminate threats as they arose, normally on the direct authority of a Prime Minister who liked the idea that she could directly influence events. When the original CD Team had been disbanded with a change of Government, Maisie had reformed it as XCD, operating independently for the common good, but now on her own authority.

XCD Team members were not mercenaries, as such. However Maisie made sure that each of them was as rich as he or she needed to be to maintain their 'normal' lifestyles, while awaiting a call to another 'XCD outing'. These outings were usually at Maisie's behest, but other 'tasks' might be authorized by her, arising from a request or suggestion by any one of the dozen or so other key XCD members scattered around the globe.

Maisie had been tracking TMG III/TruMac/Carlos for nearly six months. He was not quite the biggest fish she had tackled on her own authority, but certainly of whale-shark proportions. Over the years she had downed several other South American magnates for the UK Government, usually as part of the War on Drugs. In recent years, on her own authority, she had also downed several minor potentates.

Almost by definition such evil people were normally disproportionately wealthy and as with Carlos, Maisie made it her business to recycle their funds to undo some of the hurt that they had caused. This was a mindset she had inherited from her mother, Myra¹, now long deceased. Myra was also the root of Maisie's charity work. When she was still a teenager, Maisie had inherited control of The Margaret Miller Foundation, then with funds in excess of £20M. Since that time Maisie had grown this 'mother' charity and created its many sibling charity organizations, charities which she viewed as her 'children'.

This current operation to take down TMH III/TruMac/Carlos had its origins in a long running news saga. Maisie had watched it unfold and when she realised

¹ You might enjoy "Living with Myra" by John Bonthron.

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that the Authorities were limited by their own rules and bureaucratic self-interests, Maisie had decided to act. After a few months of snooping she uncovered the fact of Carlos involvement. He had been the principal funder, bankrolling a syndicate of Chinese and Russians who had been shipping underage boys and girls from the Far East and the Baltic States under sedation, in what appeared to be refrigerated containers of seafood. Things had gone badly wrong at Folkestone. There had been a hold-up at the docks, due to a severe gale and flooding which had closed the roads. In quarantine, trapped at the dockside before clearing UK Customs and now out of fuel, the container's air conditioning system had failed. The cargo of ninety-three children had died of overheating and dehydration, slipping away without pain, it was alleged, the candles of their young lives snuffed out by their own carbon dioxide.

The outrage quickly morphed into a "problem" that had then been ping-ponged between various jurisdictions. While the Authorities in various countries sought to pin a tail on each other's donkey, the atrocity had flared into the news, then became a heart-rending documentary, then cooled to an intermittent dog-fight, a guerrilla war of bitter words and ever more bizarre accusations. Meanwhile the perpetrators had evaporated to re-group and begin again.

Fidelity

Retrieval

Fida had known immediately that the blow-out was a fake. Subliminally she had heard the whistle of the bullet ahead of the bang of the exploding tyre. In her life Fida had heard many bullets. After the hit, the tug at the wheel, the rest had been a blur into temporary blackness.

In the wreckage of the *G-Wagen*, Fida was hanging upside down, slowly coming back to consciousness after her trauma. She heard the distant thud of someone running towards her. She had exceptional hearing, especially when in danger, and was now fully alert. The harsh breathing drew closer. The presence slowed. Fida picked out various creaks and tiny scrapes, sifting them from the moan of the wind. Her visitor was getting closer. She could smell dog, but heard no dog sounds.

She felt the final approach, rather than heard it. He was male, she smelled, and a faint residue of propellant. His breath was sweet, tasting of banana. Then the gentle press of rough, cold wet fingers, against her carotid artery, taking her pulse. She resisted opening her eyes. If he had wanted to kill her he would have already slit her throat, she reasoned, as she may have done herself if their roles had been reversed. Her best bet was to pretend to be out of it, unconscious. She forced herself to stay limp.

Sensing him moving away, she risked a quick glance, to her left, hoping that the rear view mirror was intact. His face was hidden in a khaki balaclava/face mask. Shining cobalt eyes stared through the slit. He was white, ruddy skinned with gingery eyebrows. He stood perfectly still but was poised, like a mongoose ready to strike. His was small and slim, the same build as Pablo. He seemed to be looking directly into her eyes and she shuttered them closed. Immediately she craved to see him again but when she opened her eyes to scan the mirror he had gone. She listened and sniffed: nothing. The yearning came again - she wanted Pablo to come and save her, forgive her. It was her recurring, impossible dream.

She remained motionless, hanging, waiting, listening, and concentrating: nothing. The wind was picking up with small rain spots in it. Her legs were covered with goose bumps and she was shivering. She counted in her head, allowing fifteen minutes to elapse: still nothing. The seat belt webbing was hurting which she took to be a good sign: at least she was not paralysed, she hoped. She moved her hand, found the seat plug, stabbed at it and fell with a thump.

Not for the first time over these last minutes, Fida wished that she had brought her weapon with her. It was in the locked safe, in her flat, back at Acorn HQ. She knew that the UK police were hot on illegal possession of firearms and

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TruMac had been very definite that she must use it only for dire emergencies. Not that she trusted weapons; Fida preferred to depend on her own abilities, especially at close range where a firearm could easily kill or maim the wrong person, including its owner. It had happened many times in the slums of Villa Carton, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina. She would rather have a knife.

