

# Harmony Row

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From the upstairs front bedroom, in the early afternoon November gloom, hidden in the shadows, the tall, stooped man with sallow skin stood back from the window, watching the woman visiting the doors on the other side of Harmony Row, clipboard in hand. Her quick, confident stride stirred memories of an earlier, happy time when he and Betty had lived his dream.

Eric Lumsden was dressed as a fifties schoolboy ready for a summer outing to the seaside. Open-necked white shirt, tan coloured baggy shorts held up by a snake belt and black plimsolls or 'gutties', as his mother had called them. True to those poor, early times, he wore no socks or underpants.

'Too smart for Labour, the Greens or Lib Dems. Probably SNP or maybe a brave Tory. What do you think, Roxy?'

Yipping plaintively, the slightly built dog leapt up, gazelle-like, onto the windowsill, her ears pricked, eyes fixed on the small, slim woman.

'I know, Roxy, pet. I miss Betty too. C'mon, let's go to the park and see if there's anyone for you to play with.'

Changed into his outdoor attire, a Rangers FC red, white and blue shell suit under a long, blue raincoat with a red hood, a garment which had once belonged to his mother, he was shod in bright red wellington boots. On exit, he took great care to set the alarm, double lock his door then close and padlock his front gate.

When man and dog left the narrow, terraced, two up, two down, the drizzle was falling gently. By the time they reached the park, it was teeming down. Bedraggled, they trudged home. Turning into his narrow street, packed with cars on both sides, Eric saw the canvasser under an umbrella, standing on the pavement in front of the full-height, locked gate, peering at his house through thick glasses.

The Reverend Jean Fraser was still recovering from a breakdown after her spilt with Lois, a slow burning affair which had smouldered for twelve years before they had set up house together in Chelsea. Living in close quarters, the niggles and struggle for dominance had developed into an apocalyptic shouting match which ended in a cataclysmic rift. Lois was now engaged to Gwen, a quiet, compliant twenty-four-year old, a mere factotum in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Jean had resigned from her well-paid post in the Speaker's Office as Deputy to the Permanent Undersecretary, returning to

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her roots in Glasgow to renew her commitment to Christ and re-train as a minister in the Church of Scotland.

The recently ordained minister had been at Stonehouse for only four weeks, a church with a troubled past which had been vacant for almost three years. Aged thirty-eight, at a first glance she might have passed for late twenties but the creases around her eyes and across her brow suggested early forties. What her new congregation did not officially know was this was her third 'try out' taking charge of a church, the previous two had proved too much for her. She had been gently warned Stonehouse parish was her last opportunity.

Roxy ran ahead on her extending lead, barking a welcome. As Eric approached, Jean turned and stepped towards him, her hand outstretched. Fresh faced with bright auburn hair, startled brown eyes swimming behind thick lenses, no make-up. She was wearing a dark blue trouser suit, probably Armani, he judged, with darker blue suede pumps, sodden black from tramping through puddles. There was a dog collar topping a lighter blue silk shirt with a ruffled front. No rings, nails torn, nibbled, no varnish. Her only ornament was a small silver cross on her left lapel.

'Jean Fraser, your new Parish Minister.' He recognised her accent as posh Glasgow. Reluctantly, he offered his which she shook his firmly. 'Hello, are you Eric Lumsden? Your wife, Betty, is one of my flock, I understand. She's been missed over recent weeks. I was hoping for a word.'

'Not my wife, my cousin. Betty is my cousin.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. So, not your wife. I've been doorstepping, getting my name out there, as it were, using the Electoral Roll which says Betty is married. I assumed you were man and wife.'

'Really? Doorstepping? Is that what Alec's church is reduced to now? He would birl in his grave. Well, yes, Betty is married, but to my brother although he left her, so to speak, on their honeymoon.'

'Betty is your cousin? Married to your brother?'

'Yes. I know it sounds odd to the likes of you but it's not that strange around here. We stick to our own. Known quantities, as it were. Those we can rely on. Look, come in out of this downpour and we can sort it out, in the dry.'

Inside, Jean watched as he indulged in a rather complicated routine, un-setting the alarm, double locking the door then re-setting the alarm system in perimeter alert status, explaining himself as he did so.

