

Now or Never

Fated

Dundee, Scotland.

Four hundred and fifty miles north of his family home in Watford, Zak Hacklet waited in the stuffy anteroom. He was dressed in his hired graduation outfit, with a red and purple hood draped over his left arm. In deference to the occasion, he had combed out the unruly twists of his long, gold-red ponytail which betrayed his Viking ancestry.

The usher signalled silently and Zak shuffled forward in line. A few minutes later, she pushed him in the small of his back. He moved toward the Beadle who stood facing the visiting professor standing in for the Chancellor, currently at a conference in the Seychelles. The small, wizened man sat high on his ornate chair, drowning in borrowed ceremonial robes. Behind him, a motley selection of bored academics faced the audience of proud families and friends assembled to witness the graduation ceremony.

As Zak stepped into the limelight, his head turned away as his free hand shot up to touch his left eyebrow, thereby concealing his lazy, pale grey Merle eye, an eye which contrasted sharply with his 'good' brown eye.

The Beadle intoned, 'Zachariah Mackenzie Hacklet, for research in marine biology in the Department of Natural Sciences, the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.'

Behind him, the Beadle's hand pressed firmly down on Zak's right shoulder as the hood was deftly removed from the sturdy young man's left arm. Zak kneeled. The rat-faced, inebriated octogenarian leaned forward and breathed a mixture of halitosis and whisky fumes into Zak's face. As he tapped the young man's head lightly with the ceremonial mitre, the Beadle looped the hood over Zak's head.

'Well done, laddie. From the Hebrides, are we?' said the professor.

'No, sir, your honour. Watford, sir.'

'Check out your ancestors, laddie. That eye of yours is a dead giveaway.'

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Stitch Up

Watford, England, two weeks before.

Vernon Hacklet swept back his dreadlocks and logged on to the *Stablemates* dating site.

'Wha d'ya tink, Tello? Blagged diz phota from de old man's website. Got me ol cuz Denzo a new whitey face from me bro Zakko. Says Denzo ees a doctah nevra fink, eh?'

'Yeah, ya got Zakko's good side man. Makes im looks kinda human, eh?' replied shaven-headed Tellman Lucas, as he flicked a khaki-coloured roundel of nostril pickings in the direction of the aquarium. The ball landed with a splash, causing a flurry of activity.

'Nice one, Tello! Bounda kill em, eh? Fucka fish, eh! Y'know wha, Zakko luv dem fish, ee does. 'N soma dem is deadlee poison, ee say. Fucka ponytail. Fucka pansy arse weirdo.'

'Oose accoun ya use, Verno?'

'Dickarse Zakko's, a-course.'

'Hey, wachit, Verno, Fucka mental ee is, Denzo. Fucka Kung Fu Karate Kid, ee is, just like Zakko. Dey both fucka tenth danz, intey?'

'No worries, Tello, ma man. Dey'll nevva find out, willday?'

'Fucksake, Verno! Denzo ee find ya use ees name on Zakko face, yarmince, man!'

'Howwah fucka ee find out, eh? Cos dissis all down ta lovva boy Zakko, intit? Coz diss Zakko's ol laptop, eh, now ee gotta fancy new one. Serves im fucka right. Fucka schollaship boy. Fucka la-de-da wankka. Finks ee know evra fink! Denzo find out, ee do Zakko. Clevva, eh?'

'Yeah, Verno, yo Zakko, eh? Waydee come fram? How come he yo brotha? Fink ees adopda or summit, eh?'

'Yeah, fucka whitey basta wid de mad fucka eye, Count Fucka Drakaleye, eh? Serves eem fucka right, eh?'

'Yeah, Verno. Denzo, ee do Zakko good, for shoo-ah!'

'Hey, Tello, you got 'nuff dosh saved fo' Ibeezah?'

'Sure, man. Got loadsah dosh. Me ol' Mum, she a soft touch, ain't she? How bouwt you? Fink you cood sell summa dem Zakko's fish, eh? Say dey died or summit?'

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'Nah. No way, Tello, man. Zakko, ee gottem countett, ain't ee. Like dey ees children, eh?'

'Yeah, yo Zakko's fucka weirdo. True fucka whitey weirdo. Waydee cum fram? Outta space, eh, Verno? Outta space?'

'Yeah, man. Outta space!'

'Wish ee go fucka back, eh! Scares de shit outta me, ee duz.'

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Dundee, the day after Graduation.

Zak's mobile dragged him from his online chess game. He was about to let it pass to the answering service but, on checking, he grabbed it:

'Hi Mum, how goes it?'

'Zak, you dey, boy?' demanded his stepmother's voice, almost shouting, revealing the emphatic traces of her West Indian origins: her parents had moved from Trinidad to Watford after WW2. Although otherwise healthy, her hearing had been in steady decline for a decade.

'You pick up daht phone, you hear me? This is 'mergency, boy. You fadder, he stuck somewhere in jail in Solveenya cos he a football hooligan again. You hear me, Zak? Party's over! You has to earn you livin' now, you hear me. You gotta get here now, boy.'

During *Liverpool FC's* glory days, Zak's father, James Mackenzie Hacklet, had played for two years in the second string. Since then, he had followed his team faithfully and drunkenly all over the world. All Jimmy would reveal of his past life was having trained as a welder in the Glasgow shipyards before being spotted. Why he had pitched up in Watford with Zak as a toddler remained shrouded in mystery. When he was a child, Zak had called Amelia his 'Mum', the only mother he had ever known. As he grew up, he realised she could not be his birth mother, a subject which his father refused to discuss, saying his own mother was dead and he should 'let it lie'. Amelia, too, was equally ignorant about Zak's mother or other relatives. When he applied for a passport, Zak discovered he had been born in Glasgow. All he had was his mother's name and that she was indeed, deceased.

Like his small family business, *Stablegates Fabrications*, Jimmy Hacklet's common-law marriage to Amelia Winston was a precarious affair. The business, which struggled to support the family, employed Amelia, Zak's brother Vernon, his cousin Denzel and from

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time to time Denzel's mother, Auntie Verity, who was good at using spreadsheets to prepare the accounts. Zak had always been good with computers. He had worked in the business from the age of ten to support Amelia who struggled with dyslexia. Aged twenty, Zak had made his escape by winning a scholarship to Bristol University, commuting home most weekends to sort out problems.

On graduating with a First, he had moved to Abertay University in Scotland. Without Zak's energy and cleverness, *Stablegates* would have struggled. From Dundee, he continued to help remotely, checking the computer system he had devised and set up. Nowadays, most of the orders for cattle and sheep pens were self-generated by customers, from a selection of standard options. The website also offered a complete installation service, including the preparation and laying of a concrete base, if required.

'Mum, it's me, Zak, what's wrong?'

'Get youself here, boy, OK? I need you make a delivery, OK?'

'Mum, can't Vern do it? He is the delivery driver after all.'

'Zak, get you lazy backside down here NOW, boy!'

'Aw Mum, I hate driving that old truck. Can't Denzel do it?'

'Zak, you hear me, boy? Dey's not here. Dey's in Ibeeta for two weeks, wid Tellman, OK? If you not here by tomorrow, Zak, I cut off you money, I snip you card, I cancel you mobile, OK?'

Her phone disconnected.

These were idle threats; Zak had been financially independent since he was fifteen, breeding fish in aquariums and selling them through his website, making a steady profit. When under pressure, Amelia became confused and mixed up her two sons. Left to cope alone, mistakes could and did happen.

Zak sent an email to Hamish, his lodger, explaining his sudden departure and left a cheque to cover his share of expenses to the end of the term, in the amount previously agreed. He had already sent the major part of his belongings back to Watford. Over the last few months, Zak had been running down his fish stock in Dundee. His now empty aquariums were already boxed for transportation. He put a sticky note on them which explained to Hamish he would ring soon to arrange for shipping. Packing his remaining things into his large rucksack, he strapped on the waterproof cover containing his sleeping bag.

So far, Zak had not finalised his plans but thought he might move back to the outskirts of Bristol where he could easily reach Watford when needed. Perhaps he would look up Rosita Gonzales, the Portuguese girl from the university library. She was the first

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girl he had dared to try for, because of his eye. From the start, Rosita had proved resistant to his advances but he had been besotted. After wooing her for almost two years, he had asked her to marry him, an offer which she had refused, cutting him out of her life. Zak believed her sister *Giuliana* had poisoned their relationship with concerns of children with odd-looking eyes. From her *Facebook* page, he knew Rosita was still unmarried. Importantly, there had been no recent mentions of *Giuliana* or a new boyfriend. Perhaps the sister had moved away, maybe back to Portugal.

Three hours after *Amelia's* summons, Zak caught the express bus for Edinburgh on the first leg of his trek south.

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Impending Storm

Three days later.

The early evening ferry to Hindness on the Isle of Verstaall was busy with campervans and 4x4s. Sundays in late August were favourite changeover days for fishermen chasing salmon and sea trout and for bird-spotters, hoping for unusual passage migrants, blown onto the Outer Hebrides by early autumnal storms.

Katia MacInnes' old campervan was the last vehicle to board. Under close guidance from one of the older deck hands, she slowly descended the ramp and edged her way behind the red flatbed truck, top heavy with galvanised gates and fencing and towing a small excavator on a trailer. For the first time, she noticed a fancy racing bicycle fixed to the rear of the driver's cabin. Katia was a timorous driver and had been stuck behind this combination four nearly four hours, unwilling to pass it even though it seldom managed more than 45 mph. *Stablegates*, the name on the truck had struck a chord with the dating website she had recently signed up to.

Born and bred in Glasgow, Katia was not a Verstaall girl, although the simpler lifestyle had always appealed to her. Throughout her childhood and into her early teens, she had visited in summer for holidays, staying on Verstaall with her grandparents. When Katia was ten years old, her mother had deserted them, leaving her daughter with her alcoholic father. It had been convenient for him to send his daughter to Verstaall for the school holidays, usually alone on the bus from Glasgow, with her ferry fare and a note to the ship's purser, explaining her grandfather would meet her at Hindness pier.

Safely parked, as she gathered her bits and pieces into her handbag, a deck hand tapped her window. Without realising who it was, she wound it down and the stink of stale tobacco made her nose wrinkle. But for his drawl, she would hardly have recognised Barry Kelnet a man who had once been tall and handsome but now sported a huge paunch below a puffy, unhealthy face. Some things never change, thought Katia. He had always been a vicious bully. From her cousins, she knew he was still quick to lash out with his huge hands or use a flick knife. The pity was, she had not known of his reputation when she first met him.

The twelve-year old memory of the early hours of the morning after the wedding in the Midness Halls rushed back with its painful aftermath. Then seventeen years old and two stones lighter, Katia had brought her ailing father, in this same campervan, to attend the wedding of her cousin Marie Mackenzie when Katia had been one of four bridesmaids. Being an incomer, a fresh face in a group where everyone knew each other intimately,

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Katia had been in the limelight. She had flirted with all the boys and with Barry in particular.

On the night of the wedding, as the evening celebrations built to a crescendo, Barry had spiked her orange juice with vodka then persuaded her outside and into the campervan where, after forcing her to the floor, he raped her viciously before returning to the party, leaving her abandoned, bleeding, bruised, curled into a ball weeping bitterly. For years afterwards she continued to ask herself the question:

"Did I encourage him? Was it my own fault?"

What made it seem worse, making her feel extra guilty, was that her father's sterile dialysis equipment had been lying alongside them while Barry violated her body.

Back home in Glasgow and newly enrolled in *Glasgow School of Art*, she discovered she was pregnant and persuaded her GP an abortion was the best option for her and her father. Later, she learned Barry had also impregnated fifteen-year-old Ishbell, Marie's sister and principal bridesmaid. Under pressure from both families, he had been shotgunned into marrying her.

Two years after her abortion, Katia's father, Colin Mackenzie MacInnes had died, unaware of what had transpired. The sale of his small garage had been enough to fund her studies and buy a one-bedroom flat in Havelock Street, just off Glasgow's Byres Road, putting her among the swirl of students attending the University and the medical and nursing staff from the Western Infirmary.

Katia had followed more recent events on Verstaall through chatter on *Facebook*. When Barry had made Ishbell pregnant for the seventh time, she had finally left him for good and moved, with her children, to live with her sister Marie, who had settled in Old Kilpatrick. Marie's own marriage to a fisherman from the west coast town of Troon had not been a happy one. Divorced with no children, she worked at Glasgow's Golden Jubilee Hospital as a radiography technician. Marie was delighted to be a hands-on auntie and auxiliary mum.

Leering, Barry said, 'So, Katia, you still haff your old man's shagging wagon then.'

She blanked him and tried to wind the window up but he held it open with his huge, powerful arm.

'So here you are with us again at last, Katia Mackenzie MacInnes. And it is still the beauty you are, with your wee pixie face and your big, sky blue eyes. And were we not all wondering when you would be a-coming over, now that you are the last in line for the MacInnes land that old Mackinnon has been after these years since. They are saying ye haff been setting them Mackay boys a-warking on that old croft house o' yer granny's,

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away out there at the road end by Midness? So, Katia, it will be just yer ownself out there? All alone without a man to warm your bed, is it?’

She stared ahead, determined not to encourage him.

‘Aye, and they are saying you are being the big cheese down there in Glasgow, winning all the prizes. Pottery, is it? So, it’s the good hands you are having on you? Well, maybe it is a massage parlour you should be a-starting, is it?’ He laughed harshly, causing a coughing spasm.

Recovered, he added, ‘It is for sure they would never find you out, not away out there on the west coast with only the sheep and old Angus for neighbours. And will you be settling to raising the sheep, is it? I haff a few fine rams I can bring out to be a-covering them, for a wee consideration, if you are getting my drift?’

Katia spat at him: ‘How many is it now, Barry Kelnet? Six? And another one on the way I hear? Time for the snip, don’t you think? It’s a wonder Ishbell put up with you for so long.’

‘Well, Katia MacInnes, if it is bairns you are after, you are talking to the right man. Sure-fire Maguire is what they are a-calling me nowadays. How would that be suiting you?’

‘Don’t waste your time, arsehole. I’d rather have a box of chocolates and a bottle of white wine any day.’

‘Well, Katia, the wee bit beef you haff put on suits you fine, if you can bear a wee compliment.’

‘Aye, up yours too.’

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CalMac’s *MV Viking* cleared the harbour and set out into The Little Minch with the wind force four, gusting six. As the storm blew in from the south-west, the last of the light left the sky and rain came in great slabs of grey-black, with a touch of sleet. During the two-hour crossing, Barry and the other deckies worked to lash down the heavy lorries and trucks. When *Stablegate’s* truck and trailer combo lurched and almost toppled onto its side, it too was secured.

Upstairs, in the corner of the café/bar, Katia shut out the ribald conversation from the large group of fishermen heading for Vestness Lodge in South Verstaall. Across the stuffy space, she saw a young man, wearing blue overalls with the *Stablegates* logo stitched in yellow. She guessed he must be from the delivery truck. He was hunched over his laptop, his face concealed by his mane of long, gold-red hair. There seemed something familiar about him.

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She fired up her iPad and connected to the free, on-board Wi-Fi, found the website and logged in. *Stablemates* was intended for those with a common interest in country life, farming, crofting and the like. This website had been recommended on Facebook by one of her friends from Glasgow School of Art who had used it to find an organic farmer husband, an older man who had set her up with a studio and gallery in return for 'companionship'. In part, it was this success story which had inspired Katia to seriously consider moving to *Tigh na Mara*, the family croft she had inherited from her grandmother.

What had persuaded her to make this life-changing move was when she unexpectedly won £30,000 for her entry in a UK-wide contemporary arts competition organised by The Tate Modern, a qualifying round for the Turner Prize. Her work had been immediately purchased by an Arab collector, adding a further £12,000 to her meagre bank account. It was now or never, she decided. Supplementing her income by renting out her flat to a student nurse, she took the decision to move to Verstaall to see if she could make a living as a ceramicist. Katia had already splurged nearly thirteen thousand on a new oil-fired central heating system and a kitchen and bathroom upgrade for the croft. Two weeks earlier, on a promise the work had been completed, she had paid the final instalment by online bank transfer to the Mackays.

Now her big move was happening, the girl from Glasgow was filled with the dread of uncertainty and wondered, for the hundredth time, if the rat had told everyone of his conquest on the long-ago night of the wedding. Would there be others like him, even some who might make the trip along the lonely road to *Tigh na Mara* to try their luck?

To counter these negative thoughts, she began to play her internal video: perhaps she would get a dog as a companion to take with her on her beachcombing excursions. With an outdoor lifestyle, she would eat sensibly, walk more and slim down to her earlier self in the photo she had posted on *Stablemates*, when she had been a cuddly size 14, nudging eleven stones.

Flicking through those who had responded to her entry, she let her mind wander and began again to fantasise about finding 'Mr Right'.

Katia was not normally a risk taker and making a posting on the website had been a big deal for her. The tipping point had been three months earlier. Darrell, her long-term, if intermittent boyfriend, had sent a 'good-bye and good luck text'. He was a self-employed Amazon delivery driver which was how she had met him, delivering a bulk load of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. In his text, Darrell had explained, while on a recent call, he had met a rich divorcee with a liking for younger men and had now moved in with her.

None of the newer *Stablemates* offers appealed. What she had not expected were the responses from females, most of whom had profiles like her own but offering 'no-

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ties-experimental-arrangements' and 'flexible male/female role play'. Many offers were from older women 'hoping for romance and more'. Reading between the lines, these respondents seemed desperate. When she checked the wording of her own entry, she saw it too, could be construed as 'desperate'. When she got a chance, she would amend it, make it more professional.

She moved on to trawl the archive of men who matched her desired profile and, almost at once, found the reference for Dr Denzel Winston of *Stablegates* and the photograph which had sparked her interest. When she glanced across to check, she saw the man in the blue boiler suit was watching her. As he turned away, she noticed his left eye was identical to her father's.

A jumble of thoughts whirled through her mind: why is he looking at me? - has he seen me on the *Stablemates* website? With his eye like my father's, is he related to me in some way and how? He looks fit and strong, not like a weedy academic - more like a manual worker. Does he really have a PhD? *Stablegates* and *Stablemates*: is this fate, are we meant to meet? Is he interested in me? He has a kind smile. With a jolt, Katia realised why he seemed familiar. His short, bulky stature and the way he held himself also reminded her of her father. When she looked up again, Dr Denzel Winston had gone. Katia flipped back through the entries on *Stablemates* to have another look at his photograph, a three-quarter profile designed to conceal his left eye. Pinching it out to take a closer look, she realised, although the man in the blue boiler suit's hair colour was much lighter, the strong square shape of his face was very like a version of how her father would have been in his twenties, his brown right eye jarring with a left eye of washed-out pale grey, almost white.

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The tannoy announced drivers should return to their vehicles. Katia shut down the iPad, packed it in her shoulder bag, freshened her make-up then applied a squirt of perfume behind each ear. Maybe she would be able to snare him in conversation on the vehicle deck.

As the ferry slowed on arrival at Hindness, the starboard-side bow thruster failed. Caught by a gust, the ship slewed out of control and smacked off the side of the loading ramp, causing significant damage to both the ship's hull and the pier.

Chaos ensued as the tannoy announced an emergency. In the rush to reach muster stations, Katia tripped over a stray holdall and fell heavily, knocking all thought of romance from her mind. Her right shoulder and both knees ached but it was her right wrist which gave cause for real concern: the pain was excruciating. One of the anglers, who explained he was a GP, checked her over, confirmed no bones had been broken although her wrist was badly sprained. From his holdall, he produced strapping then

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fashioned her long scarf into a make-shift sling. For the pain, he offered her a blister pack of paracetamol, thumbing two into her palm with a stern warning not to take more than eight spaced over any twenty-four-hour period, stressing she must avoid alcohol. She washed the tabs down with a can of diet Coke and munched on her last low-calorie energy bar a surprise snack she found after a left-handed rummage in her capacious handbag.

There was a delay while emergency docking procedures were put in place. After a one-handed struggle in the toilets, Katia found she was the last vehicle on the car deck. As she approached her campervan, she spotted Barry Kelnet standing in a doorway, smoking, even though this was prohibited. There was no one else around that she could see. Speeding up, she got into the campervan and locked the door, staring ahead as she fiddled awkwardly with her sore hand to get the keys into the ignition and start the engine. From her peripheral vision she saw him grind the cigarette under his heel before swaggering over, banging on the window and tugging at the door handle. Ignoring him, she drove off, leaving him alone on the empty deck. At the ramp she was waved up Donnie Macdonald who had been at school with her father, the same cheery man who had helped her to negotiate the stern ramp when boarding.

Katia bumped over the hump and down onto the noisy bow ramp then gently eased up the steep concrete slope across onto the tarmac of the marshalling area. As she drove gingerly towards the exit, the two CalMac men in their yellow oilskins waved her off on her journey into the dark, blustery night. She crawled passed the brightly lit Hindness Hotel, hers the only vehicle on the road.