She estimated that she might take two hours jogging to reach the distant A-road, and help. But on high heels and without proper clothing to counter this freezing cold, she knew she would probably not make it, unless she could find a spot where her phones worked.

ooOoo

The voice sounded straight into Biscuit's ear from thirty-three miles away. He was now three hundred metres from the G-Wagen, behind a scrubby birch tree, safe to respond at a whisper.

'Gotcha! Streaming now. OB One, how are we?'

'Tag Two has managed to get herself out. Groggy, I would say, from this distance. She has been on her phones, can you read her?'

'Hold... No signal. All three of her phones are down. But listen up folks, from what I have seen here she is more of an innocent than we first thought. In particular she is not part of his recent scams. In all fairness, perhaps you should render assistance to your maiden in distress?'

'OK Position One - will do. Will report later; signing out at...1056 hours.'

Biscuit withdrew from his observation point and scurried at a fast trot back up through the woods to his Defender. He opened the rear door, called the dogs out, to "HEEL" and set them to "WATCH".

Removing the disguised Velcro-ed flaps on either side of the wheel arches he revealed two levers. Pulling these released the aluminum floor plate which supported the rough carpet covered in dog-hairs. He lifted the panel free, stowed his weapon and other gear then changed into his Estate Ghillie outfit, his normal persona by which he was known in this area. He reversed the procedure, re-loaded the dogs and he fired up his vehicle, setting off down the lumpy hill path towards the tarmac track that led to the bridge.

ooOoo

Travelling at a cautious eight miles per hour over treacherous black ice, Biscuit slithered to a halt ten metres short of her. He opened his door and stood on the sill of the ex-Army Defender, looking over and down at her, keeping his

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body mass behind its reinforced door, minimising himself as a target.

He called to her in his native North-East of Scotland twang, playing the Ghillie role.

'Hello there, wee bitta bothur, have ye?'

She rose to her feet, her right hand holding a phone, left hand empty, but already formed for a chopping blow. These were the same cold, beautiful cobalt hard-staring eyes she had seen in the rear view mirror. It was him. There was no doubt about that. She stood squarely, watching his eyes, reading his body language. He held himself like Pablo, pretending to be relaxed but in fact coiled, ready to spring. She would use her posh Home Counties voice, claiming the higher ground in the class stakes that these Brits seemed to need.

'Yes, can you help, please?'

This man had a functioning vehicle. She must re-assure him, defuse him, get him off balance. If she could get close enough she might be able to take him out. Charm might work, or else sudden violence, if she got lucky. Although he did not look like someone she could easily defeat.

'Tricky bittaroady this, did you skid aff into the wee bit waall o' the bridgy then?'

'Yes, going far too fast. Looks like the car is a write off,' she shrugged, turning to look at the G-Wagen. When she glanced back quickly his eyes captured hers again. He had not been fooled by her attempted distraction.

'Aye, looks like it, but hooabout yersel, are ye all right, then?'

His impassionate eyes were at complete odds with the apparent warmth of his voice. This man was good, a practiced deceiver, so very like Pablo. *But why has he come back?* she asked herself. The answer came at once: *This must be about Carlos! I am to be a hostage!* Then it struck her: he must think she had a weapon. She stepped over the tote bag towards him and he jumped down and came to meet her. His right hand was inside the large patch pocket of his jacket, probably holding a weapon.

Their eyes were still locked. The dogs whined from inside the Defender.

His hand shot out of his pocket and he took two quick steps towards her and offered it to her, taking her by surprise.

'At your service, ma'am. Pity about your vehicle. Great cars these. Every

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gadget you could imagine. Soon they'll be driving themselves?'

Now he was a being soldier, pretending that she an officer or a dignitary to whom he must show respect, deference.

She was forced to switch her phone to her left hand.

'Penelope Fairbairn.'

His handshake was firm, genuine, and re-assuring. She wanted to believe in him but his eyes were still cold, wary, as hers must be also, she thought. She shifted her phone back, set her left hand again. This caused a small tightening of his jaw. *He is very good.*

'And whit waas it that waas bringin ye along this wee bit o' God-forsaken track on a wild day like this, when a nice lady like yersel should be in her hoosie, maakin' Christmaas Pud and tying up presents fir her kiddies.'

'I could, reverse that question, of course?'

'Well, aye, so ye could an' aa'. But it's ma joabby to be about here, being as Ah'm a Ghillie for the Estate, and being that yer driving about on the Laird's wee bit roady, smashin' intae his wee bridgy. An' who dae ye think Ah'll get the joabby o' puttin that tae rights, if no masel, then?'

'Ah, so that's why you're here, just doing your rounds?'

'Aktually, Ah thought at first, when Ah heard ye racing about, that ye were out daein' a wee bit o' rustlin. The Laird's sheep and coos have been disappearin' at wan hell o' rate ower these last weeks afore Christmaas, then.'

Not once in three years of driving this road had Fida seen a sheep or a cow. Red deer, pheasants and grouse aplenty, but no domesticated livestock of any description. And still his eyes held hers. Given the chance, she would chop him down with either hand. Being more left than right-handed, she eased to her right, to open her body, preparing herself.

The dogs yipped.

'They're needin' a wee ran oot. Aar ye aa' right wi' that?'

'Yes, of course. After all this is your patch, so to speak.'

As soon as he turned away she threw herself at him, bringing her left hand down with full force, aiming a killing blow onto the nape of his neck, targeting at a point two inches below his right ear, while making ready to lift her right foot, to snatch up her stiletto heel and follow up with a vicious stab into his eye socket, reaching deep into his brain.

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But she failed. His movement was lightning fast.