'We need to vigilant, nowadays, So many incomers. You know, left footers. The green, white and gold brigade.'

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After a short delay while he changed back into his schoolboy outfit, Eric served her weak tea and fusty shortbread, treating himself to a double shot espresso, knowing it would keep him awake until the small hours.

Settled in the over-heated garden-room extension at the rear of the house, they faced each other over an old-fashioned Art Deco coffee table which Eric had carefully placed, almost touching her knees, then placing a heavy pouffe behind it, boxing her in, leaving Jean perched on a narrow dining room chair. At her feet, Roxy, rubbed dry, was asleep in front of the open flame coal-effect gas fire, stretched out like a photographic negative on a spotless sheepskin rug.

On the far side of the room, Eric Lumsden was sprawled on a settee, his heels resting a second coffee table, older, mahogany, his legs spread wide displaying his long, thin, black-haired legs. Between his feet, placed exactly in the centre of the coffee table, was his large bunch of keys with its tether chain coiled neatly on top, like a snake asleep. She noticed that his short, military hair was dyed, jet black, while his bushy eyebrows and neat goatee beard were more salt than pepper. He had a drip at the end of his nose which he sniffed away before wiping it with the back of his left sleeve, an automatic habit he did not seem aware of. His enormous bunch of keys were placed exactly in the centre of the coffee table, between his feet.

Jean's trousers were sticking to her legs and the heat from the fire was making them steam. She was now aware of a powerful aroma of patchouli oil mixed with lavender furniture polish, these stronger scents masking an underlying musty dampness.

Over his shoulder, the room was dominated by a huge window which overlooked a long, narrow vegetable garden, with four neat rows of high, wide cloches. The far end was bounded by a picket fence, its palings painted red, white and blue, in sequence. Beyond the fence was the towering gable of a derelict building boasting a faded sign, 'Vernon's Garage', its corrugated iron entirely covered with what seemed to be recent graffiti. This disturbing abstract was a psychedelic version of Edvard Munch's scream, rendered in a fluorescent, spray-painted palette. Both sides of the garden were enclosed with high, solid metal fencing, also painted neatly in red, white and blue vertical strips.

Turning sideways to avoid his manic gaze, the graffiti and his long hairy legs, Jean was fighting the urge to peek again, forcing her mind from the growing certainty he was not wearing underpants. Keeping her eyes on her shortbread, with her teacup and saucer balanced on her knee, she decided to open the batting.

'Thanks so very much. A nice cup of tea is just the job on such a miserable day. You can call me Jean. May I call you Eric?'

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'No, most certainly not. Let's stick to Mr Lumsden until we get to know each other better. Let me state for the record, you're wasting your time on me, I'm not in the least religious. Never have been, never will be. If anything, I'm agnostic.'

'Yes, fine, fine. Yes, of course Mr Lumsden, I fully appreciate your point of view, of course I do. At least you're not an atheist so I'll take it we still have chance,' she tried for a chuckle but it came out oddly, like a cackle. 'As they say, Mr Lumsden, never say never. All things are possible under Heaven. I myself was lost in the spiritual wilderness for over twenty years, down in London.'

While listening to him, she was scolding herself for talking too much, a trait which took over when she was nervous. During her training for the Ministry, she had been advised time after time to get the other person talking, to be a sounding board not a megaphone.

'Are you undercover, from the Police, the MET? Just for the record, I'm recording this interview, two cameras, just for back-up. Tit for tat. They think I don't know, Jean, but I've shut down their surveillance for the duration of your visit, just in case, if you understand my meaning. Rather amateurish, I had expected a greater challenge. So, Jean, confess. I hear a trace of the Southbank in your speech Are you from the MET?'

'Oh no, Mr Lumsden. I'm from the church, honestly. Be assured, our conversation will be held in sacred confidence, never shared with another living soul, carried only to the Lord in prayer.'

'Are you on foot, Jean, all the way from the church? Look at it! You'll drown out there.'

'Oh no, Mr Lumsden, I have my car around the corner, outside the hairdressers. I was surprised to get a space. They told me parking around here is a nightmare.'