The straggle of houses petered out and she was alone on the unlit eight-mile strip of two-lane 'new road' to Westness, a road often jokingly referred to as 'Verstaall's motorway'. With hailstones mixed with swirling rain blurring the windscreen, the old campervan made slow progress. Despite full headlights and wipers on maximum speed, Katia caught only glimpses of the highway ahead. After a repeated struggle, she eventually persuaded the clunky gearbox down into second, slowing to almost walking pace.

The impending storm was now force six gusting eight, veering violently from south-west to due west then back again as its centre raced across the North Atlantic, heading towards the Outer Hebrides. This remote archipelago of over a hundred islands on the extreme western edge of Europe was sometimes collectively known as 'The Long Island,' a chain which bulwarked the Scottish mainland by absorbing the worst of the powerful rollers generated by such storms.

When she reached the tiny hamlet of Westness, Katia hauled at the steering wheel to the left heading the campervan southwards, the wind buffeting her from the right-

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hand-side. The highway now reverted to the roadway which served as the norm for the Outer Hebrides, a narrow ribbon of undulating, single-track road, interspersed with tight, passing places, often carved out of a niche, hidden by a lump of bracken covered rock. Emerging onto a level, straighter but exposed stretch, she was almost blown off the tarmac strip by a violent gust.

Only then did she realised she should have tried for a room back at the Hindness Hotel or parked in its car park until morning. With each jerk of the steering wheel, her right wrist throbbed more painfully. All she could think of was reaching what she hoped would be the snug comfort of the croft and luxuriating in a deep, hot bath, with a scented candle and a bottle of dry white wine for company.

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Picnic Spot

Alone on the road, Katia felt reassured by the winking lights as she crept passed the scattering of roadside crofts which formed the community of Midness. Shortly after the last of the houses, her headlights picked out the stunted, wind-blown rowan which was the right-hand turn-off for *Tigh na Mara*.

She steeled herself for the last leg of her journey on an even narrower, single-track gravel road which twisted and turned in a westerly thrust towards the wild Atlantic coastline. Although she thought she knew this track well, when viewed through violent pulses of rain, its undulating twists and turns seemed unfamiliar, frightening.

Standing on the heavy clutch, she fiddled the gearbox into neutral and slowed to a stop at the entrance to the tarmac track which led away to the right, up a long gentle slope to Angus Kilgour's croft, sheltered in a copse of wind ravaged trees and bushes. Peering through the rain, she was disappointed there was no light showing in his window. Had he forgotten to start her new boiler and fill her fridge/freezer with the items she had listed in her short note to him?

Don't be bitchy, Kat. You know Angus would never forget.

Her wrist was on fire, nerves jangling, sending bolts of pain up to her shoulder and on into her brain. With the downpour lashing directly onto the windscreen, it was almost impossible to see the track ahead.

Christ Kat, you're asking for trouble on this road, in the dark with this bloody storm. You'll kill yourself. Why don't you park in Angus's yard for the night?

However, the thought of indulging in a warm bath, followed by a hot meal and a few glasses of wine were too tempting. The pain subsided. Katia took a deep breath and continued heading to her new home and her new life, moving at walking pace, keeping her eyes fixed on the right-hand edge of the bumpy track. Out at the edge of the shore, as Kelnet had said, she would be alone with just sheep and seagulls for neighbours. Where did seagulls go in such weather? She would ask Angus when she next saw him.

Still whining along in first gear, she approached the narrow ridge which bordered *Lochan na Domhain*. To her left, a steep bank towered above her while to her right, a sheer drop into the dark water. Her grandmother had told her of a tractor which had skidded off this part of the road, ending up in the lochan, fifty feet below. The driver had survived but the tractor had never been seen again. In summer weather when the sun shone brightly from dawn till dusk, it was a favourite spot for swimming, with braver

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children diving or 'bombing' from the side of the track into its deep waters. The sandy beach at the far side was where her grandfather had taught her to swim.

Beyond the ridge, the road descended gradually, becoming flatter and straighter as it crossed the rolling machair land which made her croft so prized because of its good pasture. Relieved to have the worst of her journey behind her, she forced the reluctant gearbox into second and began to speed up, hoping soon to wallow in a hot bath with a glass of wine at her lips. On crunching the gearbox into third gear, vague memory and instinct told her she must be near the sharp right turn at the Midness Prayer Stone, the point which marked the boundary of her headland with her only neighbour, Angus Kilgour. Some locals said this large splinter of Neolithic rock had magical healing powers. For Katia, it normally evoked good memories as a favourite picnic spot visited with her grandmother during long summer holidays at *Tigh na Mara*. Picked out of the driving hail by the headlights, its jagged outline loomed dark, uncaring, unwelcoming.

She sensed rather than saw a blur of flashing yellow lights then a high-powered torch cut through the murk, blinding her. Stabbing down hard on the brake pedal caused the campervan to stall. A face, plastered with long hair, loomed out of the darkness and approached her driver's side window. Recognising him as the man in the blue boiler suit, she wound down her window a little. As she did so, the wind eased and the rain and hail stopped.

'Hi, can you help, please?' said the man. His face was almost as blue as his boilersuit which was soaked through, clinging to him. 'Mia culpa. Driving too fast then my brakes failed. Nearly crashed into that rock. Slid off the road. Tried to reverse but the trailer jack-knifed and the whole combo toppled onto its side. Can't get a signal on my mobile. And my bicycle is wrecked. Expensive.'

'Oh, it's you! Hi, I saw you on the ferry. Quick, get in the other side, you'll get your death out there.'

He hauled open the passenger door and climbed in.

'Hi, I'm Zak. Zak Hacklet. Thanks.'

'Zak? Really? Zak? Oh, I thought . . .!' Katia stopped herself just in time. There was no point admitting she had seen his face on *Stablemates* as Dr Denzel Winston.

He pulled a glove off, held out his hand but, on seeing her bandaged wrist, drew back.

'Yeah, eh. . . Hi, Zak, I'm Katia MacInnes, please call me Kat.' She offered her left hand and he shook it briefly, awkwardly.

'Kat! Right. Gotcha. Yeah, Kat, cool name! Nice to meet you, Kat. Please, does your mobile have a signal?'

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She fished in her handbag and a stabbing pain shot up her arm.

'Ah! God, that hurts. Here, you try. My wrist is agony. I fell when we hit the pier.'

'Yeah, I heard you had a fall. I saw those older guys helping you. What happened?'

She explained.

'Right. Right, gotcha! Should you be driving?'

'Needs must. Anyway, nearly there now.'

She proffered her handbag and he took it, peered in and found the phone.

'Thanks. Hey, you don't have this phone secured, right?'

'No, it's new and, well, I'm not that good with techie things.'

'Right, gotcha. Ah, no. Zilch signal. Bugger!'

'Welcome to Verstaall. It's patchy at the best of times but with the storm, it'll probably be down for a few days.'

'I suppose getting a recovery truck would be unlikely, right?'

'No chance. Maybe tomorrow we could find someone. Or get Angus, with his tractor. But tonight, no, sorry, no chance at all.'

'Right, gotcha.'

'I think you must have made a wrong turning. Is it a B&B you're heading for?'

'No, no, I was planning to kip in the truck but under the circumstances, seems I might have to throw myself on the mercies of our customer. D'you know him? Mr Ivan Jenkins at Bayview Cottage. Any chance you could drop me off?'

'Did you say Jenkins? No, sorry, I don't know him. He must be another incomer. Anyway, there are lots of houses called Bay-something-or-other around here. This track leads only to *Tigh na Mara*. In English it means "house by the sea". So, Zak, I'm afraid you've definitely taken a wrong turning.'

'Right, gotcha. So, how about a B&B then?'

'Yeah, of course! You're having a laugh, right? Would you open your door to anyone on a night like this? Anyway, they'll all be booked. It's always busy around this time of year. You saw the ferry, stuffed with twitchers and fishers.'

'Right, gotcha.'

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Zak's smile was open and genuine, bright and cheeky, like her father's when she was a wee girl, before his kidney failure. He's nice, very nice, thought Katia, smiling back. He grinned and so did she. A bond had been established.

'So, Kat, any chance I could kip in this vehicle, or a shed or whatever? Somewhere out of the rain, just for tonight? I've got a sleeping bag. I'll get things sorted in the morning.'

What else could she do? Left out here, he might die of hypothermia. If she said no, she would have to take him somewhere else and she had had enough driving for one day. He was smiling hopefully.

'OK. But this old van doesn't have any heating, you know.'

'No worries. Thanks, Kat, that's very gracious of you. I slept in my truck on the way up and this is way more spacious.'

'Look, Zak, could I trust you to drive? My wrist is terribly sore, my whole right side is throbbing and my knees are giving me gip. I'm hoping a hot bath will do the trick. I've had a couple of painkillers but they don't seem to be working. I'm not keen on taking them anyway.'

'Right, gotcha. Two minutes, OK? You change sides and I'll grab my things and switch off the wipers to save the battery, OK?'

A few minutes later, as he started the engine, the storm returned with a vengeance, rocking the campervan and causing the wipers to judder on overload.

Zak drove much faster than she would ever have dared but he seemed to be in total control, confident. As he hurtled along, he explained he had been on the road from Watford since the early hours of Saturday morning, nursing the old truck along, making frequent short stops to avoid over-stressing it, parking up near Gretna to grab a few hours' sleep in the cab before setting off again.

As they bumped along the track, he talked about *Stablegates*, describing a small family firm run by his parents, helped by his stepbrother called Vernon and his cousin, Denzel Winston. Nowadays, he was no longer an employee, just helping out because of an emergency.

'We're a small outfit, a micro-business if you like. I help them remotely, online, an unpaid system administrator for the website I set up to help them market and manage the business. I've been away from this sort of hands-on stuff for years with no desire to get back into it. It's not rocket science and with a bit of help now and again they bumble along, making an honest living.'

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Katia like his deep, warm voice which she felt inspired confidence and trust. She would check out his website later if she could get an internet connection.

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Angus

When Katia's campervan passed the end of the short track up to Angus Kilgour's house, two collies whined. Coming a wake from his short slumber, the long-retired police sergeant knocked out his pipe, unwound his tall, sparse frame from the upright wooden chair, switched off the radio and reached for a shepherd's crook. He was dressed in habitual garb, a sort of uniform, comprising a heavy khaki-coloured fisherman's jersey of close-knit Harris wool, virtually wind and waterproof. It was decades old and had once belonged to his brother. Below it, he wore a dark olive shirt and lighter green tie, green-black corduroy trousers and heavy walking brogues, items which nowadays he removed only to go to bed or bathe.

'Well ladies,' he said to the collies, 'we are having a busy night to ourselves and no mistake. It is like Sauchiehall Street out there. First a lorry going like a bat out of hell then Katia's old van, still needing a new exhaust. Well, what do you say? Now the wind is easing maybe we shall have a wee daunder down the road and find out what new-fangled thing it is she is having delivered off the ferry at this time on a Sunday night.'

A confirmed bachelor, now in his eighty-fourth year, Angus Mackenzie Kilgour had returned to the family croft aged fifty-five, pleased to escape from the computers, short-wave radios and endless paperwork which had changed the old-fashioned way of policing the tougher parts of Glasgow. Angus as the last of his strand of the Kilgour clan on Verstaall. During his first decade back on the island, he had buried both parents, quickly followed by an older brother who had died of sclerosis of the liver.

With a good pension and little desire for luxuries, Angus lived a frugal and temperate life, spending his days diligently keeping the croft land and sheep in good fettle. His prize possession was a vintage tractor, a 1967 International 856 which he kept under lock and key in a well-equipped shed behind his tidy, four-bedroomed modernised cottage. During the back end of the season, more for a bit of fun and banter than for money, he offered himself as a fishing guide to the visitors who came after the salmon and sea trout.

After zipping up an ancient but still serviceable knee-length Burberry coat, he released the earflaps of an old tweed deerstalker and tied the straps firmly under his chin. Striding away from the cottage, with the dogs trotting to heel, he lengthened his long legs into the rhythm which could propel him at a steady four miles-an-hour all day long, regardless of the terrain.

Ten minutes later, he stood on the ridge above the dark sea lochan and saw Katia's campervan in the distance near the Prayer Stone. Part-way down the peat bank, partly in

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a ditch and was a truck and its trailer, both items on their sides with hazard lights flashing.

As he watched from his vantage point, Angus saw a stocky man emerge from the campervan then slither down the slope to the truck. The hazard lights stopped winking. Moving his gaze back to Katia's campervan, Angus saw her emerge, go to the passenger side. Something about the way she moved seemed awkward but, before he could work out what it might be, she disappeared into the vehicle. After a few minutes, the man returned and hefted what looked like a rucksack and a large travel bag through the sliding door into the back of the campervan, got in at the driver's side and drove off toward *Tigh na Mara*.

'Well, ladies, perhaps Katia is playing the Good Samaritan? But why is he driving her van?' He smiled. 'Och, of course! It is surely that they already know each other. Maybe our wee girl has found herself a decent man at last.'

He watched the receding vehicle until the next pulse of rain raced towards him.

'Look you there! Here it comes again. We are in for another big blow tonight and no mistake. Well ladies, let us leave our lovebirds to it and hope for the best.'

When he arrived back at his croft, he re-tuned to the BBC World Service and settled to doze in his chair. Angus had reached the age when sleep came to him in short, troubled interludes, interrupted by frequent visits to the bathroom, ever hopeful he might be able to relieve the painful urge to urinate.

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Tigh na Mara

'Right, Kat, here we are, duly delivered. Thanks. I'll just kip down here in the back. I don't want to startle your family when they wake up, right?'

"What family?", thought Katia then said, 'OK, Zak, see you in the morning.'

She splashed across in her Doc Marten's and felt for the key on its hook under the low eaves then opened the door. Just inside the door, as she wiped her feet on the mat, her ears were assaulted by a high whine which eased to a lower tone before rising to a frightening, piercing whistle. From the darkness, a door closed with a violent boom. The fanciful notion leapt to mind that she had stepped through a portal in time and space into a haunted house.

Christ, Kat MacInnes, get a grip. What did you expect? They all told you it was a bad move to come away out here to the edge of the world but would you listen? Her mind was racing, trying to make sense of her situation. Had the Mackays left the back door open? Or was the bang something to do with the new boiler? Was the whine from a partially open window?

The air was cold, damp, draughty. She felt for the switch. Slowly, a dim lamp began to glow, shedding barely enough light to see what lay before her. She reached to feel the new radiator. It was stone cold. Bumping the door shut with her bottom, she leaned back, shut her eyes to the chaotic scene before her and muttered under her breath.

'Have those Mackays scammed you? Is this the same old cock-up repeating itself?'

She pictured her grandmother sitting by her fireside through violent winter storms, spinning tales of flying sheep and carts and even houses and their occupants blown away, never to be found. Her father had laughed off such stories as fanciful. His voice came back in his slow Verstaall drawl.

"Aye, Katia, but that was before we learned how to make our roofs strong, before we had the galvanised fixings. Oh, I'm sure it could have happened to one of the older ones. You see the remains of them scattered all over these islands but it will never happen to this house. This old cottage has been strengthened, built to last and I tell you my girl, it will still be standing here a hundred years from now. When there is a big blow, this house will creak and groan but that is how it is meant to work. You know what they say, "a wee bit give and take will never break", right?"

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The original croft, built in the early part of the twentieth century, had comprised a living room and bedroom with a simple galley kitchen. It had been adapted several times over the years, firstly to add a small extension bedroom for her father, creating an awkward L-shaped entry hallway in the process. About twenty years ago, a narrow bathroom had been formed by combining a walk-in storage cupboard-cum-larder and a previous WC compartment, a space shoe-horned between the kitchen and what had once been her grandparents' bedroom, now hers.

Although the actual construction of the building was sound, the work had been done on an ad hoc basis, without reference to building standards. As a result, all three doors opened directly onto the living room, the heart of the house with its peat fire. A decade further down the line, after her grandfather had died, the kitchen had been remodelled to accommodate a simple Calor gas cooker and a washing machine. The next year an oil-fired central heating system was installed but the system had never worked properly, leading to a saga which grumbled on for years. Endless tinkering with the boiler, the fitting of a new timeclock and several increasingly powerful pumps had failed to resolve the problem.

At times, the heating would work after a fashion, sometimes for as long as three months before it defaulted to its previous, unreliable behaviour. No solution could be found which worked, leaving her grandmother little better off, reliant once again on the vagaries of the single fire in the living room to heat the entire house. This fire, with its contorted, narrow flue, had also been a problem. In stormy weather, it was subject to fierce blowbacks which filled the room with peat smoke and fine grey ash.

With the money from her prize, Katia had contracted *Mackay Heating and Plumbing* to upgrade the kitchen and bathroom and to install a modern, energy-efficient, oil-fired central heating system with new radiators and new piping throughout. At least, that is what they had promised.

The banging started again. She took a deep breath and set off along the dull hallway to the kitchen, passing the badly stacked piles of transit crates which contained her clothes and other worldly goods and chattels, sent ahead by carrier during the previous week. Standing in the doorway of the living room, she switched on the overhead light and surveyed the dozens of *Amazon* delivery boxes scattered around in a random assortment of sizes, including cartons containing new bedclothes, towels, crockery and other miscellaneous orders. Like the rest of the house, this room was also dimly lit by old style low-energy lamps, a hangover from her grandmother's time. Somewhere in these many boxes there were modern, brighter replacements which used even less energy.

Her eyes rested on her wine delivery comprising a dozen identical boxes, neatly stacked, four wide and three high. She smiled and whispered:

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'Soon, my darlings, soon. Just as soon as Mummy gets this bloody heating system switched on and her bath running.'

Katia picked her way through the jumble to check the new radiators in the living room and bathroom. Both were stone cold. A surge of disappointment welled up, morphed into anger, sending dark thoughts chasing around in her mind.

The Mackay brothers had emailed, promising her they had completed their work, that everything was 'hunky-dory'. Had they scammed her? But, no, they were nice men and Angus had said they were the best.

Could she be out of fuel? They were supposed to top it up as part of the deal. Had the old oil tank sprung a leak? No, Angus would have noticed. Surely he had not forgotten to start the heating system as she had asked him to do in her letter.

The last time she had seen the old man, he had looked gaunt, haggard, clearly not fully well even though he had claimed to be 'fine and dandy'.

Was he so unwell he was confined to his croft? If so, why were there no lights when she passed? He was not a man to go to bed early. A more likely explanation was that he was visiting his ghillie friends at Vestness Lodge and had got caught by the storm. If so, he would have decided not to risk the causeway, the scene of a recent drowning tragedy during a storm such as this.

When she clicked down the kitchen light switch her eyes opened in wonder at how light and bright it now was. She felt a surge of pride at what she had achieved. The tiny low-energy lamps recessed into the ceiling sparkled and flooded much needed light into what had once been a gloomy tunnel. The Mackay brothers had created exactly what she had envisaged in her mind, transforming the old chaotic room into a modern, functional galley kitchen.

There was a full-length granite effect worktop into which was set a 1.5 bowl sink and, further long, a Calor Gas 4-ring hob, with an electric double oven below. To the right there were three sets of drawers including two deeper ones specifically designed to hold pots, pans and cooking equipment. At the end of the work surface was a tall, fridge and freezer combo. To the left of her sink she saw her chosen, integrated, clothes washer/dryer, its power light pulsing steadily, ready for programming.

I'll give it a try-out tomorrow and get those old bedclothes from the spare room laundered to use as wiping-up rags for when I get my workshop going.

She would have liked a dishwasher but there was not sufficient space. Along the wall, above the work surface, was a row of fitted cupboards, each with two sparkly down lighters to eliminate dark corners, a problem she had back at her Glasgow flat.

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Pretty damned near perfect, Kat. even if it almost broke the bank.

She let out a low murmur of pleasure: 'Well boys, you've done me proud. So why is the bloody heating not working? Is it the timeclock?'

Running her hand across the worktop, she moved towards the external wall where the heating control panel was mounted beside the door which led out to her new utility room. As she approached, this door swung violently inwards, narrowly missing her, before crashing into the sidewall, its handle denting the plaster.

'For God's sake, what next?' she exploded.

This must have been the door I heard slamming earlier.

As she closed the door, her head was jerked round by a sharp noise from the living room, a penetrating sound like the piercing blast of old-style police whistle.

The Mackays must have left the living room window slightly edged.

The piercing call sounded again. Distracted from her task of starting the boiler, she moved back into the dimness of the living room where her toe caught on a rug. As she stumbled forwards, her right hand shot out, onto the back of a chair, to save herself. A hot surge of pain seared up her arm and exploded in her brain. Tears welled but she sniffed them away. When the pain subsided, she drew aside the curtains and checked. The window was fully closed. Looking for clues, she glanced around the dim, cold room with its mishmash of old bits and pieces of furniture and grimy walls. A surge of doubt and defeatism welled up at what remained to be done.

Come on, Kat! You must learn to be resilient or you may as well pack it in now.

Leaving this mystery unsolved, she picked her way back to the kitchen to the control panel. The miniscule icons made no sense. It was then she brought to mind her father's much used, jokey adage:

"Remember, Katia, if all else fails, read the instructions."