Her momentum threw her past him and he snatched at her wrist and spun her roughly to the ground, face down, pounced on her, knees hard onto her buttocks, balled fists punching hard down on her shoulders, thumping her into submission. He cuffed her hands behind her back with what felt like cable ties; then did the same with her ankles. A clean handkerchief was eased into her mouth and a hood dropped over her head and fastened at its base with a Velcro tie.

From her attempted blow to being trussed took less than nine seconds.

One handed he hauled her to her feet, spun her round, hit her solar plexus with the heel of his right hand, knocking the air from her, lifted her over his shoulder, and swung the Defender's rear door open.

"STAY" he snarled, before bundling her in beside the two dogs then slammed the door.

*"F*** me, man! Cock-up on top of cock-up! Ye 're loosin' it Davie man, big time!"* he muttered under his breath.

He moved away from the vehicle, out of her hearing, he believed.

'OB One to Position One. Tag Two is a problem. Have secured. Will take to Lock-down One, over.'

'Message received, OB One. Finishing up here. Will meet you at Lock-down One circa 1300 hours.'

He picked up her shoes, snapped off the heels and threw the four parts into the heather, in different directions. He collected her bits and pieces and checked through her bag. No weapon. This pleased him, he could not say why. He emptied the car of all her personal possessions, looked at the incoming clouds racing up the hillside and then set the *G-Wagen* alight.

As a vehicle her car was a write off, albeit car pickers would have been pleased to scavenge it for its valuable components and for its metal to send to China. The initial whoomf was followed by crackling and sizzling as the sleet came to block out the smoke and fume and begin the slow but certain process of corrosion and decomposition that would follow. He would deal with the debris later.

At Acorn HQ Maisie simulated an emergency scram of the IBM Master Console, shutting it down, freezing all further incoming and outgoing data streams. She then removed the rear cover panels, sabotaged several key components using

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a portable high-voltage prod on some and a strong magnetised pointer on others. For neatness she replaced the panels. The IBM Master Console was now very sick. Had it been a person it would have been moved to a high dependency ward.

A Taste of Freedom

Fida was confined in the meat store, with three stags dripping blood onto the floor beside her. After a further thump to her solar plexus, the cable ties, hood and gag had been removed. The smell was nauseating. She could hear nothing from the outside world and was huddled into a corner, alone in a silent, stinking, disorienting world of inky blackness.

On the other side of the cobbled yard the XCD Team sat round the kitchen table in David Abernethy's Keeper's Cottage, (Lock-down One). They were high in the hills above and to the north of Corgarff Castle, on the eastern slopes of the Cairngorms. The Castle was just over a mile from Biscuit's cottage and four hundred feet lower.

The Castle was closed up and secured, and would remain so until the first week in May, when the Brigadier and his group would return, in time for the spring salmon runs. The Laird, Brigadier Henry Murray-Galbraith (Rtd) was at his villa on Madeira with his small entourage. This comprised his wife Mirabelle, his disabled daughter Harriet who had lost her right leg and shattered her left in a winter climbing accident, ending her career as a RAF Pilot. Harriet was 'managed' by her nurse, Mina Thomson, a large powerful woman who had been an Army nurse. The group was marshalled by Colonel Willie Munro (Rtd), the Brigadier's former aide-de-camp and Mina's partner.

ooOoo

It was almost two o'clock.

By Maisie's 'request' the room was at 20 Celsius, uncharacteristically cool for Biscuit. The initial Phase One de-briefing was over.

'Well, we are agreed?' Maisie said. 'The evidence shows that she is innocent, apparently. I would like to be sure. I started this, so I'll finish it. Tom, get her, put her under, and we'll move her to my place for interrogation. I'll take responsibility.'

'No, Maisie! No, please' said Biscuit, with unusual passion. 'Leave her with me, please, I'll clean up or whatever. After all, it was my slip up. If it goes tits up, so be it. I'll be back in touch when I'm sure I'm fully clear of it. This is down to me. And I want to know how she sussed me, for the future.'

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Maisie raised her eyebrows. The XCD Team was not actually a democracy, just the pretence of one. Maisie always made the big decisions.

'Before we decide, any offers? Tom?'

'No good way ahead. From her actions, her attack on David, and her long years of complicity with this TruMac chappie, it could be judged she deserves to die. Letting her live puts off the inevitable, in my view. If she gets to a telephone, warns him, we'll have a devil of a job taking this TruMac chappie out. Finish her now. I'll attend to her, if you wish?'

'Sumo?'

'I'm with Dopey. F***** right cock-up Biscuit, whit wur yae daein, goin in tae check her oot like that? Whit if she'd taken ye oot, wee man. Why no Dial Crime Stoppers and let them find her. You've f***** up big-time, wee man!'

'That's it then, David,' said Maisie. 'You have until 1800 hours on the 4th of January to deal with this, one way or the other. If it's not solved by then, Dopey will do it. And bear in mind that if you reveal us to her, well... you understand?'

'Accepted.'

'On your head be it,' muttered Tom.

ooOoo

When Maisie stood the others followed suit, donning their outdoor gear. Biscuit left ahead of them, still in Vibrams, shorts and tee-shirt, his normal indoor attire, summer and winter. At the door he shrugged himself into a full-length waterproof camouflage cape. For long minutes he stood at the head of the track with his binoculars, checking the hillside. The collies, Murphy and Angus, stood beside him, sniffing the icy air.