'You're parked opposite 'Jenna's for Hair'? Dearie me, Jean, not a good idea. It's only free there because it's an accident black spot, a blind summit. They come over the hill too fast then ZAP, CRUNCH, CALL THE MEAT WAGON AND CHEERIO, CHEERIO, CHEERIO!'

'No, not at all! God will send a guardian angel to watch over it.'

'A guardian angel, no less. Oh, how trusting. Que sera, sera.'

'So, Mr Lumsden, your cousin is married to your brother? Is that legal?'

'Yes, it most certainly is. Betty, nee Elizabeth Robertson, is my second cousin, my mother's cousin's daughter although that's immaterial because my brother Edward, Eddie, was adopted from a care home in Preston, as an infant, where Dad was based at the time with the railway. Then the usual. After they adopted, Mum was pregnant with me within months. That's when we moved back here, to Stonehouse, when I was about a year old. Betty lived in the next street along, with, Francis, Frankie, her older brother. We were steps and stairs, you see. Betty is sixty-six, a year younger than me. We, all four of us went to school together. But I'm jumping ahead because by that time her parents had died, in a dreadful accident. People still talk about it. They were coming back from a

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special dinner and variety show night out with a crowd from the Miners' Welfare when their double decker crashed into a low bridge in the fog. They were on the top deck, at the front, decapitated with six others. Frankie and Betty were already here with us that night so they never left. From that night they came to live with us. That's when we got our first Roxy, it was Betty's mum's dog. I didn't really understand it all myself until I was in my teens.'

'What an amazing story. Your dear parents struggle to have you so they adopt a child, you come along almost at once then suddenly, they have *four* children. Is it not truly wonderful how God provides?'

'Rubbish! That's your fantasy version. No, Jean, in our reality we were dirt poor. Dad always said it was a mercy that Frankie died when he was seven. More for the rest of us, I suppose. Poor Frankie, they say he was always keen on climbing trees. Fell from a huge oak tree, the huge one beside your church. I wanted to see if we could see Glasgow from the top. They had to get the Fire Brigade to get me down. He spent six months in hospital in Glasgow, died a vegetable. We used to visit every Sunday afternoon and we all got ice cream at the bus stop on the way home to cheer us up. That's what I missed when he died, the pokey hats. I never really knew him, you understand. No, ours wasn't a happy, jolly family, not really. My Dad was a drinker and, by Sunday morning, his wages were almost gone. Most of the time we were hungry, always in debt, holes in our shoes, that sort of thing. No, we were as poor as the proverbial church mouse.'

Jean could not hold his gaze and looked away to the door, wondering where he had put her shoes which he took away to stuff with newspaper and if they would ever recover from their dowsing.

Eric stood suddenly, leapt over the mahogany coffee table and landed on his knees, his face inches from Jean's, staring into her eyes, 'Jean, I take you don't know where Betty is, by any chance?'

The stench of halitosis mixed with strong coffee was revolting. Despite herself, she wrinkled her nose and closed her eyes. Determined to remain calm, in control, Jean sent up a prayer. When she opened them again, Eric was seated as before, legs spread wide, rubbing his crotch. There was a bulge. When he saw her looking, he smiled then calmly placed his hands behind his head. She forced herself to keep matters normal, to await a suitable chance to escape without upsetting him. 'Betty, No. Sorry. I've not had the pleasure. Is she missing?'

'Yes, sixty-three days and counting, although the Police say they have been in touch with her and told me I've not to worry. Easy for them to pass out advice with me left here all alone, worried sick.'

'What about Edward, Eddie? What does he say?'

'Eddie? Oh, of course, you don't know, do you? Eddie died on their honeymoon. Torremolinos. The night of their third full day, drowned in the pool after a drunken fall from the eighth-floor balcony. Did I say we were all there? I came back from College in

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Dundee to be with them. You see, Dad had a big win on the Rangers' Pools and blew it all on the wedding and he took us all, by coach, from the Miners' Welfare. It was a long, hot trip. Took a day and a half. Most of the folk on the bus were from the village and most of the rest from Larkhall. All Rangers supporters, true blues. Drunk as skunks, everyone except Mum and me. Embarrassing. Even Betty. I'll never forget her vomiting over me. Never. Dad only got us on the trip at the last minute because of cancellations due to some weird summer bug going the rounds. In fact, we took it with us, Dad said. Nearly everyone was drunk, sick and vomiting. Only Mum and I escaped. Eddie was one of the worst affected. I had to share a room with him, the smell was disgusting. Betty was in a three-bed room with Mum and Dad to keep Eddie off her because of her condition. Did I say I was away at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art when Eddie molested my beautiful sister and made her pregnant. Lust is what it was. Pure unadulterated lust. There was no true love between them, no romance just lust. The beast.'