She spread the user manual out flat on the worktop and scanned its pages for guidance. As instructed, she gingerly pressed the green START button. Through the wall, in the utility room, after a short delay, the boiler rumbled into life but, after a few seconds of gurgling noises, it shut down. She pressed again more firmly, holding the button in. The boiler fired. This time, the circulating pump gurgled more loudly but when she removed her finger, both boiler and pump fell silent and the red boiler FAIL light flashed.

'Christ! That's all I bloody need! Damn and blast it!'

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Outside, the wind hit a new high. From behind her, came a sustained and frighteningly loud, high-pitched whine. She followed the sound to the fireplace and soon worked out the banshee-like screech was coming from the energy-saving balloon-sock which the Mackays had fitted inside the living room chimney. They had been adamant; without this windsock, the heat from the radiators would be sucked up the chimney. They had gone on to explain the balloon, when deflated, could be easily removed should she wish a traditional peat fire during calmer weather.

Again the banshee screeched, taking her mind back to months earlier and the long acrimonious telephone calls with Peter Mackinnon, the geriatric solicitor from Benbecula, advising her repeatedly that her ceramics studio idea would never work, arguing she should sell *Tigh na Mara*, promising he would find a willing buyer. At the third time of asking him to do her bidding, he had delivered what he had thought would be the killer blow:

"Listen to me Katia MacInnes and mark my words, girl. When the new broadband superhighway arrives next year, all the young techie go-getters will be flocking back over from the mainland. But you, Katia MacInnes, isolated out there at that road end, will never get connected to it. Give up this nonsense now and save your money. It is the very same advice I gave to your grandmother, although Catherine would never listen to me either. I blame Angus Kilgour for egging her on. She should have let me sell the place and give you the money instead of asking you to take it on. Madness it is you are planning, girl. Pure unadulterated madness."

Smug words and condescending, she had thought. Back then, his opposition had strengthened her resolve. Now, sotto voce, she whispered her recurring uncertainty:

'Kat MacInnes, old Peter was right, this is madness. You'll never be able to live out here on the edge of the world. And face it girl, you've hardly anything left at the bank and that campervan is on its last legs too. If you sell up in Glasgow, there'll be no going back, will there?'

Her arm and wrist were aching like toothache, a dull throbbing with an occasional vicious stab. She palmed two more paracetamol tabs but at the last minute resisted, recalling the doctor's words on the ferry. Instead, she drank a glass of tangy Verstaall water trying to imagine it was crisp white wine.

Looking through her bedroom window, she was relieved to see the internal light of the campervan was still on. She eased her way along the narrow hall, pulled up the hood of her anorak and crossed to the vehicle swaying in the wind. Thumping at the door, she shouted:

'Zak, do you know anything about boilers?'

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'Hold on, I'll come right away, have a look.'

She retreated through the storm to the kitchen to wait for him. He appeared a few minutes later and draped his wet anorak over the living room radiator. From the door of the kitchen Katia eyed him, her first good look at him. He was wearing a tight-fitting yellow cycling vest, tight dark blue knee-length cycling pants. His outfit was completed by his untied work boots, making him seem slightly comical. However, he looked fit, strong, well-muscled and ready for anything. Her mind swirled ahead to possibilities.

In the galley kitchen, he eased past her, flipped down the cover on the boiler control panel and scrolled through the settings on the LCD pad.

'Ah-ha, ha-ha! As I suspected, low system pressure. Looks as if you have the same problem as the boiler at our smallholding. Your boiler is where?'

'Through that door into the hen coop, eh, utility room.'

She followed him through the small porch to the outbuilding, found the switch and turned on the overhead light. They stood beside the boiler in its insulated casing.

Although the Mackay brothers agreed a new central heating system was needed, they took some persuading to install the new boiler on the outer wall of what was an old lean-to shed which had been her grandmother's hen coop. In the end they had relented but only on the basis they would upgrade the structure to make it wind, water-tight, fully insulated and wired to comply with building standards. This long wrangle had pushed up the cost by nearly £3,000 but the result was a bright utility room with a deep sink and offering space for a potential second freezer and, perhaps, her longed-for dishwasher, when funds became available.

'OK, so this is brand new, right? He hunkered down, seemed to know what to do, unclipped the access panel and used the torch on his phone to examine the boiler.

'Ah-ha, ha-ha! Look! Here we have a handy water pressure top-up valve. Can you see it? This blue pull-down lever at the side?'

She looked over his shoulder, pretended to stumble and leaned into him, letting her breasts squeeze against his back for a few seconds before releasing the pressure. She could smell coal tar soap, another reminder of her father. Or was she imagining this?

The top-up water hissed through the valve and the pressure needle rotated into the green zone.

'Right, here goes.'

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Back in the kitchen at the control panel, Zak pressed the START button. After a short delay, the boiler fired and the internal pump began to whirr quietly without gurgling.

'Ah-ha, ha-ha! Now we're cooking by gas!'

Katia felt a shiver run through her and just about managed to stifle a laugh. "Ah-ha, ha-ha!" and "Cooking by gas" had been favourite phrases of her father's.

'So, all sorted?' Katia asked. 'Is it OK to have a bath? It's supposed to produce instant hot water, or so they promised.'

'Yeah, don't see why not. Give it a go. Maybe I should hang around for a bit, see what happens, top up the pressure if it stops, OK?'

'Sure, let's hang out for a bit, why not?'

They grinned.

Feeling his eyes on her as he followed her back into the living room, she found her rucksack, delved for the toilet bag, turned with a twirl, chose the awkward route which meant brushing past him then sashayed across to the bathroom, where she stopped and turned, smiling coyly.

'Zak, this is really great of you. You don't mind waiting? Really? The very last thing I need now is for the boiler to fail again when I'm naked, eh, I mean, when I'm in the bath. Hopefully a good long soak will help put my shoulder to rights. What do you think?'

'Yeah, I suppose. I'm more one for showers, myself.'

'Look, it has a shower too.' He leaned in and looked, straining not to touch her so she eased against him again, as if by accident. As he reversed out past her into the living room, stepping after him she added, 'Just a minute, please, Zak, I'm hopelessly right-handed.'

Smiling, lifting her chin to bare her neck, she said, 'Could you undo the zip, please?'

As he reached out, he smiled.

'Thanks,' she grinned back, tugging to free herself from her anorak, deliberately making a meal of it. 'Ouch! Oh drat. Ouch! Oh, Zak, I need you to help me out of this anorak.'

'Yeah, sure, how's that?'

'Fabulous. Thanks. Great. And the fleece now. Could you unzip it too, please?'

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Working together, they extricated her from her fleece and again she smelled coal tar soap from him.

'Thanks again. Oh, and could you open this and pour some bubbles liquid into the bath for me, Zak?'

This meant he had to squeeze past her again, which she enjoyed.

'Thanks. And a squirt of shampoo on my hand? No, a little more, please. Thanks.'

She smiled coyly, 'What *would* I have done without you to help, I wonder?' She could have heeled off her fashion boots but instead added, 'Zak, be a dear and pull these off for me, please?'

He knelt and, smiling up at her, eased them off. The socks came with them, sodden.

'I do have wellies somewhere in my boxes, new ones, Hunters.'

'Yes, I think wellies are what's needed for this weather.. There's a song about Wellies, I think?'

'Yeah, my dad used to sing it!'

If it wisnae fur yer wellies, where wid ye be,

You'd be in the hospital or infirmarree.

'That's all I can remember.'

'Hey, you sound very like Billy Connolly when you sing like that. And you have a nice alto voice, like my Mum.'

'Thanks.'

With her fleece removed, Katia was dressed in a figure-hugging, front-buttoned red blouse and, dark blue hipster chinos, three-quarter length, a combination which she felt displayed her curves to good effect. It was one of her favourite casual outfits and quite appropriate in this setting, she hoped.

He smiled back, 'I'll drape this on the radiator over here, OK?'

'Yeah, beside yours, yeah, great idea. *Side by side*, just like Flannigan and Allen, eh? Oh, Zak - could you decant the socks and throw them into the washing machine then lean those boots against the radiator too, please?'

Wearing a grin, he complied and was almost at once back at his post leaning on the living room radiator, staring at her as she posed just inside the doorway, now with her top three buttons undone to reveal a deep cleavage and the frilly edges of her bra. Katia

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knew she was being overt, pushing herself forward too much but now Zak was near, she did not want him to leave.

Leering her boldest 'come hither' smile at him and toying with the next button on her blouse she said, 'Oh, thanks, Zak, you're a star, my knight in shining armour!'

Zak could not hold Katia's hot gaze. Looking at his feet, he mumbled, 'Eh, eh, right, gotcha.'

She turned away, rubbing the shampoo into her hair, waiting for the bath to fill, deliberately leaving the door wide open.

'Kat, the water, it's running hot OK?'

'Yeah, fine but the flow is slow, is that normal?'

'Yeah, it could take ten minutes to fill it, maybe more.'

Loosening her blouse buttons entirely, she called over her shoulder, 'Oh, well, at least the water is piping hot.'

Spinning to reveal her black silk bra fully, she caught him staring, ogling. Although it was clear Zak was enjoying her flirting, she knew she should tone it down a notch, give him space to take the lead. The bold approach had worked with Darrell. There was no rush; these storms could last for days and, well, . . .it just might happen.

We could share a glass or two of wine and then, who knows?

Maybe, if it went well after her bath, they might get to the stage of a gentle snog, to set the scene for later, when her arm and wrist were not so painful.

Katia's smile split into a grin and Zak grinned too, sheepishly.

'Seems to be not too bad, the leak in the heating system. I suspect it might be small, just a dribble. I could check if you like, do you have any spanners? I have them back in my truck. Maybe the pliers on my Leatherman might work.'

'Really? Oh, that would be so helpful but maybe we should leave well enough alone, for tonight anyway? I mean, we can always keep topping it up, the pressure. If you fiddle with the joints they might leak worse and the boiler might go off again. I had that problem once in my flat, in Glasgow. Flooded my neighbour below, big insurance job, lost my no claims bonus.'

'Yeah, you're right, Kat. So far it looks like the pressure's holding up fine. Let's leave well enough alone. I'll top it up if it fails and again after your bath, right? Tomorrow, I'll search for leaks. Maybe we'll just leave it running all night for you, help heat the place up? Leaks are usually worse when the system cools down. What d'you think?'

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'Yeah, great. No neighbours to flood here though, just us, No one else for miles, just old Angus at the road end.'

'Angus?'

'Yeah, my adopted uncle, my Granny's old flame from a million years ago, before she married Grampa.'

'Oh, an *uncle*. An *old* uncle. Right, gotcha.'

'Yes, I agree, we should keep the heating on all night and try to steam out the dampness, eh? We *do* want to be warm and cosy, I mean both of us, right?'

'Yeah, yeah. Warm and cosy. Right, gotcha!'

They exchanged smiles again and she twirled away into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar, making her visible from where he stood, she hoped. Although the new bathroom radiator was hot to the touch, the room was still cool, filled with steam. She reached up and pulled the cord to start the electric fan heater.

This mist creates an air of mystery.

She glanced and saw he had moved away to improve his sightline, now standing with his bottom against the radiator, his hands spread on top of it, his feet apart, smiling as he watched her. She lowered her head as if to check her nails, took a quick peek at the naughty bits inside his tight pants and saw they had responded. Her strategy was working, just as it had with Darrell on that first evening so long ago when it all kicked off for them.

In the mist with her back to him, searching in her toilet bag for her favourite perfume, her eye caught the strip of contraceptive pills; she grinned, happy she had decided to keep taking them, just in case. She applied a few generous squirts of perfume to the water and a tiny squirt to her cleavage. The whole sequence had only taken a few seconds and, she hoped, would have seemed natural. In her peripheral vision, she saw only his vague outline but could feel he was staring hard at her.

Another slab of wind hit the croft, tugging at the roof, attempting to heave the corrugated sheets from their fixings. Involuntarily, Katia glanced up at the bathroom ceiling. Once again the flue emitted its banshee protest as the wind veered and an unexpected light spattering of hailstones rattled against the tiny bathroom window.

Over the noise of the storm, Zak called out, 'Hey, is it always this wild out here in the Hebrides? Fantastic, isn't it?'

Katia turned and moved to the bathroom door, posing for him. Another detonation of wind hit the weather side of the croft, this one accompanied by a strident cacophony of

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hailstones drumming ferociously against the living room window and strafing the metal roof.

She caught him staring at her cleavage. He immediately looked away, embarrassed, which she thought was sweet. Pretending not to notice, she raised her left arm to lean on the bathroom door post, looking up at the ceiling, framing a different pose from her repertoire, imagining herself to be naked.

'Yeah, but don't worry; these old crofts have all been strengthened to withstand extreme weather like this. In the past corrugated roof sheets were held down with simple, twisted galvanised wire fixings. After Grampa died, Dad had those replaced with stronger, modern stainless-steel fastenings.'

Zak was looking upwards, smiling, which gave her a further chance to view his him again. Her mind was racing. The words which came were *gorgeous, fit, strong, virile*.

Oh, Kat, why did you ever fancy Darrell?

The answer came back immediately:

He fancied you first and you were lonely, desperate.

Her memory pinged back three years: Darrell had telephoned to say he was running late and she would be his last delivery in about fifteen minutes. After a quick shower, she had applied a slash of red lipstick, perfumed herself, lit scented candles, laid out a selection of nibbles and put on Rod Stewart's *Vagabond Heart* CD to play low in the background. Dressed in her new kimono-style silk pyjamas, her proffered drink had kicked off their first romantic evening.

When Zak spoke, she was jerked back to reality.

'Amazing. Truly wild. Nature in the raw.'

'Yeah, I suppose so, if you like wild and scary,' she replied, moving towards Zak, aiming to encroach further into his personal space again. 'Grampa used to say it was God's way of telling us who's the big boss.'

'Right. Gotcha. OK then,' said Zak, 'I'll leave you to it,' while attempting to step away from her before realising he was trapped in the corner of the room with nowhere to go.

Swishing passed him to the transit boxes sent ahead with her clothes and personal items, she failed to find her kimono pyjamas. Instead, she settled for a fleecy onesie, as yet unworn, bought recently online in case the new boiler failed to heat the house as she hoped it would. While searching for her slippers and dressing gown, she saw her red thong, the one used when posing for the Life Drawing classes at Strathclyde University.

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On impulse, she smuggled it into the bundle. There was other sexy lingerie in the cartons she might want in due course, if things went to plan.

'Zak, I need to find towels, bed linen and other things. Please, please, would you be a dear and get a knife from the kitchen and slit all these Amazon cartons open for me? Using a sharp knife with my left hand could end in disaster.'

'Sure, no worries.'

Heading back to the bathroom, she squeezed past him a second time, hoping the perfume would do its promised magic and "Captivate". Surely, he must have got the message. At the door, she turned, her smile tending towards a leer, let her eyes wander slowly down to his tightly packed groin area and back to his face. Hands on hips and feet apart, he was looking directly at her, grinning boldly. Katia was certain she had clicked.

'Look, Zak, why sleep outside in that cold, draughty campervan. Listen to it, the weather's getting worse. You would be miserable out there. Why not sleep in the spare bedroom? Look, I have to be honest, that bed's only a narrow single and the mattress is a bit lumpy but I've got fresh bedclothes somewhere in these Amazon boxes.'

'Thanks, Kat, that's very generous of you. I'll get my stuff from the campervan.'

'Great! But, hey, Zak, look, I have to be honest, it's maybe a tiny bit damp in there as it's not been used for ages. Come to think of it, it must be years, actually.'

'No worries, thanks.'

'Honestly, Zak, that spare bed, it's dreadful, embarrassing, really. You see, until the new heating system, there was no radiator in there, so, well, you can imagine. Actually, I'm planning to dump it as soon as I get a chance but I haven't got around to it yet. My idea is to do the room up as my planning and design workshop, maybe get a new sofa bed for visitors. Look, I'll tell you what. Why don't we put these two armchairs together, opposite each other? I used to do that when I was a wee girl. Once the heating kicks in fully, this room should be much warmer for you, right?'

'No worries. Really, Kat, I'm sure the bedroom will be fine, thanks. Honestly, I don't mind it cooler, no not a bit. I betcha I've slept in much worse places over the years.'

'But look at you, Zak, you're frozen near to death. You should have a bath too, or a shower. I've got plenty towels. Go on, why not sleep on the armchairs? It'll be cosy for us. I'll be just through the door, in my bedroom.'

She could see the surprise in his eyes. The tiny smile on his lips changed to puzzlement. He looked down at his feet, shaking his head slightly.

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'Right. Gotcha. But no, thanks, Kat. Look, I'm sure the bedroom will be fine, honest. I'll go and bring in my sleeping bag, right?'

She realised she had pushed it too far, too quickly but she pitched again.

'OK. OK. Look, I don't know about you but I'm hungry. I've got some microwave meals in the cool box. Oh, I forgot, it's in the campervan. Zak, What d'you say?'

'Right. Gotcha. Thanks. I'll get it then, the cool box, OK?'

'Great! Great! Look, there's a microwave somewhere in this lot. Talk about cardboard city.' To make sure he got a good look, she leaned over and pretended to search.

'It should be here somewhere. Maybe you could find it? It'll definitely be in an Amazon box.' She glanced up and saw he was focused on her breasts.

Bingo!

Rising, taking a pace closer to him, she said, 'So, Zak, are you really hungry too?'

His hands were covering his groin, an act of concealment, she was certain. Her heart began to pound. The faint tang of red carboloc soap reached her nostrils, definitely not imagined.

'Yeah, I didn't fancy eating on the ferry, all that heaving about made me feel queasy. I had to get out on deck, get a view of the horizon. Watching the approach to the pier from the front viewing area was spectacular. It's an amazing vessel, isn't it?'

""*The Viking*""? Yeah, I suppose so. Oh, did I say, the cool box's still in the campervan?'

'Yeah. Yeah! Right! Gotcha. Cool box and microwave. Yeah. Yeah. No worries. I'm on the case. Leave it to me, Kat.'

'Great. Thanks. I'll just grab a bath then, OK? See if it helps my knees and shoulder.'

'Right, gotcha. Hey, Kat, look, I mean, are you sure you're OK with me inside? I really don't mind sleeping in the camper. I'm used to roughing it, honest. I'll be . . .'

'No, Zak, *please!* I'll feel much safer with you inside and it'll be so much better for both of us, yeah? What I mean is, the place'll soon warm up, won't it?'

'OK then, if you're sure. This is really great of you, Kat. So, I'll get my things in, and the cool box, yeah?'

'Great. With you sleeping here, well, it'll be much more intim . . ., eh, I mean, *cosier* for you Zak, right?'

'Yeah. Yeah. . . . That's it, *cosier.*'

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Before she could stop them, the words escaped, '*Yes, cosier. Absolutely!*'

She glanced up to his face. They were both grinning.

'Oh, and Zak,' Katia said, pointing, 'while you're getting sorted, if you fancy a glass of white wine, there's lots of nice stuff in those boxes.'

'Ah-ha, ha-ha! Thanks, but no, I never drink alcohol. I did try it once and hated it. But look, I'm not hung up about it or anything, so please, you go ahead, if you want some.'

'No, you're quite right, Zak. It's probably not a good idea for me either, not with paracetamol in me, is it?'

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Tête-à-Tête

After a luxurious soak, Katia emerged from the steamy bathroom, smelling floral. Her various pains had reduced to dull aches and she was feeling much better. The house was warming up nicely and the aroma of garlic bread and lasagne drifting through from the kitchen was tantalising.

Earlier, standing in the warm swish of blown air from the electric wall heater over the mirror, she had squirted a 'tincture' of *Captivate* behind each ear then added tiny squirts underarm, under her breasts and to her bush, breathing in the heady scent and dreaming ahead.

Fresh make-up applied with her left hand was a mess and she removed it with a cleansing wipe. Despite the pain, she started over with her right hand to re-do it properly, as if for a big date. Gripping and manipulating the lipstick was too painful. Again she used wipes before changing to a simpler fresh-faced look with only a lightly applied hint of lipstick. As an afterthought, she searched her make-up bag for the complementary shade she wanted, then added the merest touch of dark purple eyeshadow for drama.

Katia had always thought her cherub face was her best feature, framed by naturally curly black hair. Now, with her hair damp, it gave her a 'waif in a storm' look which she thought suited her situation perfectly. Working cautiously, suffering occasional jabs of pain, she had eased herself into her pale lavender onesie thinking the garment would add to her appearance of vulnerability.

Ah, Kat, this is not such a bad choice after all. But God, it's itchy. What is it made from - Badgers' pelts?

Using her make-up mirror, she practiced this waif look with her eyes, adding a slight downturn of her lips to make a tiny moue. No matter how hard she tried, Katia found she could not hold her 'waif look' against the smile which kept playing on her lips at the memory of Zak grinning back at her from beside the radiator, his arms akimbo and the evident bulge inside his lycra pants.

With the afterglow from her bath, she judged herself to be 'nearly fabulous'.

From the bathroom door, she looked across at the wine cartons, unopened. She had hoped he would have popped a couple of bottles into the fridge to chill but then scolded herself:

No, Kat. Leave it. Not on top of the paracetamols. Get a grip!