Biscuit gave the all clear. Sumo's Discovery rolled forward and slithered down the narrow track. At the Castle the Discovery stopped. Maisie had taken Tag Two's three phones and MessagePad. She would have a signal now and would be reading their history. Biscuit watched and waited. Depending on what she found it was not impossible that Maisie would change her mind and send Dopey back to kill the girl. The Discovery moved ahead, disappeared briefly behind the building then re-appearing to move slowly down the icy tarmac track. Biscuit checked - three occupants. When they were beyond the Estate boundary onto the better surface and moving off north and east towards the A-road, he returned to the house, turned the thermostat back up to 30 Celsius, showered and changed into fresh tee-shirt and shorts.

He cleaned his rifle then returned his weapons to his safe-store, a large steel box built into the wall and hidden behind the monster fridge/freezer that stood in the corner of his Kitchen. This box was secured into the original thick wall by six half-inch Rawl bolts. Its door was secured by three high tensile steel key-code

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locks.

At the kitchen table he emptied Fida's tote bag and examined each item carefully, removing a steel fish-tailed comb, a small pair of scissors, a long glass nail file and a ballpoint pen and dropped them into a plastic bag. As an afterthought he took his knives and forks from the cutlery drawer and added them to the bag, re-opened the safe-store and put them inside. The only 'weapons' left now were his favourite kitchen knife and his peeler: those he would hide later, if necessary. He lifted the perfume bottle: "Guerlinade". He sniffed at it without opening it: bergamot, jasmine, vanilla and something else.

He checked the weather again through the window, and made his decision.

Standing at the top of the track he again searched the hillside with his binoculars then traced the track until it disappeared towards the lights of the traffic glittering through the early evening gloom as it raced to and from the city of Aberdeen hidden behind the folds of the mountains to the South. On foot from the cottage the most direct route down to the A-road was nearly twenty miles, with an overall descent of nearly two thousand feet over rough country, in approaching darkness. Easy to break a leg or sprain an ankle.

The silent bulk of the Castle was gradually fading into the growing darkness. That's where she will go first, he thought. But the Castle would offer little shelter, unless she could break the code for the padlocks on the metal grilles which covered the ground floor doors and windows.

'Well boys, what do you say? All clear, is it, eh?'

The dogs lifted their noses, sniffed, turned their faces up to him.

'Right then, let's see how she takes to a taste of freedom.'

He crossed the yard, passing the locked garage. This secured the Defender. There was also a town car, as he thought it, a dark green Fiat Panda 4*4, as favoured by the Italian Forestry Service for its agility and toughness. At the Meat Store he entered the code, removed the padlock, slid the bolt, and pulled the door ajar. He knew better than to enter or even put his head inside.

Fida was still at the furthest corner. The rasp of the bolt brought her to full alert. The dim light of the greying sky spilled into the room.

'If ye fancy a cuppa tea, ah've got the kettally ann.'

He heard her scuttle towards him and stood clear as the door burst open. She

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ran off, weaving, into the early darkness of Christmas Eve. She was running only in her knickers, so that she could stride out, unhindered, leaping across the heather in her bare feet. She had her skirt clutched in her right hand, and in her left hand part of a stag's horn.

Biscuit let out a low wolf whistle. The dogs lay at his feet, looking up, awaiting his command. David Abernethy followed her with his binoculars, admiring her agility, her athleticism. When she stumbled and fell from view Biscuit turned back to the cottage yard, closed the Meat Store and re-locked it.

'Right boys, let's get inside ootta this drizzle, eh?'

ooOoo

Ten minutes later Fida threw herself to the ground, panting. When she had recovered her breathing, she crawled on all fours to hide under a wind-blown alder near a burn brimming with dark brown water. She listened, sniffed - nothing. The wind was blowing uphill and he would be behind her, with his dogs. She must move. She raised her head, and saw the big house ahead to her left. Someone there would help her. She rose and ran towards it.

ooOoo

Thirty-five minutes later another pulse of sleet raced in from the North Sea to rattle at the cottage door and windows. He pictured her then smiled. She would probably be sheltered in the doorway of the Main Entrance, pumping on the bell pull, perhaps hearing its bell ringing forlornly in the Butler's Room.

If she tried for the A-road, success would require a physiological miracle. No matter how fit and determined she might be, she was under-dressed for the weather racing over from Siberia and, crucially, she had no shoes. If she chose a direct route, rather than the longer, winding track, she would have to detour to find her way over the three lines of ten foot high deer fences. If she tried to breach them his alarm panel would alert him. The Brigadier was a cautious man, a man who in his hey-day had been high-profile and outspoken.

David piled three logs into the log-burning stove and selected his music: Andrea Bocelli, "*Il mare calmo della sera*", singing softly with the music in his high baritone voice. Through many repetitions he was almost perfect, and although he could only guess at their meaning, he sensed the emotion the words conveyed.

He assembled his ingredients for minestrone, piled them into his soup pot and put it on the slow hob of the AGA. He prepared a four-person dish of lasagne and

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placed it in the oven. He decanted two bottles of red wine then tidied up, hiding the knife and peeler amid the small jungle of herbs which grew in the planter on the deep ledge of his kitchen window.

He changed into fresh shorts and chose the tee-shirt for its logo.

"MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR"

The cassette was set to continuous play on the music centre. Slumped on the settee by his log-burning stove and singing along to Andrea, David Abernethy stretched out his toes to the heat.