At this point Lumsden stood and turned his back on her to stare out of the window into the growing darkness. His hands were out of sight but in a pale reflection from the window, she could tell he was rubbing his crotch again with his right hand, his left hand inside his shorts. His eyes were hooded and he was suppressing a groan. When she realised he was masturbating, Jean wanted to flee from this odious man but she was trapped by the coffee table and pouffe and not sure if she could make it out of the front door before he realised. After a final grunt, he returned to his settee, resumed his sprawl and his monologue continued.

'Anyway, I never went back to Dundee. Did I say I quite liked Torremolinos? It was raw energy and raucousness which appealed to me, I think. Of course, you will have realised I was still young but no, before you ask, we've never been back. Nowadays Betty and I prefer the Canaries. Tenerife and Gran Canaria. Betty fancies Morocco but I put my foot down because of the food and hygiene standards. Then thirty-nine days after the funeral, at the memorial in your church, back in the day under the Reverend Alec Traynor, when it was a Rangers' church, Betty lost her baby. Our wee William, after my Dad, dead at fifteen days old. I was here, watching over him while the others were at the service but there was nothing I could do. The wee mite just slept away as peaceful as you like, like a wee baby Jesus. A cot death they call it nowadays but we all knew it was a mercy because he wasn't right, our wee William, if you understand what I mean, not fully formed. I put it down to the Spanish Health Service, because we were only tourist trash. I take it you are not married or the like, Jean. I see no rings.'

'No, not married.'

'Don't you worry, Jean. A nicely spoken, attractive girl like you will soon land a big lusty chap to look after you. Jean, just to check, this conversation, it's strictly confidential, yes?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Do I have your promise on this? As a Woman of the Cloth?'

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'Of course, Mr Lumsden, be assured I will never reveal a word of this conversation to anyone.'

'Thank you. I seldom share intimate details of my life. Anyway, Betty gave up her council house and moved back here. That was twenty-nine years ago, on the thirteenth of next month. Mum and Dad were still here then, of course. Dad passed first, a year later, to the exact day of our wee William's demise, electrocuted himself trying to fix our washing machine. The unspoken question that hung in the air for weeks was, "Was it suicide?". Mum passed eighty-seven days later from a fall down the back stairs. She was taking out the ashes last thing after Betty and I were tucked up in bed. Lay there dead all night, head split open from the fall, brain matter everywhere, covered in snow. In its own way it was dramatically beautiful. I took several photographs which entered for a competition and won third prize in the 'storytelling' section. Did I say Mum was teetotal until Dad's funeral? Unfortunately, alcohol was her downfall. She took a few Bristol Cream sherris and got a taste for it and moved on to port and lemonade in a tall tumbler with a big shot of Vodka in it, to give it a kick. It was called a Red Pony down at the Welfare, back in the day. Personally, I can't see the attraction. Hits my stomach like a tornado. I don't imbibe. Never have, never will. When I need a pick-me-up, I use coffee or my pills, from Dr Patel. What a nice chap, everyone round here will tell you. Anyway, after that it was just Betty and me with Roxy. Actually, it was true bliss, at last. It was from that point we could live together as we had both always wanted, from puberty, without pretence. Just the three of us. Back then it was Roxy the second. This wee mite is Roxy the fifth, only four months old so she hardly knew Betty but she misses her just as much as I do.'

'Roxy. Was that after 'Roxy Music'.'

'No, **not** Roxy Music. No, no, **no!** Everyone thinks that. No, our Roxys are named after my aunt, Roxanne, Auntie Roxy, Betty's mother.'

'Sorry, I'm hopeless with dog breeds. We were cat people, back at home. Is she a Whippet?'