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Popping her head around the kitchen door, she beamed at him. He was in the act of putting her Gran's hand-knitted tea cosy over her new *Red Poppies* Majolica teapot when the thought struck her. She glanced back into the living room; several Amazon boxes were open and one of the larger boxes was stuffed with packing paper and bubble wrap from his tidy up.

God, tell me he hasn't found that dildo selection I ordered from Amazon.

Her face flushed.

Zak said, 'Feeling better?'

She turned to face him down, her thoughts chasing each other. He was grinning.

What is he thinking? That I'm kinky? So what! I am kinky! I like being kinky! And hey, he's a bit kinky too, displaying himself to me so overtly.

She grinned back then replied, 'Yes, thanks. And ravenous!'

'Good. I'm not too keen on cooking with a microwave so I gave your new oven a good wipe down and used it instead. I've packed all the perishables from the cool box into the fridge and freezer, OK?'

'Thanks, you're a star. Oh, Zak, please, before we dish up, would you give me a hand? I've got an idea.'

After a search by Zak, under her close direction, they found the transit box with the scented candles. She selected a large, squat one with three wicks. The box also contained her *Wee Willie Winkie* candle holders in a selection of sizes. The windshields were made of sintered glass tubes through which the flames gave off a sparkling rainbow effect. Although not obvious to the casual observer, it was the porosity of these tubes which made the candle design so special, allowing combustion air to flow inwards in a controlled manner. For safety, the base of the candle was spiked onto a deep, extra wide dish fashioned with a deep annulus into which the tube slotted. The dish had an ornate looped handle, allowing the candle to be carried safely and easily. Every tube and dish combo had been handmade, the dishes embossed with flower patterns.

Before lighting the wicks with a gas wand, she placed the candle holder dished base on the tiled hearth surround, adding a cupful of water as an extra safety measure before sprinkling dried flower petals on the water.

'Spectacular,' said Zak. 'Hey, and the glass tube, it's full of tiny holes, right? That's cunning. So, let me guess, you made this, right?'

'Yes, I don't mean to boast but the original, the prototype if you like, won me first prize in the second-year show.'

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'I've never seen anything as beautiful and brilliant as this. It's a true work of art and craftsmanship. Absolutely stunning!'

'Yeah, good, eh? I have them in all sorts of diameters and heights. I got the bug, an obsession. On the run up to Christmas that year, I was working on them almost non-stop and sold dozens of them from an arty gift shop called *Nancy Smillie's*, near my flat in Glasgow. I even took to making my own artisanal candles but it was too messy, too time-consuming. Nowadays I buy them from *Shearer's Candles*. They're a Glasgow firm, one of the oldest candle-makers in the world and they do all sorts of sizes, colours and scents.'

'So, it was a real money-spinner, like my aquatics business.'

'Yeah. . . . Yeah. . . . Anyway, when it became more about production, I jacked it in. To be honest, it was affecting my studies and other projects. However, I've seen copycat versions of these on the Internet. And I know him, the guy who's selling them. He was in my year but dropped out. Peter the Prat, we used to call him behind his back. His are ordinary, nothing like mine.'

'Right, gotcha. Cool design. Clever. Very clever. Well done you!'

'Zak, switch off the ceiling light for me, please. . . Thanks. . . Ah, no. As I guessed, not bright enough. Let's light a few more.'

Sitting in her armchair, the one which had been her Gran's, she asked Zak to unwrap several others from their bubble-wrap, choosing their diameters and heights according to her concept then getting him to place them around the mother candle, creating a family group.

While he was doing this, she eased down the zip on her onesie to reveal a hint of cleavage. Although the garment was still a bit itchy, she was enjoying the roughness of the material against her nipples.

When the group of five candles was lit, she had him adjust their positions precisely to the millimetre to create the lazy, flickering rainbow effect she wanted. The scent of ylang-ylang filled the room, one of her favourites. She had read it was the most effective aroma for arousing passion in males.

'Zak, would you do me a favour and take a photo of these, please? I want to get a record of this installation. I plan to call it "Romantic Rainbows". It's such a pity we couldn't capture the scent as well.'

'What if we made the image into a postcard impregnated with the scent, sell them to gift shops to advertise your studio, and maybe ask that candlemaker outfit to sell them or use them as point of sale pop-in-the bag flyers? Kinda double benefit advertising. What d'you think?'

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'Hey, Zak. That's brilliant. Truly. Why didn't I think of that!'

'OK. I'll do a selection from different angles and do a few of those 3-D imaging shots using the App on my iPhone.'

'Brill!'

Kneeling in front of her, he took close-up images which he processed with the phone App then held the resulting 3-D image up for her inspection. Leaning forward, as if to get a better view, Katia gently placed her left hand on his shoulder, at the same time wishing she had squirted more *Captivate*.

He repeated this process several times and she kept her hand in place, gently squeezing and rubbing his shoulder.

God, his muscles are as firm as rocks!

Rising, Zac passed her his iPhone to allow her to consider the options. Keeping her eyes down, Katia could feel his eyes inspecting her cleavage. Rolling up onto his tiptoes and stretching his arms above his head she heard him murmuring very quietly:

Awesome.

Another glance at his groin area produced a wide grin:

The ylang-ylang is working.

'So, time to eat? OK?', he said.

'Yes, please. Thanks.'

He delivered her plate on a small wooden tray which had been her Gran's, 'Hope you don't mind, I used the invoices taped to the Amazon boxes to find your new pots, pans and dishes, OK? That's how I found the teapot. But I didn't open other items in that carton, you know, personal items, promise.'

Katia felt her face turn crimson, glanced up to his eyes and knew for certain Zak had found the box containing the dildos. Staring at her slippers, she decided it was good he was not a natural deceiver. Darrell had been sneaky, often telling practiced and plausible tarradiddles, usually to show himself in a good light.

Her mind whirled forwards to a bedroom scene:

So, why not? Maybe we could use my new toys together, like the 'sword-fighting' couple in the promo video?

Zak said, 'Oh, I couldn't find any new cutlery so these knives and forks are from the kitchen dresser. I gave them all a good hot, soapy wash as they were a bit, well, grimy. I

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assume the water's safe. Yeah? I've made tea. It's de-caffeinated Earl Grey. Did I say I'm normally caffeine free, especially late in the evening? I always carry a box of decaff tea bags with me, wherever I go.'

She wanted to add:

And a big box of condoms, I hope.

They sat opposite each other in large, well-worn but still comfortable armchairs which were fifty-years old, eating from their laps and drinking tea from ancient china cups perched on the scuffed wooden armrests. This meal was from the *M&S Healthy Options* range, chosen on impulse after reading an article on Quorn and how to save the planet by cutting down on meat-eating. After struggling to cut the pasta left-handed with the edge of her fork, she gave up and scooped up her first ever taste of vegetarian lasagne using her teeth to snip off piping hot mouthfuls.

'Mmm, not bad at all,' she said. 'I used to cook a lot but lately I've started to eat ready-meals more, just laziness, really.'

'Yeah, and a lot more expensive too. I agree this lasagne is just about OK. But, being honest, I like to eat fresh food like vegetable stir fries using pumpkin oil and the smallest touch of chilli oil. I'm quite into Japanese and Asian cooking. Actually, my flatmate used to say I was "Zak, King of the Wok."'

'Me too, I like stir fries with chilli prawns. And I simply adore spicy, garlicky food.'

'Yeah, prawns and langoustines are a favourite with me too. But I read online that the best and tastiest fresh ones are ridiculously expensive, way beyond what local restaurants and hotels can afford. Anyway, the blog said that all over Britain, shellfish are landed on a pre-sold basis and shipped directly by refrigerated lorries to Spain and France.'

'Yeah, I know, they send them from here on Verstaall, from all over the Hebrides, actually.'

'Kat, did you know frozen so-called 'British' prawns on offer in supermarkets have thousands of airmiles in them?'

'Do they?'

'Yeah, the UK wholesalers fly them half-way around the world to process them cheaply before re-freezing them to send back here for final inspection, sorting and re-packaging. As a result, they are virtually tasteless, a mere shadow of freshly caught. Sorry, I'm on my soapbox here.'

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'No, Zak, you're right, we all eat too much processed food without thinking about it. Now I'm here to stay, I must get back to real cooking again.'

'Yeah, agreed, fresh is best. Look, Kat, just to be clear, I'm not an extremist about food, not really. But I am very picky, I'm afraid. My first choice is organic, free of additives, e-numbers and with minimal air or road miles. Actually, it's not as hard as it seems. You should try it.'

'Yeah, I agree, Zak, organic, that's the best plan, one hundred percent.'

'D'you know, I read an online article on food and health last week which said how fit we are and how to stay free of ailments and illnesses is eighty percent dependent on what we eat and only twenty percent on exercise. The article said the important issue for healthy living is staying clear of addictive substances of all kinds.'

As Zak ploughed on with his sermon, Katia sneaked a peek at the boxes of wine:

Oh, dear! Not zesty white wine, surely? Could I ever give it up?

'Very importantly, we must avoid meat which contains unwanted chemicals and residues of antibiotics and other prophylactic medications. We should support farmers who stick rigidly to organic farming methods for all kinds of domesticated animals, especially poultry. Turkeys, it seems, are to be avoided as they need to be stuffed with all sorts of medications to keep them alive in captivity.'

'Yeah, Zak, I agree, eating directly from nature sounds really good. Gran used to grow all her own vegetables. I plan to do that too, maybe even soft fruits, strawberries and the like. The machair soil is highly productive. Using seaweed as a fertiliser is supposed to be amazing. Actually, I don't know much about it yet but I plan to find out how to do it. Although it's wet and windy out here, it's almost always mild. According to *Facebook*, polytunnels really work, and lots of people around here are using them nowadays.'

'Is anyone growing mushrooms? Or herbs? Or pumpkins, for the oil? One flatmate I shared with, Edward, was a botanist and a rabid vegan and nudged me into becoming nearly vegetarian.'

'But not a full vegetarian, not if you eat fish?'

'No, you're right, I'm not a pure in the full sense as I do eat dairy and eggs, in moderation. As I said, I love sushi and I'll eat wild meat, game and the like but nothing farmed with antibiotics and fertilisers. So long as it's wild and healthy, I'll try it, nature's harvest.'

'So, what about the cruelty of killing an animal, a fish, for example?'

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'No problem. Fish are a great source of protein. The seas are teeming with life, all sorts of fish and shellfish. No shortages out there, managed sensibly. If it's from a sustainable source and plentiful, why not? Your sheep, they're free range, right? You see, Kat, it's about *healthy eating*. I believe variety is the key. Anyway, Edward and I were in a flat, no garden. As an experiment, we devised a hydroponics system, only on a small scale. After we mastered the technique, we couldn't eat the huge amounts we grew, virtually free. Within a couple of months, we were supplying dozens of people. We asked only for a nominal donation to our eco-world charity.'

'Yeah, hydroponics, there's an idea I should check out, yeah, sounds cool.'

'No problem, I'll show you how to do it. I'm prepared to bet there is a market for exotic mushrooms and herbs out here on Verstaall. I could get Edward to source a starter pack and post them to you, if you want. We could order the rest of the kit online. Think about it, Kat. Think of the effect on your shopping bills.'

While he was delivering his big speech, she was thinking:

Oh no, he's a zealot! But he looks so cute when he's in full flight. And he's clever, educated, not a bit like Darrell and his on-line gaming obsessions. Oh, God, Kat, don't let this one slip through your fingers.

Slip through your fingers! Stop it!

Oh God, look at him, he's perfect!

'Look, Kat, what I mean is, the cost of anything on the shelves is strongly related to the amount of processing, yeah? And the addition of expensive chemicals to give the stuff a longer shelf life, right? Not to mention the cost of transportation. Your polytunnel products, mushrooms, herbs and the like, could be a really good earner, agreed? Sold locally, they would have almost zero food miles. Is there a farmers' market or equivalent in the area?'

'I suppose there must be but I'm not sure. Maybe Angus would know. Or Auntie Mary, down in South Verstaall. She seems to know everything that's going on, even though she's not on email or *Facebook*. In fact, she doesn't even have a phone, not even a landline. She still believes phones are used to spy on us, even when they're unplugged from the wall socket.'

'Well, Kat, that's not such a daft idea, really. To avoid tracking I keep my phone switched off with the battery removed when I'm not actually using it. I strongly recommend you do the same.'

Zak then launched into details about multi-base signal tracking and she stopped listening.

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The Pontiff speaks, she thought, suppressing a groan:

Who cares if they are tracking me? There's no way I could live without Facebook. Anyway, out here with no signal, they'll never be able to 'watch' me. The BT website says we'll all get a better signal when they get the new Superhighway Fibre Network in place, in a few months, if it happens. They've been promising that for years.

More importantly, how does he feel about dogs? He's not allergic to them, is he?

She had great difficulty in eating with her left hand. After a few minutes of watching her struggle, Zac offered to spoon it to her, casting her in the role of an invalid or perhaps a child. When she protested, he used her knife and fork to chop the pasta into manageable bite-sized pieces. She had not planned this scenario but the effect was to bring them close for a few minutes. His coal tar scent was comforting, reassuring.

Their simple meal was a double-portion of lasagne, three slices of garlic bread, sipping their way through two pots of hot but weak decaffeinated Earl Grey tea without milk or sugar. Normally, Katia would have eaten this entire amount by herself, plus a dessert washed down with a bottle and a half of wine, and perhaps a mug of sweet milky coffee, never de-caff tea.

She waited for a chance to interject.

'Yeah, I've heard of tracking. But, no, well, I have mine on all the time. Only, I suppose out here, where we get a weak and unreliable signal, it doesn't matter, does it? But hey, earlier, when you asked about my sheep, I wanted to ask, do you know anything about dogs? My Gran had three collies. They were brilliant. I've always wanted a dog. How about you, Zak?'

'We used to have a dog, once. Dad got her for Vernon, for his birthday from the rescue place. Vern was too young, only about five or six, I think, and soon lost interest. When we got her she was called Daisy, a Heinz variety. Dad renamed her Bee-Bees aka Baked Beans. She was quite old, slowing down but smart, streetwise, sneaky, always stealing food. Bee-Bees was banished from the kitchen but she still managed to sneak in and steal which drove Amelia wild. The old girl went everywhere with Dad, like his shadow, sitting beside him in that old truck back there in the bog. His co-pilot he called her. When Bee Bees. . . .'

Katia butted in: 'Zak, sorry, who's Amelia?'

'Amelia Winston, my kinda step-mum. She's a wonderful person and I love her to bits but she gets a bit flaky at times. My Dad and Amelia are not actually married so Vern is not a real stepbrother. He's not so bright but he's a good lad, most of the time. And he's a worker, like Amelia. Like Dad too, when he's not on a bender. But, hey, most families are crocked, aren't they?'

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Oh, yes, too true! May as well get it out now.

'Yeah, I suppose. I don't remember my mother, she died when I was young. My Dad was alcoholic and bi-polar. Long periods of depression then short brilliant highs. In the end, during his years of kidney dialysis, it was all so sad, so desperately sad. Dad did everything for me. He was a brilliant, brilliant father. His mantra was if I really wanted something I must never give up on it. He called it 'stick-ability', to fight for a thing regardless of the odds stacked against you. It's why I'm out here, doing this, trying for what I really, really want, even though it's a bit scary. It's now or never, really.'

'Kat, you talk about your father in the past tense?'

'Eight years next month. Oh Zak, to be honest, I really miss him. I think you would have liked him. When he was younger, he was fit, like you. It was in his genes to be an alcoholic, he said. Anyway, let's leave it, OK?'

'Yeah, gotcha! Alcohol can be a curse. It's insidious too, accepted and promoted by our culture.'

'Zak, I'm not sure from what you said if you like dogs. Do you? I've never actually had one of my own, Dad wouldn't allow it, not in a city, especially in a flat with no garden. Come to think of it, a dog was probably the only thing he ever denied me. So, Zak, *do* you like dogs or not?'

'Well, what I was saying, about Bee-Bees, yeah, we all loved her. When she eventually passed on, Dad went on a bender for nearly two weeks. Amelia cried too, the old softy. Actually, I think it was her fault for spoiling Bee-Bees, feeding her all the wrong stuff which meant the old girl suffered from flatulence, filled the house with her pong. Yeah, it was a relief for all of us when Bee-Bees died. Dad wanted to get another dog but Amelia would not let him. I stayed out of the argument.'

As he was rambling, Kat was becoming impatient:

Answer the bloody question, Zak, this is mega-important.

'So, Zak, *do* you like dogs?'

'Yeah, I do like them but in my view they should not be just pets. A proper dog should work for a living, like your Gran's collies working her sheep, or guide dogs and the like. And no processed meat from cans. That stuff is full of rubbish, despite the advertising about how wonderful it is, actually it's the dregs from the abattoir floor, garbage pumped full of weird stuff. Like humans, canines should eat a balanced diet, with plenty vegetables and natural protein, fish and eggs, everything unsalted.'

Bingo! He likes dogs!

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'You seem to know a lot about them.'

'Frank, one of my flatmates at Abertay was a newly qualified vet. He used to rant about the animals who turned up at the vet school, grossly obese, sometimes irretrievably so. "Poisoned by love" he used to call it.'

Edward, Frank? Is Zak gay? Or bi-sexual? Ugh!

'Frank said some of the owners were spending over twenty pounds a week on food and treats, stuffing their pets, making them ill. Think about it, over a thousand pounds a year per animal plus pet insurance and vet bills. By contrast, keeping salt-water tropical fish costs peanuts.'

'Sorry, you've lost me. Fish? Like in an aquarium?'

'Yeah, OK. So, you can't teach fish to herd sheep, right? But they are very calming and therapeutic to watch. Much better than television, in my view. Fishkeeping is a very popular hobby, all around the world. And ultra-low energy. But, Kat, look. . . .'

While they continued to eat, Katia listened carefully to his story, studying his face, noting how his hand often drifted up to hide his odd eye, another reminder of her father. Over the meal, she learned of his passion for marine biology, discovering he was a specialist in cetaceans and that his PhD had been on "Hierarchies within the Moray Firth pod of bottle-nosed dolphins". As he described his thriving hobby cum business, he became animated, taking her step by step through the processes of breeding and selling salt-water tropical fish over the internet, sending them live, in special containers, all over Europe. Russia, she learned, was a sales hotspot where keeping tropical fish had become a popular hobby over the last few years.

Katia was a quick, urgent eater and was finished long before Zak, who savoured and chewed his food, as her father had done, reminding her of his scoldings at her greediness and constant snacking between meals.

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Mindfulness

When he returned after clearing the plates away, Zak said, 'Kat, after a meal, I always take time out to meditate, to concentrate on digesting what I've eaten. Just five to ten minutes. Do you mind?'

'No, go ahead. I tried Yoga once but, well, you know, it didn't stick.'

'I think it's best to avoid 'labels' like Yoga with its connotations of mysticism. What I do is 'Mindfulness'. Inner stillness is the key. Silence helps. The idea is to let your mind drift at first. Then, when you're calm, think about what you want to achieve. The concept is, over time, what you focus on might come true. Why not try it?'

He leaned back, closed his eyes and let his feet flop apart, resting his heels on the bizarre coffee table her grandfather had fashioned from a driftwood log.

Keeping her eyes on his closed lids, she eased the zip of her onesie down another inch. Seated directly across from him, kicking off her slippers, mirroring his pose, she too hitched her heels onto the coffee table, near to his, in the hope his foot might 'accidentally' touch hers. Her senses tingling with anticipation, she shut her eyes but after a minute or two sneaked a glance, slightly disappointed he had not noticed her 'offer'. His eyes were still closed which gave her the opportunity to study him.

His feet were bare, toenails clean, neatly trimmed. His legs were strong, well-muscled, his bulge, now softer, still prominent inside his tight pants.

The notion came, exciting her:

He is exhibiting himself to me and quite deliberately so.

Her eyes moved upward: his torso, chest and shoulders were also well-muscled.

He is super-fit. Oh God, what is he thinking of me, 'dumpy and frumpy'? I really must get shot of at least two stone, get into trim, cut down on the booze. God, Kat, the amount you are drinking every night is madness. Watch out or you will end up like Dad.

A violent gust slammed against the croft: the roof whined and shuddered. From the chimney, the balloon-sock screamed as air was forced past it into the room, making the flames on the candles flutter. Zak had pumped up the windsock as hard as he could but the hand pump which had been provided with it was tiny, as if intended for a child's bicycle.

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At the sound, Zak's hands twitched slightly then calmed. Resting on the arms of the chair, they were open, cupped upwards, as if receiving. On his left wrist he wore a fancy watch, with a large dial, a diver's watch, he had explained, resistant to fifty metres. His fingers were long and thin, with perfectly manicured nails. These are artistic hands, she decided. He must have the good sense to use gloves when he does manual labour.

Katia had always been attracted to men with beautiful hands. Perhaps this was a reaction to her father's, whose nails had always been broken and torn, his skin grimy with oil and grease. Darrell had been a nail-biter, a trait which she had grown to detest.