Powered by the stove and the AGA, the open plan living area of the cottage was at 35 Celsius, just how he liked it. Maisie had insisted on a lower temperature but Biscuit saw no reason not to heat his house. It was super-insulated and had large triple-glazed south-facing windows to garner every beam of winter sunshine.

He closed his eyes. His mind filled with the image of the slim, fit dark-haired woman with the strong face. He checked the time. She had been out for nearly two hours. Thirty minutes more and he would take the dogs out to find her.

Angus yipped. Murphy growled.

'BED! That's it lads, *good boys*.'

He heard the scrape of something on the door.

'COME IN, it's open.'

She stumbled in, shivering violently, still in her black knickers, her green blouse matted against her, revealing her. The fur jacket was torn, soiled, ruined. Her legs and arms were scratched and torn, bleeding, dirty. Her tiny feet were blue-white, frozen.

In her left hand there was a stick about the size and heft of a policeman's truncheon of old. She raised it above her head and tried to move towards him. The dogs growled from their bed corner over to her right. This halted her and her eyes swung wildly towards them.

He spoke in his anglicised Scots tongue, a legacy of his military years, with easy authority, as if speaking to a squaddie of old.

'Bathroom is along the hallway, last door on the left. Stand under the shower on "warm", not "hot", for at least twenty minutes. The room opposite the

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bathroom is your bedroom. Your bag is on the bed. I don't have any female clothes nowadays, but we are about the same size, if you don't mind a bit of cross-dressing. We'll eat when you're ready.'

She stared at him, uncomprehending when he closed his eyes to her.

The room was light, airy and warm, the food smelled wonderful; there was Malbec, definitely the 1996 Bodega Catena Zapata. The man smelled sharp, spicy. There was an undertone of lavender, *lavendula angustifolia*, her favourite. Was it from his hair or his body lotion? There were fresh herbs. She sniffed: coriander, basil, thyme, parsley, rosemary. Andrea was singing "Vivere".

It was all wrong. He was supposed to be evil, a monster.

Biscuit watched her shake her head.

'You, you...'

Her eyes closed and she collapsed in slow motion to the floor, in a heap. Angus darted forward, grabbed the stick and returned to their bed with his trophy. Murphy kept his eyes focused on his master's face, awaiting a command.

He carried her through to her bedroom where he stripped away her wet clothes and laid her on the bed. He washed her legs, arms and feet with a warm Dettol solution. Following his arctic training he climbed in beside her, still in his shorts and tee-shirt, wrapped the duvet around them, pressing against her convulsing body. After about an hour her shivering finally subsided and she was still, sleeping peacefully. After a further hour she struggled, calling out in what he thought sounded like Spanish. He shushed her, then guided her, still half-asleep, to the shower room, reaching past her to set it to "Warm", before easing her inside.

The effect was dramatic. Spluttering, she lashed out with balled fists aimed at his face. He grabbed her wrists and held them firmly in front of her chest, turning himself sideways in case she decided to knee him.

'Bastardo! Bastardo!'

'Please. Take it easy. I'm on your side in this, honest. Please.'

Their eyes locked. She nodded.

He released her and she slammed the shower door closed.

Fidelity

If Music...

Fida studied herself in the bathroom mirror, adjusted her eye make-up slightly, applied the dark red lipstick and two dabs of perfume. She fiddled with the shirt buttons before deciding to leave the third one undone, revealing her cleavage, giving a jiggle to see the effect. She liked the roughness of the material against her nipples.

'Not too bad, Fida, given what you've been through,' she whispered, 'maybe you can get inside his defences, then....'

She opened the bathroom door. One of his dogs yipped at her.

'BED, you two. *Good Boys!* That's it, come on through.'

The table was set, wine poured, the lighting reduced to enhance the effect of the scented candle. Not overpowering: a trace of ginger and hint of eucalyptus.

He placed the soup before her and offered ground black pepper, which she refused and freshly grated parmesan which she laughed at the British and their ideas of what they think Italians like.

He raised his spoon, 'Bon appetite!'

'Is this food drugged?'

'No, look.' His spoon swept across and dipped into her plate, and he supped it down.'

'What about the wine? she said, sniffing it.

'That would be sacrilege!'

'Mmm, yes, very nice. Mmm, nice soup too. Without doubt the best prison food I've ever been served. When can I leave?'

'Ah, well now. Let's see what transpires, shall we? Trust me on this for a bit, and see if we can sort it out.'

'Is this a seduction scene? Are you hoping I'll be grateful? Forget it! You shot out my tyre, wrecked my car and nearly killed me in the process. You should have done it when you had the chance. Drop your guard and you are dead, mister what-ever-your-name is!'

The dogs growled.

'Y ustedes dos, se mueven y que son carne muerta!'

(You two, move and you are dead meat!)

Fidelity

'Apologies, I'm David Abernethy. And I plead guilty to all charges. But do not pretend to be innocent, Miss Fidelia Santa Maria Cortez from Villa Carton, aka Ms Penelope Fairbairn from the Isle of Man, long term associate of Carlos Montreal Ortega aka Truman McKinlay Hellsgborg III or TruMac if you prefer.'

'So, I am a hostage?'

'No, not in that sense, no.'

'Are you Government? Is this a sting?'

'No, not really. May I make a suggestion?'

'What?'

'Shall we eat first, and then sort this out afterwards?'

'Yes.'

Andrea had cycled back to "Vivere". Their eyes met and held.

'Are you a soldier?'

'No, not now.'

'Are you married?'

'No, not now.'

'Children?'