'No, not a Whippet! Whippets are dumb, brainless animals. Roxy is a crossbreed, very special, a Lurcher-Collie cross, speed with brains to match. We get our Roxys from a man over in Shotts who breeds them to order. Of course, among aficionados, we all think the Lurcher-Collie cross is the ideal pet.'

'Yes, I can see she's very beautiful. I love her dainty white paws and her black coat is shining with good health. Roxy is a beautiful animal, Mr Lumsden.'

'Jean, you should call me Eric now. *Please*. And yes, now I'm alone, without Betty, Roxy is my life. I'm so very, very lonely, Jean.'

'Well, eh, Eric, do you have any idea where Betty might be? Have you checked she's not staying with a friend?'

'No, personally, I have no idea whatsoever. As I said to the Police, round here she's well known, zipping about in her wee blue Fiat 500. Did you see it, parked right at our gate? Why did she not take it? Although Betty is the registered keeper, it belongs to me, in case you were wondering. But no, before you ask, I almost never drive, so sorry,

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you'll have to walk back to your car. As I told the Police, although everyone knew her, she had no close friends, not so far as I know. If she had anyone special, she never shared them with me. Did I say Betty was never in? Oh, no, always out at *your* church services and jamborees. I expect you know she was ecumenical. No? Surely they must have told you that, at least? Well, for your information, my sister was a butterfly, going round all the other churches, even the Open Brethren and the Mormons, playing their organs and pianos singing like a Linty. Did I say Betty was a piano teacher? Self-taught but brilliant. She used your church piano in the choir room to give lessons. You see, Jean, we don't normally allow strangers in here which means you are special to have been invited in. Do you understand?'

'Oh, well, eh, thank you, Eric.'

'Anyway, sixty-three days ago she deserted us. Left a note on the kitchen table. The Police took it for verification purposes. It said, *'Eric, I've found someone else to love. You can have Roxy, even though I'll miss her badly. Go out and find someone new. I was never right for you and you were never right for me.'*

'Oh, dear, Eric. Poor you. It's horrible to be left alone. Almost as bad as a bereavement.'

'NO JEAN! Being abandoned is worse. Much, much worse. I mean to say, Jean, think about it; when some dies you have a body to bury. But me, no. I just have a broken heart and endless questions. Even with the pills, I haven't slept properly in weeks and I've lost my appetite. Dr Patel says I need to get out and about more but of course, I can't leave this house unattended in case she comes home, can I? Just quick trips to the park, for Roxy's sake or down to the Abdul's for essentials. Everything else I get from Asda online deliveries. I have to be here for Jean when she gets back.'

Eric rose again and turned once again to look out of the window, staring up at the sky, openly rubbing his crotch, this time vigorously for a minute or so before retaking his position on the settee, his hands placed behind his head, smiling. Jean glanced, saw the bulge was back. As she fixed her eyes at the floor beside the door, Lumsden resumed his monologue, while she prayed inside her head for rescue.

'Anyway, after Mum and Dad passed over, I decided to live an indoor life. I work from home, over the Internet, have done for years. I'm one of the first artists ever to do so, I believe. Imagine, me a trailblazer. Awesome. Do you know anything about *avant garde* abstract painting, Jean, and its use to depict Nordic Noir Symbolism? I have quite a strong following, worldwide. My originals sell for good money. Easy Peasy. Although she was careful not to say, Betty was jealous of my fame. But, as she well knew, the money I brought in paid for her gadabout lifestyle. Jean, go on, ask me any question on Nordic Noir and I'll give you the answer right off pat. Did I say, they have competitions online, for good money. Easy Peasy. To be fair, Betty liked Nordic Noir too but she was just not up to competitions. The truth is, my beautiful sister relied on me for almost everything.'

'I see. Eric, were you and Betty close?'



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'WHAT?

'Oh, Eric, I'm so, so sorry. That was crass of me. Of course, you and Betty were close.'