Zak's face was square, strong, most definitely masculine. His thick, gold-red hair was held tightly with a black elastic cord. He was quite hairy, his legs and arms covered with a heavy fluff of soft, blond hairs. His eyebrows were bushy, a shade darker than his hair, like wet sand, the same colour as his neat, wiry goatee. His long sideburns trimmed in line with his large ear lobes were another echo of her father.

For the first time, she noticed the tiny gold writing on his tee-shirt, "Champion, Dundee Thistle Racing Club". The shirt was crew-necked but his chest hair spilled over the top, making her smile. Darrell had been almost bald, with only a few wispy hairs on his chest and elsewhere.

Zak looked perfectly relaxed, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth and eyes. She envied him, knowing she only seemed able to reach this level of calmness when she had over-indulged, half-way through a second bottle of wine. Maybe she could learn this 'Mindfulness' technique from him.

What is this gorgeous man thinking about? Naughty thoughts about me?

Imagining him naked, his manhood free of lycra, she felt a tingle down below, followed by a yearning leap and an itch which demanded attention. Moving slowly, watching his eyes to make sure she did not get caught in the act, she inched her left hand down between her thighs, covered it with a cushion and caressed herself, enjoying the pre-rush throb.

The next slash of wind brought a muffled crash from the side of the house, beyond the kitchen, a sound which coincided with another banshee whine from the chimney balloon. The candle flames fluttered inside their sleeves creating a psychedelic effect.

Zak was on his feet at once, moving to investigate. 'Stay there, Kat!' From the kitchen he called, 'No panic, it's the external door of the utility room. It blew open. I thought we had an intruder. Ah, right, here we are, that'll keep it shut meanwhile.'

Returning to join her he said, 'I've secured the door. It should hold until we can fix it. That Yale is ancient, knackered, unlockable. Should those Mackay guys not have replaced it? Should you not have a slip bolt as well? What about burglars?'

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'Burglars? No way. Burglary is almost unheard of on Verstaall. No one would ever get away with it anyway. Everyone knows everyone else's business. They watch each other's every move.'

'That Yale's snib is worn out too. I've tied it up with a cable tie I found on the floor. Look, OK, I know cable-ties are quick and useful but hey, why not use string or cord, lower energy and re-usable. I'll bring some from my truck, show you the best knots. Anyway, here we are, back to normal, safe and sound. We'll get you a new proper lock after the storm and I'll fix it for you. No worries.'

He keeps saying 'we'll' do this and that. Is it just a way of speaking or does he want to stay?

While Zak was fixing the door, Katia had eased the onesie zip down another inch. This was a game she used to play with Darrell, trying to distract him from watching a football match, often ending up nearly naked.

'Thanks, Zak, you're a star. Look, I know that old door needs replacing but, well, I was trying to keep the cost down. I *will* replace it someday, I suppose.'

Zak lowered himself into the chair, hitched up his heels and resumed his 'display' position, grinning at her, his eyes sneaking glances at her cleavage.

God, I hope he is not bi-sexual!

Checking his groin area, she grinned back, 'So, Zak, here we are, cosy again.'

'Yeah, out there it's really wild, amazing, fantastic. But cosy in here, right? So, Kat, you were saying everyone looks out for each other, do they?'

'Yes, I suppose they do but not intrusively. If help is needed, people soon find out and just turn up to help. Gran used to say it was a sort of communal telepathy.'

'Right, gotcha. So, it's like a proper community. Everyone helping each other? I like that idea.'

Another blast struck and again the flue screamed at them and the candles in the fireplace flickered. He looked up at the ceiling, smiling.

'Hey, this is a strong house, yeah? Cool! I guess it'll be amazing to walk on the beach after the storm, yeah? See what's been cast up?'

'Yeah, I love beachcombing. I use some of the things I find in my work. Did I tell you I'm a ceramicist?'

'Right, gotcha. Hey, so these storms sort of inspire your creativity, is that it?'

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'The actual storms? Mmm, I suppose they do. I've never thought of it like that before but, yes, perhaps they are a sort of trigger although what I like best is when they're over. You know what they say, 'after the storm comes the calm'. Well, I like the calm best.'

'How often do they happen?'

'A lot. Mostly I've only been here in summer but even then, it can be very windy. They say winter storms can last for days, sometimes weeks. Everything shuts down, people hibernate, watch TV, if they can get a satellite signal. This move to *Tigh na Mara* is an experiment and, to be honest, I'm a bit worried about living out here alone when it's like this. I don't know if I'll be able to stand it.'

'Hey, so you're *not* actually local?'

'No, not really. My Dad was from here, originally. This was my grandparents' place, the ancestral croft. It's been in the MacInnes family back into the mists of time.'

'Right, gotcha. You use this as a holiday place, is that it? Apart from the kitchen, it looks quite old-fashioned. Look, sorry, I didn't mean to . . .'

'No, it's OK. No, you're right. It was never fancy to start with and when my Grampa died, Gran just slowly declined. When she died, I inherited the croft. There's quite a lot of land and, as I said, I have a few hundred sheep out there too, somewhere. Angus, my neighbour, has taken them over for me meantime. He's been great during these last years, looking after Gran but he's nearly past it too. I think he's eighty-five. At her funeral, down in Glasgow, it was just Angus and me. I was surprised he came all that way to be with me, really surprised. He always says he hates Glasgow. He was a policeman there for thirty years, I think. Angus can be stern, gruff but he has a heart of gold. I think you would like him. Anyway, it was after the service he spilled the beans, while we sat in the bus station in Glasgow, waiting for his bus to catch the ferry home. For the first time, he told me Gran had been his one and only love. He said she was a beauty as a girl and everyone wanted her. When he plucked up the courage to ask, she turned him down for Grampa, because he had a better boat and a new radiogram. It was why Angus went off to Glasgow to join the police, he said.'

'Right, gotcha. So, you always wanted to live here, Kat, is that it?'

'Well, yes, in a way. I suppose the notion has been lurking in the back of my mind since graduating, way before Gran died. I've known for ages I was to inherit this place but I suppose actually getting it was the trigger, tipping me into thinking I might move here on a trial basis, see if it was possible to make a living. Although she never actually said anything, I think my Gran wanted me to take on her croft but her lawyer was dead against it. He wanted me to sell up, sure I couldn't hack it because of the isolation.'

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'Hey, lucky you, living on the edge of the mighty Atlantic Ocean. Fantastic. Just you and your sheep, like Little Bo Peep. What could be better than that?'

'Look, Zak, don't take the mickey, please. I know, I know, you don't need to say it. Part of me knows this move is a madness but the decision to give it a try was easy, really.'

'No, Kat, you've got me wrong. I was being serious. I know I've only seen it in the dark, through the rain and sleet but, hey, listen to it. The raw wildness, the energy of it. Fantastic. And I betcha there are miles of wild sandy beaches less than a stone's throw from here, right? I betcha you could walk for miles and not see another person. How cool is that?'

'Yes, yes. But let me finish, please. Look, what I'm trying to say is, I was only scraping a living as a part-time shop assistant in Nancy Smillie's, the shop where I sold my candle holders. I was juggling, earning barely enough to live while trying to find time to create my artwork at a cooperative where they gave me studio space for next to nothing. My hope is, being here, I will have the freedom to create, make items which sell at a real profit, enough to make it all worthwhile.'

It was on the tip of her tongue to say she had also earned extra money by posing nude for Life Drawing classes. Katia McInnes had always enjoyed showing herself off. Darrell had liked her to pose nude for him, although he would never reciprocate, preferring to stay clothed until the lights were switched off.

The lurid thought teased her:

Would you do nude for me, Zak? Please, please, please.

'Right, gotcha. So, you'll make and sell pottery to the tourists, right?'

'Sorry Zak, **not** pottery. No, I don't **do** pottery; well, not the usual touristy stuff. I do *ceramics* and, well, it's not a hobby. I have a degree from Glasgow School of Art, OK? And before you say it, I *know* I need to make a living, so I may have to compromise but only a little. You see, Zak, ceramics is my passion, my life. I'm not out here to 'escape', to run away from something. I see it as pushing myself, immersing myself in a creative environment and reducing distractions, if that makes any sense. Anyway, I've brought my kiln, it's in the van. It's only a small one. I mainly work on installations, you see, with several pieces as part of an ensemble or tableaux or mounted as a montage. Did I say I'm planning to convert the small bedroom into a studio and gallery. If things go as I hope they will, maybe I'll get a bigger kiln and well, you know, give it a proper go online, sell my artwork internationally, I hope.'

Having spouted her oft repeated rant, she was thinking:

*God, Kat, listen to yourself. **You** are a zealot too!*

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'Right, gotcha. "Ceramics". Yeah. Definitely.'

'And yes, I'll sell from the studio as well, of course. Trouble is, the narrow ridge beside the loch is a bit scary for some people. But I'll use the internet too, once I get a website. I know, it seems a bit of a challenge, doesn't it? Look, Zak, I'm not naïve, I can see this place is a bit old-fashioned and, to be honest, not that clean. Gran's eyesight was failing but, the truth is, she lost interest in everything after Grampa died.'

The storm intensity increased and the whine from the chimney windsock became almost continuous, filling the room, making it difficult to make themselves heard. The conversation lapsed and they pretended to close their eyes, sneaking glances and grinning when they caught each other looking at the same time.

Angus Kilgour could have told them it was currently Force 9, predicted to peak at Storm Force 11 overnight and keep coming at them for at least a week. The sheep had been hefting into nooks and crannies over the last two days, a sure sign another big blow was due.

The couple reverted to their previous situation, Zak in his Mindfulness position, his legs akimbo, his eyes closed a smile playing on his lips.

He is thinking of me!

Fantasizing, she imagined him stretched before her, naked. Keeping her eyes on his face and moving inch by inch, she eased her legs wider, positioned the cushion and put her hand to work, imagining it was his.

Another huge blow hit the cottage. His eyes flickered open and glanced at the roof, causing her to stop, frustrating her enjoyment. He was back from his semi-trance and her opportunity faded. Time passed in a round of glances and smiles as the storm rose to a staccato crescendo before easing back as its first depression raced through towards the ferry tied up at Hindness pier and on into the Minches.

When the noise had abated, it was Zak who spoke first.

'Ceramics! Right, gotcha. Look, Kat, I'm really sorry about the pottery remark . . .'

'No, it's OK. Hey, Zak, d'you want to know something amazing? From the minute Gran moved here, after she married Grampa, she hardly went more than a few hundred yards from her front door. She was only eighteen and Grampa was twenty-two. Until then, she had lived her entire life in South Verstaall but on the East side, sheltered from the winds. She loved it here, way out to the West. Unlike Grampa her family were weavers, When she was ten, her father died of tuberculosis, before they had antibiotics. Her mother, Gran-Gran Rebecca, moved her family back to her home at Hindness.'

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'In Hindness, she had been born and brought up in a tiny cottage next to the harbour, so I suppose fishing was in her genes. According to Uncle Angus, every man wanted to bride and bed her. After the move from South Verstaall, coming here was the longest journey she ever made in her life. This croft, her dogs, sheep, chickens and walking the shore, well, it was her whole life. Except for the radio: Gran loved the radio. Never wanted a television. Think about it; after she married, the furthest she ever went from here was the Prayer Stone, the big rock where your truck is stranded in the bog. Angus said she never wanted to go to Hindness or even to Midness. I asked her about it more than once and all she would ever say is:

"Och, I can go anywhere I want to go inside my head. But from what I hear of it on the radio, I am the lucky one to have this place to myself with no one bothering me."

'Right, gotcha.'

'When I was a wee girl, every year I was sent here from Glasgow for long summer holidays. I can remember those days like they were yesterday. When the weather was good, Gran and I used to go to the Prayer Stone, just the two of us, for a picnic. It was our favourite spot. I always had boiled egg, mashed with butter, spread on sliced white bread from the travelling shop-van which called twice a week. She cut all my sandwiches into tiny wee fingers without the crust. Sometimes I had a can of Coke. Grampa would get it from the hotel, only because I harped on about it so much. At the Prayer Stone, Gran sat watching me eat.

She smoked Capstan Full Strength but later, when they became difficult to get, she took to rolling her own or puffed on a pipe, like Grampa. Even now, if I close my eyes, I can still smell the stink of her tobacco. They were both heavy smokers but not drinkers, not like my Dad. She was eighty-two when she died of lung cancer. For the final weeks, they took her to Glasgow. Just as well she was medicated. She would have been terrified by the whole idea of being taken from here. You know how it is, they thought they were doing their best for her. At least it was easy for me, I could visit her every day in hospital and then the hospice. She died peacefully. Later, on the day which would have been her eighty-third birthday, we scattered her ashes on the shore just out there, Angus and me.'

'Right, gotcha. Amazing. Living in tune with nature. I like that idea.'

As they had been chatting, the storm had eased back to a steady gale, building its energy for a further onslaught.

'So, Kat, on that rather sad note, let's leave it for tonight, shall we? It's time for all good pumpkins to head for bed, right? I'm ready for mine, I can tell you. I'm whacked. I

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feel as if I've been on the go for days, weeks. Is it OK if I use the loo, brush my teeth? Ah, yes, I'd better check the boiler pressure first though.'

Tilting her head to one side, she tried for her waif moue hoping to get him back on track but he was gone, pulling the kitchen door closed behind him.

Oh God, Kat. You killed the romantic evening well and good there. Ah, but what if I called him through, get him to help me get my bedclothes organised. Proximity factor. Extra deep flash of cleavage. Go for it! Worth a try!

She eased herself upright and headed for what had been her grandparents' bedroom. Katia had replaced the old double with a new king-sized bed and mattress, one of the first things she had done after her Gran died. This new bed dominated the room, leaving only space for an old wardrobe, a tallboy and a tiny Ikea bedside table snuggled between the door and the bed. When she could afford it, she planned to install a full-length sliding door wardrobe.

Pushing open the bedroom door and switching on the light, she gasped. Zak had prepared the bed for her, all new items which he had taken from her Amazon boxes. His handiwork was perfect. He had even found her new soft-feel, tie-waist kimono dressing gown which he had laid out in an artistic sweep across the bed, its scarlet contrasting starkly with the white of the duvet cover.

Admitting defeat, she sighed:

Well, so much for that 'brilliant' idea. Anyway, how could a snog have worked with me like this? It would have been a disaster, like one of those mad Carry On hospital films.

Then another thought occurred:

All the time we were ogling each other, he knew this was waiting here for me. And why display the dressing gown like this? Is this part of a seduction scene he has imagined? Will he let me get settled and then tiptoe through and slip in beside me, give me a chance to be his scarlet woman? Best to play it cool and let him take the lead.

Readying herself for the night by applying skin cleanser then moisturiser, she heard Zak washing up. The room was warm and her bed inviting. With a slow, careful struggle and a few stabs of pain, she eased out of her onesie, let it fall to the floor and kicked it into a corner then wrapped herself into her kimono and attempted to tie a knot in the sash.

Pity I got the longer version, still at just above the knee, it's not too long. So, what if it slips open, maybe a bit of bare thigh will work its magic?

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She grinned at the thought, checking herself in the wall mirror above the ancient tallboy, a cheaply made piece of WW2 utility furniture which had been her grandmother's pride and joy.

She slipped into her thong, eased the dressing gown off her shoulders, sat on the edge of the bed, set her head back theatrically and set a pose as if for a Life Drawing class, viewing herself in the mirror.

Not bad, Kat. Not bad at all. And the bruise is quite attractive, in its own odd way.

Zak tapped the door and said, 'Kat, the boiler pressure is holding. OK, if I use the bathroom, please?'

Startled, she re-arranged the dressing gown to cover herself, replying, 'Sure, go ahead. Hey, thanks for making my bed. It's perfect. You're a star.'

'Is it alright if I have a shower?'

'Sure, go for it!'

The image of him naked under the shower sparked the memory of the one and only time she had managed to get Darrell to share a shower with her. He had been reluctant, eventually agreeing but only with the light out which had spoiled it for her although the mutual soaping, caressing and gentle rinsing had worked well.

Listening to the sounds of the water cascading on him, she imagined Zak soaping and rinsing, wishing she was there with him. When the shower stopped, she slipped out of her dressing gown, moved to her door and cracked it open. A few minutes passed. When he unlatched the bathroom door, she popped her head out, revealing a naked shoulder and most of her left breast, smiling coyly.

'Hi, did the shower head attachment work OK?'

She had hoped to catch him naked but he still looked good in his boxer shorts. As he turned, he moved the hand holding his toilet bag in front of his crown jewels, sparking the thought:

So, so nearly. Pity!

'Yeah, fine, thanks. Great. Yeah, really good.'

He was only a few feet from her and she could smell his minty breath, mingled with coal tar soap. Instinctively, she cupped her hand over her mouth to check her breath and realised she had not brushed her teeth since early morning.

'Oh, Zak, thanks for being there for me. I don't know what I would have done without you, honestly. Making up the bed for me, how thoughtful. You're amazing, you really are.'

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Without you, tonight would have been totally miserable. I mean, if I had been alone, in this storm, with no heating, no hot water, what would I have done? Maybe this life in the wilds is not for me after all.'

His right hand flew up to cover his odd eye. 'No, no, Kat. I'm sure it'll all work out. Try Mindfulness and you'll see, it'll all come good. Mindfulness really works. Honest. Well, it does for me, most of the time.'

He reversed to the hallway door and stopped, as if reluctant to leave.

'Oh, is it OK to say you look nicer without make-up?'

'No, not really. She smiled, but thanks for nothing!'

Katia giggled and Zak smirked, embarrassed.

She cracked the door open a touch and in response, he let both hands fall to his sides and she saw from the bulge in his shorts he was fully aroused. Their eyes locked as they stood in silence for what seemed like ages. She could sense the uncertainty in him.

Go on, Zak, say it. Ask me, please, and I'll say yes.

'Really, Kat, think about it. I should be thanking *you*. If you hadn't been coming along that track, I might have died of hypothermia, right? I mean, if I had tried to shelter in the truck, well, it would have only settled deeper into the bog, right?'

'Yeah, so you agree, it was sort of fate, we were meant to meet like this?'

'No, not really. Sorry to disagree but I think we mostly make our own luck. So, we'll see what tomorrow brings, right? Remember Kat, absolutely nothing is impossible, if we set our minds to it. We must take one day at a time and seize every opportunity when it comes along, right? Please, don't look so sad. The worst almost never happens. Chin up, eh?'

He edged back into the corridor and began to close the door, his eyes on her face.

She faked a smile, groaning inwardly:

Yeah, nothing's impossible except getting you into my bed for a nice, gentle snog and perhaps a bit of an exploration with your beautiful hands! Come on! We could use my massage oils and I'm sure I could find a way of compensating you for all you've done for me.

'Oh well, Zak, if you're determined to suffer that old lumpy mattress, so be it. I bet you change your mind! You'll find out soon enough you would be so much better off in here on the chairs, where it's cosier, despite the noise from the flue.'

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'No worries, I'll sort it tomorrow, one way or the other, bring my foot pump from the truck, see if I can get the balloon-sock tighter, stop this racket, right? If that doesn't work I'll make a better plug, maybe from wood.'

'Have it your own way, then. Sleep well, if you can!'

'Yep, I always do.' He yawned, adding, 'So, that's it then, eh? I hope your wrist and shoulder don't keep you awake. D'you know, Kat, I *really* enjoyed our exchange of views. I hardly ever get to talk with a girl about important stuff. Never, actually, to be honest. Thanks for being such a good listener. And hey, did I say? I love this place, so wild. Yeah, it's amazing, eh? Yeah, well, anyway, the lumpy old spare bed, I'll give it a go, then. Nothing else for it, eh? So, yeah, there it is, right? So, yeah, I suppose it's good night then, Kat.'

Across the jumble of boxes, he corridor door closed slowly then clicked shut.

Hoping he would change his mind she waited for several minutes, straining but hearing nothing.

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Waiting and Hoping

Katia closed the door and slumped down to sit on the edge of her bed letting out a whispered, 'Bugger, bugger, bugger!' Doubts welled up.

What the Hell was that all about? Am I supposed to ask him outright if he would fancy having a nice time with me? Maybe he is gay! Is this how he gets his fun? Teasing girls?

On impulse, she rose, slipped on her robe and moved back into the living room to listen at the door to the corridor. From the muffled sounds, she reckoned he was moving things around in the spare bedroom. She opened the door a little and the sounds became louder. Positive thoughts surged back.

No, Kat, he really fancies you. It's your own fault. You've put him off. He's a nice guy but he's not sure how to make the next move because you've been too blatant.

This had happened a few times with guys she had fancied who came into *The Aragon* pub where she had worked part-time during her student days. Katia knew from magazines that most males liked to hold the initiative in any romantic encounter but she could not help herself, she had always enjoyed flirting.