'No, sadly, he died. And you?'

'No, he died too.'

His eyes softened. She caught the flick as he checked her hands and then her breasts. She smiled and he grinned back to her. She offered her glass and he chinked it. He removed the soup plates. The muscles rippled on his legs. *He glides, like a ballet dancer.* He returned with two plates heaped with lasagne.

'Eenie or Meenie?'

'What?'

'You choose, in case one is drugged.'

'Questa, per favore,' she chuckled.

'Prego.'

Andrea sang "Sogno".

She felt good, relaxed, surprised that she was unafraid. She glanced up, caught him looking at her breasts again.

She smiled.

He grinned.

Reality Check

Biscuit dared to tell her a small part of what the operation against Carlos was about. She was openly skeptical. He dropped the bombshell, told her that the money, all of the money had been "removed" and was in the process of being "re-cycled".

She became agitated, angry, disbelieving.

'Impossible! Our software is double encrypted. We got it from a source at the CIA. No one can get in. No one.'

'Trust me on this. The money has moved on. All of it, even yours.'

'Rubbish, complete rubbish.'

Biscuit took the folded A4 sheet from his pocket. The numbers were rounded, from his memory. If Maisie found out about this she would dispose of him. But he had to convince Fida. It was his only hope of winning her.

'Check this.'

She read it.

'You bastards. You f***** bastards.'

After a period of silence, she became agitated again when it struck her.

'Carlos will never believe that I was not part of this. He will come after me, or send people. It will be like the beginning but...'

'No, Fida, he cannot touch you here. And soon, Carlos will be history. He cannot go unpunished.'

'Everything he has done is legal. Well, nearly. They all do it. He's just better at it than most of them. Except.... Anyway, he has powerful friends.'

'No, he has to be punished. Read this.'

She scanned the newspaper clippings.

'The poor children. No! Are you saying that Carlos did this? No! No! I would have known. I would not have allowed it.'

'Have you heard of a man called Zen Ng Suen, from Zhejiang, in China?'

'No.'

'Ufuk Yuferev, from Sevastopol, in Russia?'

'No.'

Fidelity

'Raimo Mumcu, from Bandirma, in Turkey?

'No. Who are they?'

These three are close associates of Carlos Ortega, key members of the syndicate which traffics children as sex slaves to the UK and other countries in Europe. Read this.

She scanned the dossier quickly.

'You are certain Carlos did this?'

'Absolutely. He funded it, from his Nigerian account.'

'Carlos doesn't have a Nigerian account!'

'Correct. Not after today, he doesn't.'

'How could he hide it from me? I know everything of his dealings.'

'Like everything else, it was at Acorn, wrapped in a "double-double", apparently, whatever that is. It looked like an old file, a legacy file, I've been told. It could *only* be accessed directly through you're your terminal. So you must know about it, yes?'

'No, you are bluffing me. I don't believe you. I would have known.'

'When was Carlos last at AEA?'

'Not since nine months ago. March, March. Why?'

'Really? Could he have been there without you knowing?'

'No. I would know. No. Unless I was at The Club...'

'Ah..., yes, your visits to The Club.'

She shot out of her chair and ran from the room. The bedroom door slammed.

Inappropriately Andrea sang "Il mare calmo della sera".

A few minutes later she ran back into the room, grabbed her wine glass, smashed it, lunged at him, striking for his neck. Biscuit rolled backwards in his chair and crashed to the ground as Angus landed snarling on the middle of her back and Murphy tugged at the cuff of her trouser leg. As she stumbled forward Biscuit grabbed her left wrist, twisted the glass from her hand, while using his foot to sweep away her ankles, downing her alongside him.

It had been a half-hearted attempt, he felt.

He rolled her onto her back and bound her hand and foot, this time with Velcro ties, but allowed her freedom of speech to rail at him.

Eventually she ran out of words in all her languages and fell silent. He swept up the broken glass. She gave her promise and he released her, hauled her upright, tidied the room, then made coffee.

Fidelity

Sitting opposite her across the table he started again, adding detail, telling her about her movements over the last months as he had trailed her, and how it was Carlos who had inadvertently revealed her involvement during his three secret visits. This time he could see that she believed him.

She closed her eyes. Minutes passed then she began to laugh, her mind running ahead. Rising, she sashayed out of the room with an imaginary partner, singing softly with Andrea, leaving Biscuit alone with his dogs.

By Dawn's Early Light

Two empty decanters stood on the worktop beside the small pile of dirty dishes. He tidied up, washed the dishes, and prepared porridge for breakfast, whenever that might come.

It was 08:00, nearly dawn on Christmas Day, with the first hint of pink on the North Sea horizon. He stood in the darkness of her bedroom doorway and listened to her rhythmic breathing until he was certain she was sound asleep.

At 08:30 he checked again - still fast asleep. He set the dogs to 'WATCH'. Unless she had a weapon or hypnotic powers over canines she was effectively a prisoner.

In his boiler suit, wellies and his old parka he drove the Defender back to the burned-out wreck of her vehicle. At 10:30 it was at the bottom of the loch. At 11:00, showered he fell into bed, exhausted. He closed his eyes and she appeared at once, tiny video clips repeating, again and again:

hanging upside down held by the seat belt, her muscled legs dangling

running across the cobbled yard in her knickers on her tiny feet,

crawling through the heather heading for the Castle,

standing bedraggled and exhausted at the doorway,

sponging her clean,

held tightly in his arms,

naked in the shower,

sipping the wine and smiling at him across the table,

angry, snarling at the loss of her money,

lunging at him with the broken glass,

dancing out of the room singing,

Fidelity

sleeping soundly in the darkness of the bedroom, only inches away.