'Yes, Jean, we were close. Betty and I were very, very close. But not sex, so let me put your mind at rest on that point. You see, the Police kept tiptoeing round that subject although it was none of their business. Anyway, as I explained, my beautiful sister and I didn't do that sort of thing. After losing her wee William, Betty said she wasn't interested in sex. Which suited us both. Indoors, we live an aesthetic life. At least I thought we did until, *Oh God, the bitch! The fucking selfish bitch! Why did she just leave, without telling me to my face?*

'Well, Mr Lumsden, I suppose we may never know. And you say the police have checked this out?'

'Yes. They were here for hours, took away some of her things, for verification. Did I say, she left her mobile phone and iPad beside the note, on the kitchen table. Both locked up, of course, inaccessible. I told the Police she was always changing her passcodes, paranoid about her secrecy. The Police took them to try to unlock them but I doubt they will have any more success than I had. They were everywhere, in their suits and masks, all over the house, probing. Up in the attic, under the floor, took the place apart, probed the garden with sniffer tubes for God's sake! I'm sure my sprouts and curly kale have been affected. My main crop potatoes are shrivelled, withered wee things. The question must be asked, *did they inject something into the soil?* Roxy was distraught too, widdling all over the house. It was like being in Purgatory which of course I don't actually believe in. The next day, I spoke to a woman at the Citizens' Advice for hours on the phone. Ellen, a very nice lady, calmed me now, advised I should not complain, that the Police were just doing their job. I have to wonder, did she call them, tell what I had shared in confidence? You see, the day after the day I spoke to Ellen, they came back, day after day for eighteen days, asked me dozens of questions, over and over until my head was spinning. Four of them, with a psychiatrist, Dr Christian Goodman, a huge Nigerian boy who looked about twenty-five to me, wearing a three-piece suit, a black, pin-striped with *brown brogues*. I could hardly take my eyes off those shoes. They clashed so badly with his attire. When they left that last time it was nearly two in the morning. Milking the overtime if you ask me. Is it triple time after midnight on a Sunday morning? That was twelve days ago. Nothing since then. Now they have 'solved the case', as they put it, I've been told to stop pestering them. Jean, do you think the Salvation Army could help?'

'It's worth a try. Oh, look, Mr Lumsden, the rain has eased. Thanks for tea and sharing. Can we look forward to seeing you at church with us, on Sunday?'

'No, certainly not. As I said, I'm not religious. Betty was the fanatic. No, Roxy and me, we're happy-clappy agnostics. So, no, thanks for your invitation. Most kind, but no. Anyway, what if Betty came back to an empty house?'

'Right, well, good luck with your, eh, quest, Mr Lumsden. God Bless us All. Here's my card if you think I can help, just ring, anytime.'

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At the doorstep Eric waved and Roxy yipped as the Rev Jean Fraser scurried behind her brolly through another heavy squall of rain and wind, heading back to her car. When she realised she was running, she slowed to a brisk walk.

When the woman was out of sight, Eric skipped forward, locked the garden gate then eased the front door closed with a click, double locked the mortices top and bottom and part-set the alarm system to monitor all doors and windows for intruders.

'Well, Roxy, what a nice lady. Lovely slim thighs and wiry, like Betty. Decent breasts and, without glasses, made up as a Goth, she might even be pretty. I see from her card she lives in Newton Mearns and not among her flock, not among the poor. What would Jesus think of that, Roxy? Pity, but too far away, not really. Best leave it for a few weeks. Get things fully prepared. I think Our Elizabeth would enjoy her company, don't you?'

At the mention of the words 'Our Elizabeth' the dog started to howl inconsolably.

'Now, now, Roxy. You better than anyone know Betty deserved her fate. C'mon, stop that at once. Now, let's spend an hour or so on Facebook Lite and post some photoshopped shots from Betty on her round the world trip. Silly woman. Round the world at her age. I told her our Lottery money was for both of us. But would she listen? C'mon, Roxy, up to the studio. When we've refreshed her profile, we'll watch our interview videos with the delectable and delicious Reverend Jean M. Fraser then go online and hunt her down. With those nails bitten to the quick, she must be guilty of something which needs punishing.