There was dull thumping and bumping from his room. He had warned he would be noisy, following the 5BX plan devised by the Canadian Air Force; twelve minutes of strenuous effort, night and morning. He claimed the night-time routine helped him get over to sleep while the morning session wakened him up, making him ready for the day ahead. When she had asked if it was a form of H-I-T (High Intensity Training), Zak had become adamant, almost scolding:

"No, Kat, most definitely not. 5BX is cardiovascular but using your own body, no equipment needed. I suggest you avoid H-I-T, mainly because it can cause injuries. Anyway, it relies on equipment so you need a gym whereas 5BX can be done anytime, anywhere you have a few square metres of space. I avoid gyms like the plague. They are a hotbed of infections, especially in the swimming and communal showering areas. Trust me, gyms are places best avoided."

Thinking back to her H-I-T sessions and cycling spin classes, Katia was inclined to agree. These activities had been included in her very expensive six-months' membership at a fancy gym, an attempt to shed weight and tone up after losing Darrell. When it expired, she had taken up powerwalking instead but, when winter started in earnest, she had lapsed back into couch-potato land.

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Remembering her stale breath, she moved to the bathroom, used her electric toothbrush then swirled out with two capfuls of mouthwash for good measure.

Smiling to herself in the mirror, she thought:

*Go for it. Think positive thoughts. It worked with Darrell and it **will** work with Zak.*

In the living room, she eased herself into her chair, placed a cushion on the coffee table then hiked her heels onto it, arranging her dressing gown to fall open, as if by accident, posing almost naked in the flickering light from the candles in the hearth, her legs spread to reveal her thong. Closing her eyes, she visualised Zak standing in the corridor doorway, displaying for her. In her imagination, he eased the boxers down and kicked them off, revealing all, a fantasy which brought a broad smile to her face and a rush below. She resisted the urge to caress herself, saving it, in case he returned.

To fully enjoy this make-believe encounter, spooling back then scrolling slowly forwards through everything from the first deliberate touch when she had pretended to stumble into him at the boiler, going over all that had happened, analysing what he had said.

The thumping sounds stopped. Zak's 5BX session seemed to be over. Katia sat on, waiting and hoping, her attention focussed on the door, straining to hear him. If she heard his bedroom door opening, she would pretend to be dozing and, when he got an eyeful, maybe they would take the next step.

As she waited, listening, hoping, doubts came again, making her jittery. An unwelcome thought occurred and whispered words escaped from her lips, 'Christ, maybe he's married or has a steady. Maybe he already has a tribe of kids.'

With this nudge, the pendulum of her thoughts swung back into reverse.

*Face it, Kat, what do you **actually know** about this guy? Admit it, he was happy to sleep in the campervan but no, you insisted he sleep indoors and not content with that, you practically strong-arm him into your bed. But no, if Zak was a gigolo, he would already be in there, in bed with you. It's you, Kat MacInnes, you put him off, just as you did wit the others. Get a grip. He's perfect for you. Give it time, for God's sake!*

Tears of disappointment welled up and she reached for a box of tissues and blew her nose. Aware she was trying to justify her failure to win him and to bolster her ego, she wheeled onto another tack.

Although Zak seems perfect, you don't really know what he's like, do you? You know he's odd, different, and you like kinky. But what if he's actually totally weird? Jesus,

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I mean, think about it, Kat, do you want another Barry experience? So, admit it, when Zak resisted your come on, maybe this time you got lucky, yeah?

As she blew her nose again, her eyes alighted on the wine cartons.

Anyway, it'll never happen now, will it? You've blown it. He'll be gone tomorrow, out of your life. You'll be all alone again so why not have a glass of wine or two to help you get over to sleep?

However, after what she had 'declared' so emphatically earlier about abstaining and visualising his solemn face, she looked away.

No, Kat, you have it right about Zak. He is a really helpful, genuine guy, just shy, which is nice, yeah? Think about all the times he said he loves it here and that it's "amazing". And the better without make-up bit, offbeat but nice too. That wasn't faked and he really does fancy you, standing there with a full-blown erection. If you could get him to stay and make a life with you here, it could be perfect.

Try Mindfulness, she thought. *Send out a message. Will him to return.*

Time passed.

There were no sounds from the spare bedroom. Eventually Katia finally admitted Zak was not returning. The storm began to build again, making the chimney windsock whine off-key increasing her feeling of loneliness and vulnerability. The list of things which needed to be done to the cottage, her dwindling capital and the challenges of the coming months crowded in on her, bringing an overwhelming desire to have a drink. She reached for a fresh tissue and glanced at the wine cartons.

Keeping her eyes on the partially open hallway door, she rose and tiptoed into the kitchen where she selected a short, sharp knife from the wooden block on the worktop. Moving silently back to the cartons, using her left hand inexpertly, she attempted to slit the securing tape but, in her desperation, managed to unbalance the box which toppled to the floor with a horrible chinking sound.

The words escaped, loudly: '**Christ No!** Don't be smashed, please.'

At the sound of her own voice, glancing over her shoulder she froze, expecting Zak to appear and catch her in the act. Holding her breath, she listened until she was sure he had slept through the drama. Leaning forward, she righted the carton. Relieved it was intact, she sawed at the tape and cardboard eventually freeing a bottle - *Oyster Bay Sauvignon Blanc*.

Nowadays, she only bought screw-capped wine. With no strength in her good hand, she tried her left but soon gave up. Taking the knife and bottle back to the kitchen, she returned the knife to its block. Holding the bottle with her left hand, she placed the top

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of the screw cap into the vertical slot between the door and the door jamb. Then, reaching her right foot around the outside of the door, she pulled it against the cap, applying gentle pressure while twisting the bottle with her left hand, turning it anti-clockwise until she heard the satisfying 'crack' of the seal giving way. Releasing the door pressure, she removed the bottle, now open, and stood it on the worktop, twisting the cap up and off. Leaning forward, she took a deep sniff - delicious.

Using a freshly washed cup from the drainer, wiping it dry on her dressing gown, she splashed a slosh of wine into it. Greedily, she downed it in two long slugs, feeling the shiver of anticipation, enjoying the heat as the alcohol hit the sweet spot, always the best part of any drinking session. 'Aaaah! Nice. Very nice,' she whispered. She filled her cup again, sipped it to half full then tucked the bottle between her body and left arm whispering, 'Come with Mummy, Baby.'

Balancing the cup carefully while clutching the bottle to her side, she negotiated her way back to her armchair. With the 'innocent' cup on the wooden arm rest, she concealed the bottle beside the chair. If Zak came back, she would pretend it was tea.

Draining the second cupful with a final glug, she refilled it then continued into her established routine, counting slowly to a hundred before allowing the next small sip, relishing the sharp, fruity taste as it rolled around her mouth. Katia could not remember the last time she had managed a night without at least one full bottle of wine. As she always did at this stage, she wondered again if she was becoming an alcoholic, following the path which her father had stumbled along into premature oblivion. Not for the first time, she scolded herself mentally.

*Kat, for God's sake, you can't keep putting it off, you **must** cut down. You promised yourself you would hoard this wine for special occasions only.*

Almost at once the customary response formed in her mind.

OK, OK, I'll start again tomorrow and try to abstain for at least a week, clear my head, make a to-do list, keep busy.

Even as these words formed in her head, she knew she would fail.

As the weather forecast which Angus had listened to earlier had predicted, the storm intensified, buffeting the cottage, increasing her feeling of isolation. A sob of self-pity mixed with self-loathing escaped. Hail rattled on the windows and drummed across the metal roof; the wind whined around the eaves, tugging viciously at the edges of the roof sheets; the flue wailed like an abandoned kitten. With this, came the thought:

Christ, Katia, this is a madness. No wonder they all turn to drink out here!

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Re-filling, she tucked the bottle out of sight. Lifting the cup with exaggerated care, she took a longer sip, replaced it on the arm rest and closed her eyes. As her mind slowed and calmed, she tried to think positive thoughts.

We'll be trapped by the storm and he'll be forced to stay for days and days. Tomorrow. When he's not so tired he'll make a move. Oh God, he looks fabulous in his cycling outfit. And even better without it! She giggled: Yes, Kat, I think we can agree, virile is most definitely the word that fits best.

The boiler was set to run continuously. As the heat seeped into the walls and furniture, it released a musty, tobacco smell. Katia, who had never smoked, hated the smell of second-hand smoke from others. However, strangely, she found this odour comforting, re-assuring, a reminder of happy times with her grandparents. As the alcohol combined with the paracetamol, Katia slid down into a semi-stupor and brought back the image of him lying in the chair across from her, his legs akimbo, displaying himself. Tipsy, uninhibited, her hand moved to comfort herself.

In her fantasy, she saw him rise, smile, offer his hand to help her up. They embraced and kissed long and passionately, pressing hard into each other. As her dressing gown slipped to the floor, she led him to her bed. The dream continued through foreplay and beyond. After their climax, she dozed, looping through the sequence from the start, over and over, trapped in paradise.

An extra vicious slam of wind and the accompanying screech from the flue hauled her back to reality. Feeling woozy, she took the 'mother' candle to her bedroom and set it on a mat on the tallboy, leaving the daughter candles in the hearth. After a hesitation, she moved back to the living room. As she leaned forward to lift the bottle, her toe snagged on a leg of the coffee table. Attempting to steady herself, she grabbed at her armchair but missed and tripped headlong onto the stack of wine cartons. Pain flamed through her right arm and lanced into her brain. Desperate to get herself upright in case the noise of her fall brought Zak, she rolled onto her left side and, grabbing Zak's armchair with her left hand, she clawed herself to her feet, tears flowing freely.

Christ Almighty Kat, not again! Get an effing grip!

This was not the first time she had fallen when inebriated. On one occasion a bad fall had resulted in a split fracture of the anterior of her left clavicle, a break which healed naturally, leaving a slight lump of additional bone at the site.

Upright, she steadied herself, glanced at the hallway door and waited, recovering. Zak did not appear and, as usual, when this kind of crisis passed, all Katia could think of was her next drink and an escape to oblivion. When the pain had subsided from its crescendo to a dull throb, moving slowly, deliberately, she lifted the bottle from its

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hiding place and peered at it. It was less than a third full. Easing it carefully under her right arm, she pressed extra hard to make sure it did not slip. Swaying forward to reach the cup, she saw it held a miniscule dribble.

Throwing her head back to down it with an extravagant swallow, she was forced to take a half step backwards to regain her balance. Feeling the bottle slip she pressed hard with her elbow, reactivating the pain in her arm. The bottle thudded painfully onto her toes but remained upright, jammed between her leg and Zak's armchair.

A flood of tears washed away all further thoughts of romantic encounters as she waited for the pain to subside. Nursing her right arm, holding it close to her body and bending her knees to a semi-crouch, she placed the empty cup upside down on top of the bottle. Grasping it fiercely in her good hand, holding it out in front, she placed each foot with exaggerated care and picked her way across to the safety of her bedroom.

Inside, she bummed the door shut, heard it click, lowered herself to a sitting position on the edge of her bed then placed the cup and wine bottle on her bedside table. Her knees began to throb and, as if in response, her whole right side caught fire. Reaching for her handbag, she found the strip, pressed out two paracetamol tabs, placed them on her tongue, drained the last of the wine into her cup then washed them down with one last swig.

Catching sight of herself in the wall mirror, once more time she whispered her repeated pledge: '*Kat MacInnes, no more. Never again. Never! Tomorrow you'll drain every bottle away into the sea and settle to live a clean life.*'

With a sniff and a sob, shrugging off her dressing gown, she switched off the overhead light. Naked apart from her thong she slipped under the duvet. Lying on her left side, she arranged a pillow to support her aching right arm and curled into herself, like a banana.

Dozing in the flickering candlelight, her mind turned to Zak, so near yet so far. The combination of alcohol and paracetamol took hold. Her thoughts became fanciful. Listening to the wind howling around the cottage and the rhythmical crash of the waves on the shore, Katia's thoughts turned to the Hebridean dolphins. She knew that, unlike fish, they had to surface to breathe and thought they must be in danger of drowning in the huge Atlantic waves. What did they do during these storms? She would ask Zak tomorrow. He had said dolphins were nearly weightless in water, like fish.

It would be nice to be weightless. Perhaps I might come back as a dolphin.

The flickering candle filled the room with its sensual aroma, casting a soft light over her face and bruised right shoulder. She imagined Zak lying in his bed thinking of her. Would he sneak through later? Maybe on the pretext of checking she was all right?

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Her eyes closed and a naughty smile settled on her face as she slipped down, down, down into the arms of Morpheus.

Intruder

After a long and careful inspection of the damaged hull of the *MV Viking* and the Hindness pier the captain read the report on the failed thruster prepared by his engineering team. The collective view was both vessel and pier would need repairs before his ship could load and sail again. At midnight, he called the control centre on the mainland once again. Together, they decided the ship would be taken out of service until the repairs could be organised.

During this interval, Barry Kelnet had locked himself in his cabin for a drinking session. When he heard the news, he had already guzzled three cans of extra-strong lager and was half-way down a fresh bottle of whisky from his stash.

Normally, crew members were required to stay on board during the entire period of their two weeks stint, no matter which port they were tied up at overnight. After some lobbying, the captain decided any local men who wished to go home could do so, provided they checked with the pier office at noon each day for an update.

With a scrawl in the purser's log, Barry noted his intention to go to his croft at Norness then made his way ashore to the staff car park, huddled in his yellow waterproof viz jacket. In the pick-up, he lit a cigarette, consuming it in a series of long drags then lighting a second from the stub.

On the outskirts of Hindness, he ignored the turn-off to the North, keeping straight on, heading westwards for Midness, aiming for *Tigh na Mara*, following the route Katia had taken hours earlier. Whining along noisily in third gear, he was driving one-handed, clutching his nearly empty whisky bottle in the other. With his foot hard to the floor, the big car was butting into the teeth of the storm, windscreen wipers slashing back and forth on full speed.

Tigh na Mara was silent apart from the intermittent grumble as the boiler stopped and started. Both occupants were deeply asleep when the black Isuzu 4 x 4 slewed to a halt beside the campervan, stalling when Barry failed to find the clutch. The huge man stumbled out, teetered, almost fell, recovered then lurched over the path of crushed shells to the croft. At the door, he stopped to drain the remains of the whisky then

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heaved the bottle high and wide in the direction of the sea where it smashed on the rocky shore, shards scattered into a tangle of seaweed.

He twisted the handle. To his surprise, the door was locked. Unaware of local protocol, Zak had dropped and set the snib on the old Yale when he returned from the campervan with the cool box. Frustrated, Barry dunted the door hard with his shoulder. At the second more determined thud, the flimsy lock yielded to his bulk and he all but fell into the corridor. In the darkness, he tripped over a stack of boxes, cursed softly then careened into the living room. The dim, psychedelic flickering from the remaining candles in the hearth flashed an image of a disco, twisting his face into a lewd grin.

'So, Katia MacInnes, you are expecting me after all,' he mumbled. Swaying, he staggered forwards, tripped and almost fell, recovered his upright position, threw off his viz jacket, shaking his head, unable to make sense of what he was seeing. The room was stuffed with boxes, some piled two and three high in places. He had been in this house only once before, by appointment, to bring three of his tups to serve Catherine's ewes. Cursing as he weaved his way to the bedroom, he stumbled and slammed into the bathroom door, sending it flying inwards with a loud bang.

Shoving open the bedroom door, reaching a hand to the tallboy, he steadied himself as he took in the scene. The candle trembled in its holder but did not topple. Standing in the doorway, Barry ogled the sleeping girl, his breathing quickening at the prospect ahead. A sneer set on his unshaven face.

In Katia's delicious dream she was lying in a star shape, on her back, floating, with Zak kneeling astride her, massaging her breasts, kissing her lips.

Slurring his words, Barry said. 'So, Katia MacInnes, here you are waiting for me, is it? All perfumed like a rose and ready for a good seeing to, is it?'

The words shattered her dream.

Barry!

Disorientated, Katia was scrabbling to sit up, her head thick, her brain working slowly, fighting the dullness caused by the wine and painkillers. Pushing herself up into a sitting position, she struggled to disentangle her legs from the duvet and get them over the side of the bed. Barry towered above her, his stench filling her nostrils, his hot eyes bloodshot, a gleam of triumph in them. Her blood ran cold. Frozen by fear, she could not move, could not speak.

'So, it is the fancy candles you have been setting out for me, is it?' Leering, his words came slowly, enjoying the fear on her face, 'I see you are stripped naked, already gagging for it, is it? Right then Miss Katia MacInnes, lie yourself back like a good girl and get

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those creamy, white thighs up and wide. It is nearly three months since my boy has seen real action, so you are in for a treat girl, a full load.'

Adrenalin flooded into her bloodstream, reaching her brain. Her injured arm forgotten, she threw herself out of bed onto her feet, screaming, shoving at his chest with both hands:

'Bugger off Barry, you bast. . .'

His powerful backhander hit her left temple so hard she was catapulted viciously backwards to land across the bed, the back of her head bouncing off the padded headboard. Her brain exploded. The room began to swim. Darkness closed in and she slumped down onto the bed, her arms stretched y-shaped above her head, as if inviting him to proceed.

For the sheer pleasure of dominating her, he leaned across and slapped her bruised face viciously before grabbing under her knees, lifting them roughly and forcing them apart to reveal the red slash of her thong, an evil grin on his bloated face, dirty brown nicotine saliva rimming his lips.

'So, Katia it is the dirty wee bitch you are after all, pretending to me you were a wee nun, back there at the ferry. Ach, but were you not always a randy wee goer, coming on to us all like a cat in heat with yer pretty wee innocent smiles and all the while rubbing yer self into me, practically asking for it, ye wee Glasgow hoor.'

As she squirmed to try to escape, he reached forward again catching her with another backhand blow on her right cheek, his signet ring, drawing blood.

His wife, Ishbell could have told Katia this was the part Barry enjoyed the most, the beatings before the actual violent sex.

When Katia fought back through the dizziness to sit upright, Barry was naked from the waist down, with only a football shirt covering his top half. His right hand was cajoling his flaccid penis, trying to rouse it for action.

Seeing she was coming back to consciousness, he moved towards her, grabbed her ankles and hooked them over his shoulders, pulling her bottom nearer and forcing her thighs against his chest, leaning back and levering her towards his penis to effect penetration. However, this act was not consumed because his penis was still drooped, his libido damaged by years of heavy drinking.

Katia tried kicking and twisting but the clench of his hands on her thighs was too powerful. The stench from him was a disgusting mixture of nicotine, stale alcohol and rank sweat. She twisted in both directions, trying to pull her knees free, trying to kick

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at his face but he had a firm grip of her upper thighs, locked in his grasp. Leaning into her, letting go of her legs, bringing his hands forward to cup her face, as if to kiss her.

Barry had her trapped. Katia could see from the smirk on his face, he was enjoying the struggle. She changed tack and kicked out at him, trying to get a knee under his chin. In response, he leaned forward and punched her hard on the left side of her stomach, winding her.

'Now that is it girl, go on, fight me now, why don't you. Go on, let us make this a good old-fashioned shagging, you smug wee Glasgow bitch! Or would you like me to drag you out onto the floor of that old camper van, eh? Is that what turns you on?'

Unnoticed, Zak appeared in the living room, dressed only in boxer shorts, his long hair free, framing his face. He stopped just outside the bedroom doorway, trying to make sense of the situation. Unaware of what had transpired before he arrived, he was unsure if what he was witnessing was a consensual arrangement. All he could see was the rear of a tall, broad man running to fat, naked from the waist down, with Kat's feet poking over his shoulders.

Unaware of Zak behind him, Barry took a quick step backwards. Released from his imprisoning arms, her legs slithered down, leaving her fully exposed.

Hissing with frustration, Barry bent forward and grabbed a fistful of Katia's hair with his left hand, jerking her head towards his floppy penis held in his right hand, saying, 'Come now, bitch, get your head up here and open wide. Give my boy a nice seeing to with those cherry lips and we'll save the . . .'

'Hey, what the hell are you playing at?' barked Zak.

Confused, Barry turned to face the smaller, younger man. Katia took her chance and rolled away to the far side of the bed, curling herself into a defensive ball.

'And who the **fuck** are . . .'

Zak stepped forward into the doorway. 'Get out of this house, at once.'

'Aw, right! It is the pony-tailed pansy with the sheep-pen kit for Jenkins. So, what the **fuck** is it you are doing here, you wee shite? Did you dip your dick in my shag, you fucker?'

Barry stepped forward and his foot kicked the wine bottle. He picked it up brandishing it, an evil smile on his bloated face.

'Now for some other fun, you wee nancy boy, **fucker!**'

Zak growled, 'Under the terms of my licence, I am obliged to warn you not to try anything stupid. I am a trained. . .'

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Barry raised the bottle above his head.

'**NO!** I give you fair warning, **do not**'

As the bottle swung at his head, Zak side-stepped and landed a well-placed Karate kick on Barry's unprotected testicles, causing the man to sink to his knees, screaming.

Katia was kneeling on the bed, trying to find her dressing gown then saw Barry was standing on it.

'**Stay where you are, Kat!** I'll deal with this prat. You, whoever you are, **get out of here now!** Or I promise you *will* regret it.'

From a crouched position on his knees, cursing under his breath, Barry threw the wine bottle backhanded but it lacked force and direction. Zak parried it in mid-air with an openhanded downward slap and it fell to the floor harmlessly with a dull clunk.