He smiled, remembering his stupid grin - *she must know I want her.*

Through the common partition wall, less than twelve inches away, Fida Cortez lay awake, thinking of David Abernethy, her thoughts running in parallel with his.

ooOoo

At 13:00 the table was set properly with knives and forks and a decanter of fresh orange. She ate porridge drowned with full cream to mask its slightly salty taste, followed by a full Scottish Breakfast including Dingwall black pudding.

The next few days were like a honeymoon.

The weather was a perfect: cold, clear, crisp and nearly still. They spent most of the daylight hours outdoors, walking over the hill tracks with the dogs, spotting deer, climbing to the tops, studying the landscape, even skiing, which she had never done before in Scotland.

She raided his freezer and cooked a mixture of grilled meats called *parrillada* served with green salsa called *chimichurri* to complement his excellent Malbec.

Her legs and arms were healing rapidly, and indoors she took to wearing shorts and tees and a pair of lightweight Vibrams and enjoying catching his eyes roaming over her body, making her smile, making him grin and offer shy compliments.

They traded histories, sharing everything of their hopes and dreams.

Their commitment to each other was made through their eyes.

On the fourth night, they danced to Andrea, both crooning along with him.

As the last song faded, they kissed.

For David Abernethy it was the first proper, heartfelt kiss in fifteen lonely years.

For Fida Cortez it was the first proper, heartfelt kiss in over twenty-one years.

Their first coupling was noisy, filled with animal frenzy, bringing the dogs to their door, growling, agitated, barking and making the humans laugh. Their next coupling was a slower, romantic affair with Andrea singing quietly in the

Fidelity

background and a scented candle pattering in the corner.

David had not been snipped. Fida's period was due in a few days, and she was very needy, receptive to his repeated advances. They did not take precautions. They had discussed this and both wanted the same thing.

As Maisie's deadline approached they held each other.

'David, what if Carlos comes for me?'

'Fida, if anyone deserves to die, it's Carlos. Taking the money was only part of it. Trust me on this. Soon Carlos will be no more. I promise.'

ooOoo

It was 14:53 on the 4th January, 1999.

Biscuit was high above the cottage, so that his mobile phone could 'see' the mast in the distance, five miles away. Fida stood at the rear door of the cottage, the dogs at her side, looking up at him.

He had explained what he was about to commit to, that he would take responsibility for her, for her life. He explained that if she betrayed him she would effectively sign death warrants for both of them. She had acknowledged first with her eyes that she had understood, before agreeing with a simple nod and a whispered "I do".

Maisie answered his call at the second ring.

'Yes?'

'Tag Two is fully secured.'

'Removed?'

'No, secured. Under my protection.'

'Wait.'

He heard the handset being fumbled to another hand.

'Tom here, old bean. You do realise, don't you?'

'Yes, Tom. I accept and commit to it.'

'On your head be it, old boy. I hope you can trust her.'

Maisie took the handset again.

'So be it. Good luck, David. I'll be in touch again later in the year. I have a proposal for you both. Something I think could work very well.'

Fidelity

'Oh? For Fida?'

'Yes, and Harriet. Leave it with me. And tell Fida I have her money safe. We'll finish up Phase Two without you, David. Tom will sub for you. Watch out for Sumo.'

Purgatory

6th January, Cairo Airport.

TruMac was not a happy man, but the British Airways Manager at the First Class desk was implacable.

'I'm sorry Mr. Hellsgborg, I do see that you are one of our Platinum Members of course, but sadly some mishap on your side of the booking has you seated in our World Travellers' section. You have a very nice window seat in Row 38, at your Travel Agent's express request.'

'How the hell can you people stand there and give out such crap! Get your Manager here! At once!'

'Actually, I am the Manager, sir, but don't worry, no need for you to queue. I'll pop you in from here. Swing your bags up for me please. No need to make a drama now, is there?'

He slapped his Diner's Club Platinum Card onto the desk.

'Look, can I upgrade, to First?'

'Ah, sorree, sir, all seats in First are gone. I can give you an aisle in Business, the last seat left. End of the holidays you know, everyone desperate to get back to London.'

'Go for it! I'll dine on someone's entrails when I get back to Aberdeen. Entire bloody office seems to be off-line. It's as if they are still partying! I'll sack the lot of them.'

'Aaaaah. Ooops. Do you have another card you would prefer to use? This one seems to have a problem.'

'A PROBLEM?'

'Mr. Hellsgborg, please. Please keep your voice level down, you're upsetting people. Now, do you have another card, sir, please?'

TruMac fished out his American Express Gold Card.

'Ah, No. Refused, sorry. Do you wish to pay cash?'

'CASH? I don't do CASH!'

'Ah, well, you do still have your seat at 38 F. There you are, all checked in now. And you may use the First Class Lounge, if you wish. Do have a nice flight, Mr. Hellsgborg. Thank you.'

'Have you checked me through to Aberdeen?'

'No, sir, there is no booking on the system for a connecting flight. Sorry. Now,

Fidelity

I must ask you to move through, please.'

'Ah, but...'

'Next, please.'

The Manager beamed her winning smile, over TruMac's shoulder.