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As predicted, the minister's car had been demolished by a speeding tipper lorry using the narrow hill loop road as a rat run to avoid traffic lights. The wreckage was coned off with blue and white 'Police Aware' tape. Standing inside the misted window at Jenna's, Jean watched, through the downpour, as two workmen unloaded equipment from a flatbed truck to set up temporary traffic lights to prevent further carnage. Using her mobile phone, she arranged through her insurance company for her car's uplift. Her wrecked Mini Cooper, a graduation present from her parents was barely thirteen months old. To her, it seemed like a write-off and she wondered if she would be able to claim a 'new for old' replacement or if that option expired at twelve months.

While waiting for the recovery vehicle, she called her cousin Mack, (Malcolm MacRobert), aged only thirty-eight and recently promoted to the rank of Detective Inspector, a workaholic with an Open University degree in 'Criminology and the Criminal Mind'.

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'Mack, Jean here. I'm may be breaking a confidence but I have something odd I think you should hear about. Are you free for a bite to eat tonight at Andiamo's? My shout.'

'Sure, Cuz. Okay if I bring Ray (Mary Scanlon), she's back living with me. Everything's hunky dory. She's accepted the promotion to Head at St Gerard's and we've agreed not to have children. It's what she's always wanted, she said. The headship, I mean. I just hope it's not too big a job for her. Time will tell.'

'Mack, please don't be so pessimistic. That's wonderful news, isn't it? Let's make it a mini-celebration.'

'Jean, even though she's still a Roman Catholic and, as you well know, I'm an atheist but Ray she wants you to marry us but also to be her Bridesmaid. How can that work?'

'Mack, don't worry, all things are possible under Heaven. I'll make some enquires. Look, I don't want to spoil tonight, can I give you the gist of my information now?'

'Of course, shoot!'

'Well, today I met a very odd man. His name is Eric Lumsden and he lives at ...'

'Jean, please tell me you did not enter his premises at number nine Harmony Row in Stonehouse!'

'Well, actually, yes, I did.'

'Jean, stay away from him, he's poison. Did no one warn you?'

'No. Look, Mack, I do realise he's a bit strange, and very lonely. We must make allowances. After all, he's grieving for his lost cousin.'

'Jean, never go back there and never, ever engage with him in any way. never speak to him with at least two others present. The man is deranged, probably psychopathic, highly dangerous. I've had him assessed by a top Psychiatrist from Carstairs. Lumsden is at the highest end of the intelligence spectrum. He's as slippery as an eel but we have him under digital intelligent surveillance. He's our first ever on my new initiative. Digital Policing, we call it. No doubt I'll be able to watch your visit on our cameras, back at HQ. later. More than that I cannot say.'

'His cousin, Betty Lumsden is one of my parishioners.'

'Betty is safe. He has been dominating her for years until she managed to break free of him. She's been in touch, via social media. It seems she won a substantial amount on the Lottery a few months ago and is on the run, scared out of her wits, keeping on the move. We're in touch with her, from time to time but only when she feels safe enough to contact us. We think she is 'damaged', probably as a result of Lumsden's abuse. The neighbours won't say a word against him. We think he has terrorised them too. Jean, treat all this is confidential, Okay. But, please, don't worry about Betty Lumsden. I think finally she is getting to grips with a life of freedom. We are weaning her off our support. Jean, it's a protocol thing, and lack of resources. I must focus our small team on the real crimes, not her tales from fantasyland about what she's doing and who she's sleeping with. I mean, Cliff Richard and Ed Sheeran with her as a threesome? Really? No, Jean, it's all complete and utter nonsense. My tame Psychiatrist agrees. Look, I'm sorry, I can't

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reveal anything else but you must promise me never, ever to have any further dealings with that monster, Eric Lumsden.'

'Monster? No, Mack, none of God's children are *monsters*. Our Heavenly Father loves each one of us equally and so must we.'

'Please, Jean, you must stay away from Eric Lumsden at all cost. No contact of any kind. If you let him into your mind he could destabilise you again.'

'Now Mack, stop that! Don't start haranguing me again, please. Look, Mack, I do understand you're just trying to do your best for me but please let me live my own life. Anyway, I doubt I'll ever hear from him but if he does get in touch, I'll keep you in the loop, Okay? Oh, look, the recovery truck at last. Mack, sorry, I simply must ring off, see you at seven-thirty. Okay? God Bless us All!'