Balanced on the balls of his feet and keeping his eyes on his opponent, Zak watched as the man scabbled for his trousers which Zak expected him to put on, to cover his nakedness.

Enraged, Barry did not intend giving up. Snorting a deep breath, the huge man hurled himself upwards towards Zak, scything with a flick knife.

Zak bunny-hopped backwards, the razor-sharp blade missing his torso by millimetres.

As Barry scabbled to his feet, Zak edged backwards into the living room, already crouched in a defensive Karate position, squarely on his feet, his fists balled, alert, ready to evade the next attack, preparing to counter by chopping down on Barry's knife hand at the first opportunity.

Barry lunged again, throwing his knife hand at Zak's throat. Zak sprang backwards to avoid the raking blade but, in doing so, his heel caught on the rug edge. Unbalanced, as he fell sideways, his head cracked against the hard edge of the coffee table with a sickening thud. Unconscious, he lay silent, unmoving, at the mercy of his opponent.

Barry, thrown onto his knees by his attack on Zak, crawled towards his helpless quarry, a malicious smile of triumph signalling his evil intent as he hauled at his opponent's boxer shorts, pulling them down to expose Zak's genitalia.

'Got you now, you wee shite. I will have the balls off you, you bastard, neuter you like the boy lambs. That will put an end to your shagging on my patch.'

Leaping from the bed towards Barry, Katia screamed, grabbing at him, trying to get purchase on his shirt:

'**No, Barry. NO! YOU BASTARD! NO!**

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Her foot trod on the bottle; she skidded, twisting her left ankle as she lost balance, causing a rip of pain in that knee. Oblivious to her futile attack, Barry was kneeling over Zak reaching for his testicles.

'NOOOOOOO!' she screamed.

Forcing herself to ignore her pounding head and the pain in her arm and both knees, Katia fumbled for the bottle. Grabbing its neck, she swung it at Barry's shaven skull with all the venom she could muster. The first blow glanced off the side of his head, above his right ear. Barry sighed, stiffened, shook his head and was turning towards her when a second blow smashed down on the top of his skull. In the heat of the moment Katia had used her right hand to wield the bottle, causing searing stabs of pain with each blow, pain suppressed by the adrenaline coursing through her body.

At this point, everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

Still holding the knife at the ready, Barry turned, swayed, and attempted to rise from his knees to face her then his surprised eyes glazed over and he collapsed forwards, landing on top of Zak, trapping his right arm between his intended victim's chest and his own. With a sudden jerk, he threw his left arm out to the side. The fingers twitched and grasped at nothing, balled into a fist then dropped to the floor, his huge frame straddling the younger man below. A deep gurgling sound was followed by a longer, softer, high-pitched hissing sigh. Both men lay still, as if asleep.

With the immediate danger over, the adrenaline coursing through Katia began to subside. The delayed reaction of shock from Barry's beating and the pain caused by wielding the wine bottle overloaded her nervous system. Katia's head began to swim. Fighting her feeling of nausea and weakness, her new imperative was to free Zak from his imprisonment. She lurched forward and clawed at Barry's shoulder with her left hand. Her feet tangled with four legs. Katia tumbled, throwing out her right hand to steady herself. A fresh wave of excruciating pain slammed into her brain like a sledgehammer. Overwhelmed, she collapsed onto Barry's back, her arms falling around his neck as if in a lover's embrace.

Inside the croft, the heap of bodies lay unmoving.

Outside, the wind rose to a crescendo, reaching a peak far exceeding Hurricane Force 12.

Time passed while the storm continued to rage around the croft, tugging repeatedly at the roof sheets, thumping the front door to and fro on its hinges, causing the windsock to scream and the candle flames to flicker wildly, bizarrely illuminating the scene with shards of multi-coloured light.

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On the shore, waves crashed onto the rocks as the tide ebbed against the wind, throwing spume into the air which built up on the side of the house before blowing away across the machair like a ghoulish coterie of eerie white zephyrs.

Unconscious, Katia lay draped on top of both men, naked apart from her red thong.

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Aftermath

When Zak recovered consciousness, he thought someone was trying to smother him. Adrenalin surged. He kicked up hard with his knee and shoved with his hands, trying to lift his attacker's chest from his face. The stink of booze, nicotine and sweat was disgusting. The image of the flashing knife returned. After a huge effort, he managed to wriggle free from under and stood, pulling up his boxers, wondering why they were halfway down his legs. In the flickering light of the candles, surrounded by scattered boxes, he felt as if he had fallen into a scene from a weird computer game.

As his breathing returned to normal, he realised his head was aching. Reaching a hand gingerly to the site of the pain, he felt the wet stickiness of blood. *I must have fallen and smacked my head on the coffee table.*

Switching on the overhead light, the scene revealed made no sense. He saw now that the weight which had been pressing down on him included Kat, who was face down, motionless and straddling a man. From his build and shaven head, Zak presumed he was the same person who had attacked him earlier with the bottle and knife.

Why is Kat lying on him, naked? Did I interrupt them in the act? Were drugs involved? Are they dead?

Panic rising, he kneeled to check her breathing and smelled alcohol on her breath. She jerked and groaned; relief flooded through him. Zak sensed his attacker was unnaturally still. The man did not seem to be breathing and his face was blotchy, with a greyish-blue tinge. Zak leaned to check the man's neck pulse, unsure if he could feel anything. There was a deep depression on the bald head but no blood leakage.

How could that have happened? What went on after I fell and blanked out?

Zak stepped around them and felt for a pulse at the other side of the man's neck. Nothing. His mind was puzzling, trying to find an explanation.

Who killed him? Was it Kat or was someone else here while I was out of it?

His eyes landed on the wine bottle, saw it was empty. *They had both been drinking.*

Had it started in a friendly way and become violent due to an argument? This lout did not seem her type but, well, maybe, who knows?

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Zak sat back on his heels and stared at Katia. He spotted the puffy redness on her side where Barry had punched her and saw the small red tear under her right eye. Protectively, his hand reached out and touched her dark curly hair.

'What the hell happened after I fell?'

This whispered utterance was followed by the unspoken, horrible thought:

Had it been rape or had it been drunken, kinky sex which had descended into brutality?

Zak checked Katia's pulse, relieved when his fingers detected a strong, steady beat. Her perfume was mingled with the rankness of the man under her. At his touch, she let out a long, mournful groan and tried to raise herself but slumped back again.

Following his SCUBA incident recovery training routine, he leaned closer to check and again caught the distinct smell of alcohol. Her breathing was slightly laboured and her forehead was cool to the touch. She moved again, wriggling, half-rising, groaning.

Gently, carefully avoiding contact with her breasts, he raised her from the half-naked man and guided her to the armchair she had used earlier. Her eyes were closed, her head turned away from him, arms dangling over the sides of the armchair. Trying to avoid looking at her nakedness, he lifted her arms and placed her hands on her lap.

He spoke firmly, reassuringly. 'Kat, you're in shock. Stay here, I'm going to find something warm to wrap you in.'

She sobbed a tiny whisper, 'Zak, please, I'm not a drunk! I'm not a slut!

Did I say those words out loud or just think them?

From the bedroom, Katia heard Zak talking quietly to himself:

'Her wounds seem superficial. Is it more than shock? Is it the booze? Were there drugs too? Oh God, it's not head trauma, is it?'

Distracted, Zak lifted the thin dressing gown from the floor, gave it a shake and moved back to drape it across her.

Katia pulled the kimono to her chin unaware this action exposed her thighs and thong.

She saw him stare then turn away. Realising her nakedness, she re-arrange her dressing gown to regain her modesty. They exchanged the briefest of glances, his face solemn, concerned, uncertain. Ashamed, Kat closed her eyes, desperate to find a way back into his good books:

Zak, if you stay, I promise, I'll never touch alcohol again. Anyway, it must have been the paracetamol which pushed me over the edge.

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His first aid training kicked in:

Always talk to a shock victim. For head trauma, try to get them to talk as much as possible, assess their responses, try to find out if the brain is working properly.

'Kat, Kat, it's me, Zak. Are you OK?'

Kneeling and holding her left hand he squeezed, offering reassurance. She clutched, held it tightly. Words escaped in a tiny, frightened voice, mumbled under her breath. *'Oh Christ, Zak, I know what you're thinking but I'm not a drunk or a whore. Please believe me.'*

He could not make out what she had said.

Kat is ashamed, embarrassed that I saw her naked, compromised.

Blood was oozing from the cut on her cheek.

He found a roll of kitchen towel, prepared a pad, wetted it with cold water, returned and knelt, holding it to her damaged cheek. Her left hand came up, pressing his hand and the pad onto her face. Now that the adrenaline was clearing from her system, the combined effect of wine and paracetamol was re-asserting itself.

He lifted her hand, eased his own away, placed hers on the pad and stepped back, out of her personal space. When her eyes flickered open, they were dull, unfocussed, staring at the floor. He caught her glance; she turned away immediately then closed her eyes, shutting him out of her world. Once more he heard her speak to herself, in the same tiny voice but this time just loud enough to hear her say:

'Barry Kelnet, you bloody, bloody bastard, why did you have to spoil everything again? Zak probably thinks I was expecting you all along. He'll never want me now.'

To Zak, these were unexpected but welcome words. Standing out of her sight line, his eyes strayed to look at her thighs and her firm, muscular legs, toenails painted a bright green. A surge of desire stirred in him again.

After a minute or so, Katia recovered enough to steal a glance at Barry's body then upwards at Zak, standing beyond it.

'Oh Christ, Zak, you're covered in blood! Did he slash you?'

Zak looked down, feeling tentatively with the fingers of both hands at the congealing blood smeared on his stomach. Smiling, he reached for a handful of tissues from the box on the coffee table, wiping himself, checking his cleaned skin, making sure he had not been cut.

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'If it's not my blood and it's not yours, it must be his. I remember him lunging at me with a knife. Next thing, I felt myself falling then a bright blue flash of pain then, well, nothing.'

He scrunched the tissues and placed them in the box with the surplus packing materials. A thought flashed:

Is this vile man's blood contaminated?

'Look, Zak, look. The rug, it's saturated. Barry's bleeding, it's seeping out from under him.'

Katia wriggled up in her armchair and leaned across to look more closely. 'Christ, he stinks! Oh my God, Zak, look? Did he just move?'

'No, no, he's not moving. He's dead, isn't he? I'll do another check.'

Zak hunkered down feeling for a pulse on both sides of the man's thick neck. There was no beat. Lifting a lid, he saw the eye was glazed, unfocussed, lifeless. To check, he touched the eyeball with a finger: there was no reaction.

'No, Zak, leave him to bleed. The bastard doesn't deserve to live after all the misery he's caused to so many of us over the years.'

'Well, Kat, I hate to tell you, I'm pretty certain he's gone but I just can't say why. The last thing I'm clear on was seeing him leaping up, trying to stab me. After that, well, no, I've no idea what might have happened. Do you?'

Zak rose again to his full height and stepped away. Blowing out a sigh, he said: 'Yes, he's dead. We have a corpse in our midst. I suppose we should get in touch with the Police as soon as possible. Did I see a police station near the ferry terminal, at Hindness?'

'Oh Zak, what do you think could have happened?'

Catching the apprehension in her voice, Zak hesitated, watching her eyes as they searched for the wine bottle before moving to check the depression on Barry's skull.

'I'm not sure, Kat. Could he have tripped, fallen on his knife? What d'you think?'

Katia seized on this explanation. 'Yeah, Zak, God, that's it!' she said, leaning forward, hugging herself with her dressing gown, closing her eyes as the words came slowly, deliberately, a story in the making.

'Yeah, Zak, it's as you say. After you fell and bashed your head, he must have tripped and then he fell on top of you. Yeah, as you say, *he killed himself!* It's what *must* have happened. As he fell on top of you his knife must have turned and he stabbed himself.'

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She opened her eyes, pleading, and found his. 'Yes, Zak, that's it, the bastard killed himself. Think about it, an inch the other way and it could have been you he stabbed. Yeah, it's what *must* have happened. Yes, I remember now, I saw him trip and fall forwards onto you and then I must have passed out from the beating he gave me. God, my cheek hurts like hell.'

'So, Kat, you think it was a self-inflicted death, a freak accident?'

'Yeah, that must be what happened, I suppose. It's the only explanation that fits. Like you, I'm not sure. As I said, I must have passed out from the beating he gave me. Yeah, as you say, that's what must have happened. Yeah, Zak, as you say, *he killed himself!* And good riddance, too!'

Their eyes locked and in that instance they both knew this was not the full truth.

After a short delay, Zak said quietly, 'Yeah. Right, gotcha.'

Barely audible, Katia hissed, 'Barry Kelnet, you *effing* bastard, you deserved to die years ago.'

'Kat, we'll need to. . .'

They were interrupted by a loud knocking at the front door.

'**Hello, Katia MacInnes.** It is my own self here, **Angus Kilgour.** Is it a homecoming party you are having to yourselves in there? **And why is this front door of yours open to the four winds?'**

Shooing his collies back outside, he said, 'Now sit you both!'

Angus slammed the door shut against the wind and, puzzled the lock was burst, jammed the door as best he could with a box, leaving his dogs whining, their noses hard against the crack at the door jamb.

Catherine MacInnes had never allowed any dogs in her house, kennelling her own outdoors, whatever the weather. She had often told Angus he was too soft on his dogs, treating them as pets when they were working animals.

He smiled again, as he always did in these moments remembering her jibe clear and loud, as if it was yesterday: "Away with you, man. Sure, and you will soon be taking a nice friendly ewe into your bedroom to keep you company, will you not now?"

Standing in the doorway of the living room, water streaming from his overcoat, Angus's hand patted at his pockets, trying to locate his pipe but the scene before him set him back on his heels.

'My God, girl, what is *this* I am seeing before me?'

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'Angus, there's been an accident. We think Barry's dead.'

'My God, Katia MacInnes, what is the game you three have been playing at here?'

The retired policeman shrugged out of his coat, looped it onto the coatrack at the end of the corridor, hung his deerstalker beside it, then moved back into the room and knelt beside the body, actions completed quickly with an easy grace which was the hallmark of this quiet man who did everything deliberately, thoughtfully, with no wasted effort or unnecessary words.

'Move over Sonny and let me have a look at him.'

Angus leaned low to the floor to check the source of the blood. When he saw the knife handle sticking out of the man's huge belly, he rolled Barry onto his back, knelt on one knee, felt for a pulse and put his ear against Barry's mouth to check for any sound of breathing.

Slowly, Angus pulled himself upright and glared at Zak. 'Och, yes, the man is dead, that is for certain sure. So, Katia, it is an accident, you say? Or is this down to you, Sonny?'

Acting out her part as if innocent, Katia sobbed and stared at the corpse in exaggerated disbelief then burst into tears, pulling her dressing gown up over her face, unaware that in doing so she was again exposing her nakedness. Her cheek began to throb. Gingerly she patted it with a tissue then looked at it, as if surprised to see blood, afraid to meet Angus's glare.

Zak shook his head, sank to his knees and stared at the knife sticking through the football top saturated in blood.

It must have punctured his heart. If he was not dead or dying from Kat's blow with the wine bottle, he would have died almost instantly anyway but the Police will never accept this was an accident, not ever.

Angus rose, moved to the kitchen, rinsed and dried his hands then picked his way passed the coffee table towards the other armchair, the one Zak had sat in earlier.

While Angus was doing this, Zak glanced at Katia, saw she was stunned, her mouth wide open, her body shivering. Afraid she might blurt out something incriminating, he rose and moved to stand beside her. When she looked at his face, he pursed his lips and shook his head to indicate she should say nothing.

Now seated, Angus patted his jacket pockets, pulled out his dry pipe, sucked on it noisily and closed his eyes, shaking his head, thinking through what he just found, comparing it with other stabbings and brutal deaths from his past.

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They waited. After a few minutes, Zak went to the kitchen and returned with a fresh thicker pad of kitchen towel wrapped around a packet of frozen peas which Katia pressed to her cheek. He hunkered down by her left side, taking her hand in his, squeezing as they exchanged a knowing look he pointing to his chest and mouthed, *'Leave the talking to me. OK?'* She nodded and smiled, *'Thanks.'*

Seconds later Angus eased himself upright, leaned forward assertively and said: *'Come now, Katia MacInnes, why do I find all three of you nearly naked? I smell whisky from Barry here and I am seeing an empty bottle of wine. Is this one of those 'spin the bottle sex games' that has gone wrong on the three of you? Were they fighting over you, Katia MacInnes? Did you encourage them? It is the sort of thing I might expect to find down there in Glasgow, not here on Verstaall. Now, tell me, what has been going on. I will hear the truth of this from both of you, everything, from the start of it all.'*

Katia sobbed, reached for the box of tissues, blew her nose then realised she had exposed herself. Crimson with embarrassment, she stood, held her dressing gown against her body and eased her way past the corpse to her bedroom. Pushing the door closed, she switched on the overhead light and stared at herself in the mirror, tears welling. Slowly, her mind was beginning to function again.

Oh, Kat MacInnes, you're trapped. Angus will pick away at us until he gets to the truth. You know what he's like. Only the full truth, every detail, will satisfy him. You'll go to prison. Maybe Zak too. Christ! It's so unfair.

After cleaning blood and snot off her dressing gown with facial wipes she eased back into her fleecy onesie. Staring at her face in the mirror she saw a huge swelling on her right cheek. The puncture wound was tiny, the blood already congealing. With a fresh wipe she dabbed it clean of blood, revealing a small skin tear, bright red but no longer weeping. Without thinking, she reached for her make-up bag with her right hand and the pain shot up through her wrist to her shoulder bringing another burst of fresh tears. Staring into her make-up mirror she thought:

Oh, Christ, Kat, you're like the Bride of Dracula. It was you who killed Barry! You know it, Zak knows it and Angus is sure to find out. What a right effin mess!

In the living room, Angus was glowering at Zak who was trying to resist the man's probing eyes by de-focusing to deploy 'a far horizon stare'.

This old man looks unwell but his eyes are sharp and he will not be fooled easily. He must have seen the dent on the brute's skull. Thank God there was no blood. Let's hope Kat can stick to our story that it was an accident, a self-inflicted death.

'Did you do this, Sonny?'

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Hearing the low rumble of their voices, Katia stood by the bedroom door and eased it open a crack to listen.

'Absolutely not!' Zak barked, raising his voice deliberately so she would hear what he was about to say. 'In fact, this brute of a man attacked me. As I jumped clear, he threw himself after me and we went down together. My head cracked on the coffee table and, when I came round, he was sprawled on top of me. I know it looks bad but the whole thing is his fault. The whole truth is, when this guy arrived, I was asleep in the spare room. Kat said he barged in on her while she was sleeping and tried to rape her. When she resisted, he started slapping and punching her. I heard screaming, ran to help and shouted at him to stop. The man was blind drunk, beyond reasoning with. Then it got ugly. He suddenly produced his flick knife. He was trying to stab me, slashing and shouting obscenities then, as I said, he lunged at me, I tripped and he fell on me. I was lucky he stabbed himself as he fell, otherwise I could have been the corpse. That's what happened, honest to God. It was all over within a few minutes. I've never seen him before in my life.'

Behind the bedroom door, Katia listened to Zak and smiled.

My God, Zak, you're good, really good. You almost convinced me.

'So, Sonny, it wasn't a knife fight? Tell me, will they find your fingerprints on that knife? Or was it indeed a knife fight and you've hidden yours?'

'Look, the truth is the truth. There was no other weapon and he was so drunk he could hardly stand upright, so he wasn't really a threat, not really. Given better luck, I'm sure I could have disarmed him. Anyway, what I can't figure out is how he got here. No one could have driven in the state he was in.'

'Well, Sonny, Barry's pickup is outside. The Devil looks after his own, they say.'

Zak squat jumped to his feet 'Excuse me. I need to get cleaned up.'

'No, Sonny. First we had better find out if you are as fit as you look. We shall get rid of this stinking monstrosity out of here and move it into Catherine's old chicken shed at the back door and get this place cleaned up. Do not worry about more blood, dead men do not bleed. At least he managed to keep it on that rug which is old anyway. Right, now, yes, that is it, good. Yes, that is what we shall do, we shall wrap him in it and use it to drag him through. It is ever a mystery why the dead are so heavy, is it not?'

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Interrogation

With Barry's body removed and the floor wiped and disinfected, Zak padded barefoot to the bathroom to sponge himself clean of the blood. Listening hard, Katia sat on her bed and waited, unsure where Zak was and unwilling to face Angus alone.

His ablutions completed, Zak went to his bedroom, returning to the living room dressed in a black Karate Gi (fighting suit) with his hair held back with a black cord. Angus was once again in the armchair Zak had used. The retired policeman seemed relaxed, his long legs outstretched, ankles folded, chewing and sucking on his dry pipe, his eyes closed, as if almost asleep. Choosing a spot to the left of Katia's armchair, Zak kneeled directly facing Angus with his spine upright, rolling his shoulders, trying to relax and make himself ready to face his interrogator. In his hand, he held a small phial of Tea Tree oil which he planned to use to treat Katia's cheek.