'Ah, hello again Dr. Runciman. How are *you* this afternoon? I have your usual seat for you at 1A. Bebtì, help Dr. Runciman with his hand luggage, there's a good chap...'

ooOoo

At Heathrow, TruMac had to wait for nearly an hour to retrieve his bags, and he had to carry them himself. There was still no response from Aberdeen. Not even Fida's red phone. The switchboard must be down. Perhaps there had been a storm. Maybe the phone masts had been blasted by high winds. It had happened before. After Customs he struggled through to the concourse, scanning the waiting drivers.

"TMH III for AEA PLC"

It was a new guy, tall, thin, laid-back type. Carlos waved. The guy swooped, took both bags.

'*This*way, Mr. Hellgsborg. I have to apologise. There seems to be a problem at your HQ, so they told me.'

'What bloody problem?'

'No idea. That's all the message I have. I thought you might understand what it means?'

'Do you have a ticket for me, for Aberdeen. It better not be for that crazy flight from Gatwick!'

'Sorry sir, I was a last minute booking. I'm Tom, I'm just your Greeter. Hamish is your driver, actually, and he's on a double yellow outside. So let's *trot*, shall we? We were told you would be out first, an hour ago. I thought you had slipped me. It happens, always causes a helluva hoo-ha. Never mind, here you are now, at long last, sir.'

'Look, I need to get in touch with them, at HQ, wait...'

'Here we are, the black Mercedes. Use the car phone, sir. That's it, there you are, let me help you, get you buckled in, it's a tricky one this.'

The syringe pierced the mohair trouser leg and emptied into Carlos's thigh.

Now paralysed Carlos was still aware of everything, though unable to speak.

Fidelity

Nothing worked, except his eyes and ears feeding him information.

The huge man in the driver's seat was speaking into a mobile phone.

'Position One, this is OB Two. Tag One secured, frozen. Proceeding as plan. Listening, out.'

Although he was unable to move, Carlos's eyes filled with fear. His bowels loosened, his bladder released.

'Tut-tut, sir, no need for that sort of childishness. Do behave yourself, please.'

Dopey buckled him in, dumped his bags in the boot and joined Hamish in the front.

They sped to a location near Abingdon, on the outskirts of Oxford. As they approached the building on the small industrial estate Hamish blipped the controller and the shutters trundled up. He drove inside, blipped the shutters closed, then maneuvered to the Mercedes alongside the dark grey Transit van sporting discreet but easily removable magnetic decals:

"Farquharson Funeral Services"

This name was repeated across the rear doors, with the additional message:

"We respectfully request that you keep clear when parking."

Hamish lifted Carlos by grabbing a fistful of his \$3,000 mohair jacket, hoisting him bodily up out of the limo to drop him into the open coffin, already secured to the runners inside the back of the van.

The coffin was of a special construction, deeper than normal, highly insulated, air tight, lead lined, very heavy. The inside surface of the lid incorporated a small computer screen, connected by a sealed cable to a compact DVD player bolted to a shelf beside the coffin. The thick lid was lowered onto the casket. The screen was nine inches above Carlos's face. Frozen, he was unable to look away as the screen came to light, filling the coffin with an eerie glow. The faces of the 93 dead children began scrolling, five seconds to each face, on a continuous loop. Dopey screwed the lid down, sealing Carlos inside for his final journey.

Dopey slammed the rear doors shut, then thumped the side panel.

'He's all yours Sumo, old bean.'

Fidelity

The shutters blipped up again and Dopey drove off in his dark blue Audi A8.

Hamish exited the building in the 'ambulance', blipped the shutters closed, setting out on his journey northwards to the dark loch above Corgarff.

The specialist valet service would arrive shortly to sterilize the limo then return it to the hire company.

ooOoo

Eleven hours later Angus yipped, and Murphy growled. Biscuit and Fida moved to the door then to the top of the track. It was overcast and bitterly cold but not raining.

Two humans, two dogs, one pair of night-sight binoculars.

They saw the Transit van edge its way backwards, to stop just short of the cliff. They saw the rear doors open, saw the huge man grapple with the heavy casket, saw it disappear over the cliff.

For the watchers it happened in silence, any sounds washed away by the moan of the wind. The man called Sumo waved up to them and they waved back, in good faith.

Biscuit walked to the top of the hill alone, and made the call to Maisie.

Phase Two was over.

The new owners of Acorn would be arriving, in force, from London tomorrow morning. Should Penny Fairbairn wish to be there to meet them, she was free to do so although, should she ever renege, both she and Biscuit would be swiftly eliminated. She declined the offer of resuming at AEA, preferring another option that had been agreed with Maisie.

ooOoo

Alexander Cortez Abernethy was born on the 15th September, 1999, at home, in the Keeper's Cottage above Corgarff Castle. He was delivered by the local GP and a midwife. Maisie Kaywood is wee Sandy's godmother.

His mother Fida Abernethy runs "Excalibur Executive Expediting" a global travel services company which operates from a small highly computerized office suite in the Brigadier's house. Harriet Murray-Galbraith is a partner in the

Fidelity

business so there is no rental for the use of the offices.

David Abernethy continues as a Ghillie for his Brigadier. He is also continues as an important member of the XCD Team. As required, Fida makes travel arrangements for XCD, offers translation services and undertakes logistical planning and support.

The Brigadier is 'deliberately unaware' of the various items of equipment and the armaments stored in the secure vaults beneath his home.

From Carlos's secret files the GCHQ computers also unlocked the names, contact details and banking arrangements for the others who were directly involved with Carlos in the container business.

Plans are being made.

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