Angus eased himself upright and put his pipe away. 'Katia MacInnes, come you out here girl and let me hear your side of this sorry tale.'

Katia left her bedroom. 'Excuse me, I need a minute, my cheek.'

She headed for the kitchen, rinsed then replaced the packet of peas to the freezer compartment before making a fresh damp pad of tissues for her wound. Bracing herself, she made her way across the living room with her head down, taking her seat, using the pad over her cheek and eye as a prop to hide from the old man's searching gaze, unsure if she could deliver her version of the story without being tripped up.

Zak leaned across and, using a tissue, Zak gently dabbed her puncture wound. 'Kat, this is Tea Tree oil. It may sting a little but it's highly effective. It's a natural antiseptic and anti-inflammatory medicine which Australian aboriginals have used for thousands of years.'

This treatment administered, he eased himself to a slightly different angle forming a loose triangle between them so he could watch her face. As before, he sat on his knees, erect, poised, her protector, his right hand resting lightly, proprietarily, on her left knee.

The dim overhead lights were on, supplemented by the flickering beams from the smaller candles, whose scent gradually overwhelmed the stench of Barry's banished presence and the chlorine whiff from the damp patch where Zak had cleaned the corpse's residues from the floor.

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The storm, which had fallen away, now returned with renewed fury, howling like a host of lost souls, buffeting the cottage, rattling the windows and doors and tugging at the roof sheet fixings with malignant force, competing with the kettle-drumming of hailstones against the south-facing window, hidden by the heavy, wine-coloured velveteen curtains. The windsock screeched like a pig heading for slaughter, its tone and intensity changing as air was sucked either from or blown into the room by the vagaries of the wind slicing across the chimney outlet. Under the campervan, the dogs were curled into each other, asleep.

Because of the din inside the cottage, speech would have been difficult, if not impossible. Angus, a patient man and knowing this interruption would pass in its own good time, lay back again with his pipe in his mouth as before, resuming his previous pose, watching his interviewees through hooded eyelids, studying their body language for clues, re-running Zak's defensive outburst. He had seen Katia open the bedroom door to a slit and realised why the man Zak had raised his voice.

Whatever it is they are up to, they are in it together, hook, line and sinker.

Thankful for this delay, Katia and Zak closed their eyes and retreated into their own thoughts. Now the immediate practicalities of removing the corpse from view had been dealt with and a semblance of order had been restored, their minds were churning, trying to resolve and rationalise the issues thrown up by their roles in the recent violent death of their attacker.

Pretending to doze, Angus continued to watch them closely, happy to wait, knowing the enforced delay would build pressure on them, creating a desire to explain and justify themselves to him, their confessor. Long experience had taught him crime scenes were seldom what they first seemed; he was waiting to hear their fuller story before making his judgement.

In time the wind eased back to a force nine and hail turned to driving rain. This would prove to be a temporary respite. Five hundred miles away, to the south and west, another intense depression was arcing across the Atlantic Ocean towards The Long Island, dragging scores of sister fronts in her wake.

When the howling died down, Zak spoke, catching Angus slightly off guard.

'Kat, who is Barry? Why did he come here?'

'Barry Kelnet. He's married to my cousin, Ishbell Mackenzie. Don't you remember seeing him? From the ferry. One of the deckies?'

'No, not really, they all looked the same to me. Why did he come here, Kat?'

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This brought another flood of tears and she shivered, despite the warmth of the room. Now the adrenaline was fully spent, shock was re-asserting itself.

Angus responded to her sobs in a stern voice.

'Tears will not sort this, Katia MacInnes, so shush yourself now child.' He stabbed his pipe at Zak. 'And you, Sonny, make us a cup of tea then you will tell me both what it is that I am seeing here. I warn you, I am going to need good answers, for it is looking to me like one of those American horror films.'

Angus watched them glance at each other then look down, unable to face his hard stare. It would be better, the ex-policeman decided, to get Katia's version first. He had known her from an infant and believed he would spot a lie, if she proffered one. She had always been a truthful girl and had even confided to Catherine the painful business of the abortion after the wedding debacle when she had been assaulted by Barry. Was this attack why she had never found the right man?

'So, Katia, you make a start and tell me what happened, the whole of it, the drinking and the fornicating, if that is what happened here. Tell it all, the whole truth of it and do it right now, girl!'

Katia shook her head and blew her nose. 'I don't know what happened, Uncle Angus,' she pleaded. 'I don't know why Barry came here. Back at the ferry, I told him not to come, honestly. I hate the sight of him and what he's done to Ishbell and her kids.'

At this she broke down again, sniffing, crying, blowing her nose noisily into a handful of tissues.

Angus's irritation flared which he re-directed to Zak.

'And that tea, Sonny, that would be right now!'

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With tea dispensed and Katia recovered, Angus began his slow, deliberate interrogation, casting himself once again in the role of a policeman.

'Now, Katia, tell me everything from the beginning and how you got these injuries?'

His voice was softer but still had an edge to it. He was after the truth, as best they knew it, not a concocted fairy tale.

Katia told her story in a jumbled fashion, leaping backwards and forwards. This pleased Angus because he saw it as natural. This was her style, clever but slightly scatter-brained. Off the wall, they used to call it back in Glasgow. Almost as an afterthought, she explained about her damaged arm and wrist, caused by her fall on the ferry and her treatment from the Doctor.

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'Did you see this fall of hers, Sonny?'

'Call me Zak, please, not Sonny. And no, I'm sorry, I didn't see Kat's fall on the ferry. I was out on the foredeck, watching as we approached Hindness. I realise now the storm was just starting to build but even back then, it was spectacular but nothing like as amazing as it is now. When they announced we should go down to our vehicles, I knew I was at the back of the line, so stayed on deck until the last minute. Something went wrong with the steering. We slewed sideways and smacked into the pier then the alarm sounded to send us to muster stations and I was directed to the main cafeteria. I didn't see Kat again until she stopped out there at the Prayer Stone to help me, after I skidded off the road. From what she's told me, I reckon she probably fell when the ferry hit the pier.'

'So, Zak, you saw Barry hit Katia, did you?'

'No, not actually. You see, I was in the other bedroom, in my sleeping bag, fast asleep. I was wakened by shouting then I heard Kat scream. You've heard what Kat said, about how he beat her but no, I didn't actually see him hit her. But those marks on her face are new, not from her fall on the ferry. No, her face was unmarked, earlier. When I saw the man for the first time, he was standing beside her bed with his hand grabbing her hair. I didn't know what to think. He was naked from the waist down, as you saw him. I couldn't see Kat. I didn't know then he had assaulted her. My first impression was, well, to be honest, in that instant, I thought it might be a lover's tiff, that sort of thing. Look, sorry, Kat. I'm just trying to tell the whole truth, you know. Like on the Bible.'

Seeing the quick glance between them, Angus caught the trace of a smile on the girl's lips and thought:

This man is clever, he is giving to Katia the story she must follow, reminding her of what they have already agreed, to make sure she does not cross his version. He is the smart one. Chances are, he stabbed the brute to protect the girl and . . .

Zak continued, 'It was only later, when I saw her face, I realised what had been going on. As I said before, I didn't see what happened between him and Kat on the boat. Before Kat's screams wakened me, I was asleep in the spare bedroom. It had been a long trip from Watford. I was exhausted, completely out of it. When I intervened, he slashed at me with his knife. As I stepped back, I tripped and fell, banged my head. That's the last I remember until I came to and found him lying on top of me. At first, I did not know he was dead. I thought he was trying to smother me. As I've already explained, we had just realised he was dead when you appeared and now you know the rest.'

Angus changed focus, back to Katia. 'So, Katia, whatever happened between you two to bring Barry here? His own place is nigh on twenty miles away, up there at Norness.'

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Katia explained again what had happened when she had seen Barry on the ferry, and that both meetings had been on the vehicle deck. Listening to her repetition, Angus thought:

Well done, child, you have it off pat. Chances are, you both were rehearsing this when I interrupted you.

'Now, Katia MacInnes, think very carefully; who saw you talking to Barry the second time?'

'Uncle Angus, I told you this before, there was no one else about. Barry was waiting for me, hiding. All the other cars and trucks were gone. There was no one else around, not that I saw.'

'Did you see them, Sonny?'

'If you want answers, it's Zak, not Sonny. But no, I didn't see Kat or that man when I was disembarking. As I said, because Kat and I were last on at loading, I knew I would be last off so I went back out onto the foredeck after we had moored to try to see what had happened, what the damage was. When I realised everyone else was off, I went down to the car deck. As I said, before, it was empty. Just my truck and the campervan but no sign of Kat or anyone else, only the cheery old guy at the bottom of the ramp and two other men in the car park.'

'Katia, I must know the whole truth of this. Did anyone else see you talking to Barry on the empty car deck?'

'No, Uncle Angus. Look, I needed to go to the toilet after my fall. With my wrist strapped and arm in a sling, everything was so awkward. I realised there was no way I could drive while wearing them and took them off, washed my hands and checked my make-up. My wrist was aching. I took two more paracetamols. Everything took ages. When I got down to the car deck, my campervan was the only vehicle left. Barry was hiding in a doorway, smoking, waiting for me. I spotted him and ran across, got in, locked the doors and drove off, leaving him standing. We have a history, from years ago, Barry and me.'

'Ah, yes. That old business at Marie's wedding! So, Katia, tell me you two were not back at your old, eh. . .'

She could feel Zak's eyes on her, felt herself redden and buried her face in tissues., her mind screaming:

Oh, for God's sake, Angus, please, please leave it, please!

'Ah, well, no, no, no. No, we shall say no more of that! Now, Katia, are you truly certain sure no one else saw you with Barry?'

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She glanced up to Angus's face and saw the sadness in his eyes. Knowing full well that keeping secrets in a small community was almost impossible, this dread had been haunting her since she made the decision to move to *Tigh na Mara*:

Gran must have told Angus about my abortion. But who else did she tell? Knowing Barry, he would have mouthed off about his 'conquest' in the campervan. And now he's dead, here in my croft. Oh God, how could it possibly be worse? Now it will all come out, dragged up from the past. My name will be mud and Zak will get the blame.

She re-ran the memory of what had happened the second time with Barry, alone on the car deck.

Could anyone else have been watching him hauling at the door of the campervan, cursing and shouting as she drove away?

Katia decided to tough it out. What else could she do?

'No, Uncle Angus, I did *not* see anyone else around, only old Donnie Macdonald who guided me up the ramp but he couldn't have seen Barry thumping at my campervan because we were out of sight of the ramp, at the rear of the deck. Anyway, Donnie was desperate to get the bow doors closed up, shooin' me away up the ramp.'

'Now Katia, this is important. You're certain sure Donnie didn't see you and Barry?'

'Yes, certain. As I said, Donnie could not possibly have seen me. He was out of sight, hidden by the bulkhead at the far end of the deck. No one saw Barry approach my campervan. No one.'

'Good. Good. Sit easy now, Katia. And not another peep from you, for I have some questions for your new boyfriend here.'

Angus saw them exchange shy smiles and knew he had read it true. They were a couple, despite Zak's tarradiddle of sleeping in separate beds.

'Now, Sonny, tell me **again** why you **are** here on Verstaall? This truck of yours, the one that you **have abandoned** out there **at** the Prayer Stone, tell me everything.'

Zak's story unfolded, in a logical, clearly explained sequence with the wily old policeman intervening to check details, watching his eyes, his body language, prodding, interrupting, disrupting, trying to unnerve him and finally concluding:

This man's story sounds real, full of detail. He is well educated and seems sensible with it. Maybe what I am hearing from him is the truth, or most of it. He will only give me what he wants me to hear but maybe the brute Barry did stab himself after all.

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For a second time, Angus took Zak back to the truck, going over the reason for his visit, this time slowly, pedantically checking every detail of how the family business was organised, the roles of his father and step-mother, step-brother and cousin and the self-ordering website system the man claimed he had devised. It all sounded too complicated not to be true.

Angus said: 'Ach, young Jenkins the Diver is the go-getter, is he not? So, Zak, tell me about your father. He is the brains behind this *Stablegates*, is he?'

With each answer came another question, rambling backwards and forwards, Angus's piercing gaze swinging from Zak to Katia and back to Zak, going over and over the sequence of events, right to the point where Angus entered the room to find them with the corpse.

As he listened, he was thinking:

This part about the business rings true. The man knows every detail. He is the brains behind it. The others down there in Watford are depending on him. It is when we get to the part about Barry he gets nervous, glancing at Katia to make sure she is hearing his version. And the child is taken with him. She cannot take her eyes off him. And he wants her too, that is plain to see.

Zak eventually ran out of words. Waiting for Angus's next question, he saw the old man's eyes were closed and wondered:

Has he fallen asleep on me?

He glanced round at Katia who immediately put her finger across her lips and shook her head to prevent him from saying anything. Using a mixture of hand gestures and silent speech, Zak gathered she was pleading for him to keep quiet. She mouthed, slowly: 'Leave it be. Let him think it through. He'll sort it, you'll see.'

Pretending to doze, Angus watched them as before, resisting a smile while thinking:

They have a good story, with almost no holes in it. Indeed, it is almost too good to be true. And it is plain they are in it together, up to their necks. What matter if Zak did stab Barry? If he did, has not he surely done Verstaall a service? Ach, and it is almost certain sure that only the three of us here in this croft know the brute came here at all.

Angus was once again playing the police officer, holding several 'information cards' his interviewees were blithely unaware of, enjoying the old game of teasing out the pieces of the jigsaw he did not yet have:

Well, now, it will do the child no harm if I try to find out as much as I can before she makes a full commitment to him.

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'Right then, Mr Hacklet, tell me again about your family. You say you are originally from Glasgow and yet you have not a trace of Glasgow in your words. Surely a true man never forgets his roots?'

Zak began again with Angus curious for every detail. His two avid listeners learned about Jimmy Hacklet, Zak's white father and Amelia Winston, his black-skinned common-law stepmother and of Vernon, Zak's mixed-race sibling. Although Amelia had been born in the UK, her family had strong roots in Jamaica. The odd couple had been together since Zak was about four.

In answer to a follow-up question from Angus, they learned Zak was now twenty-eight. At his news, Angus had nodded to Katia, knowing she was newly twenty-nine.

Under Angus's steady probing, Katia learned of the day to day running of *Stablegates*, a family business, operated from a ramshackle farm steading on the outskirts of Watford. When Zak had left for university, Jimmy had taken on Denzel Winston, one of Amelia's many nephews. Unlike Vernon and his equally wayward mates, Denzel was clever and dependable. He and Zak were good buddies, sharing Karate and cycling as common passions.

As a child, Zak had accepted Amelia as his 'Mum', realising the truth only later, as he grew up. Whenever Zak had raised the issue of his Glasgow origins, his father had diverted the conversation to football, proud of his time playing for *Maryhill Juniors* where he had been spotted as a good prospect. Although he had eventually signed for *Liverpool FC*, Jimmy had never been chosen for the first team. When he was older, Zak had pressed for information about his birth mother to be told bluntly by Jimmy:

"No, Zak, leave the memory of the poor woman alone. Let her rest in peace."

Although Zak was no longer an active member of the *Stablegates* installation squad, he had been ambushed into this trip to Verstaall, a project which Denzel would have normally undertaken. With Jimmy in Europe following his beloved team and Vernon and Denzel on holiday, to satisfy Amelia, Zak had agreed to provide emergency cover. Under pressure from Angus, Zak revealed his father was a binge drinker and had been detained in Slovenia by the local police, for drunkenness.

Nodding while listening attentively, smiling occasionally, Angus listened as Zak explained his childhood and his eventual escape to Bristol University. From the details provided, Angus concluded Zak was a young man who had defied his family background, pulling himself up by his bootlaces to gain a good education:

This pair I see before me are like two peas from the very same pod.

When the story moved on to his more recent past, Zak revealed he owned a three-bedroomed flat in Dundee, acquired when he moved to Abertay University to study for

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his PhD. When his lodger's lease expired in a few months' time, he was planning to sell it for upwards of £300,000, according to the estate agent.

Hearing this, Katia glanced at Zak in astonishment. Her Glasgow flat had been valued around £90,000 and *Tigh na Mara*, without its croft land, at about £40,000.

Angus caught the look, clearly new information for his goddaughter:

Ach, he is going too far now, spinning me a tale and aiming to impress her. Let us hear the detail from him then we shall judge how it stacks up.

Pouncing with a string of aggressive questions, Angus was reassured by Zak's quiet and confident answers, learning this flat had been part of the former Nurses Home at the long defunct Dundee Royal Infirmary, converted and modernised by a developer twenty-odd years earlier, during a 'buy to let' boom. Back then it had been bought 'off plan' by a newly retired dentist on the advice of her financial advisor, to provide her with a secure top-up income to add to her NHS pension.

On arriving in Dundee four years earlier, the local market had been going through a downswing. The flat had been cheap because it had been let out to a foreign student, a Nigerian who had concealed his intention to occupy the flat with his wife and two small children. Breaking the terms of their lease, his wife had used the flat as a day creche for children of other overseas students, trashing the premises during their three years of tenancy, making it unlettable. The dentist, now in her late seventies and living a three-hour drive away in Fortrose, had been desperate to sell. Using the bulk of his savings, Zak had bought the wreck outright for £123,000, initially living in squalor while restoring it to a good standard, then finding a series of lodgers, fellow students at Abertay and Dundee Universities, using their rental income to offset running costs.

When Angus probed hard on how he had accumulated the initial purchase price, Zak explained it had come from his fish-rearing business, started as a hobby when he was fourteen and currently netting him around £30K annually, still a part-time business but with potential for growth.

While the man was telling his story, Angus was thinking:

This fish business, if it exists at all, is a cover for drugs. I expect he will tell us next he has a big fancy car he keeps in a secure lock-up where he stashes his stuff.

'So, Sonny, you would have us believe it is now the big businessman you are, a property mogul and fish-rearing entrepreneur, is it? With two university degrees, is it? So, this is your best story for us simple folks away out here on the edge of the world, is it? Yet what we see before us is a man with a ponytail pretending to be a Karate expert and driving a twenty-year old truck sinking into the bog out there with an old bike all bent

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and twisted tied onto the back of it. You will be telling us next you normally drive a fancy big BMW, is it? Ach, away with you, why not pull the other one?’

‘No, Uncle Angus it’s true

‘**No, Katia! Wheesht** now! Let this business mogul speak for himself.’

‘Mr Kilgour. I don’t own a motor vehicle, never have. And that ‘old bike’, as you call it, cost me just over four thousand pounds. My tropical fish business, as I explained to Kat, is a money-spinner. Look, I know, as a policeman, you are used to dealing with criminals and you are quite right to be suspicious of me but I can show you the orders and how the business works. All the details are on my laptop. It’s quite simple really, from the money point of view. The skill is in fish husbandry, giving the fish the right circumstances to breed which, of course, varies from species to species. Not everyone can do it successfully. And please, it’s Zak, not Sonny.’

As Zak had been talking, answering calmly, Angus was thinking:

This man seems to be genuine, clever, confident and he seems to be the mainstay of his family, even though they are clearly dysfunctional. Despite his odd look, with a beard and a fancy ponytail, he seems to be healthy and wholesome. It is plain he is taken with my Katia but is he good enough for her? Is it all an act being put on for my benefit? Maybe he is twisted or some sort of religious bigot? Now is the time to apply some pressure to flush out any secrets he may have.

Angus leaned forward and stabbed his pipe in Zak’s face.

‘This fish business of yours, Zachariah Hacklet, is it a cover for drug dealing you are running? A big scam?’

‘No. I don’t do drugs. I don’t smoke, nor do I drink alcohol. I like to keep my body clean by eating healthily, keeping fit and staying focussed.’

‘Are you religious?’

‘I’ve studied Buddhism but I’m not a Buddhist. I practice Mindfulness through Meditation, based on a simplified version of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. I try to keep my body free from extraneous substances such as caffeine and its derivatives by drinking organic decaffeinated infusions. Although I’m mainly vegetarian, I do eat wild meat, free of chemicals and hormones, fresh fish and organic eggs but not pork in any form.’

‘All the roommates you’ve told us about have been male. Are you homosexual?’

Katia closed her eyes, focussed her mind on what she hoped to hear and waited.

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'Well, Mr Kilgour, you do like to be direct. No, I'm not gay. I have had a few girlfriends but so far it hasn't worked out. My eye puts them off. I've got used to being 'avoided'.'

'Zachariah, you look fit, healthy. But are you?'

'Sorry Mr Kilgour, you've lost me? What have these questions of yours got to do with the man Barry? Listen, I think you are totally out of order here, prying into my personal life. The man pulled out a knife. He was attacking me and I tried to defend myself. He lunged at me and I stepped back and tripped, probably on the rug, I don't know for sure. The next thing I remember was falling backwards and hitting my head on something, probably the coffee table. Kat has already told you all this. Look, count back, we've been over this at least three times. Out there in the utility room, the rug Barry's wrapped inside; you probably noticed it was worn out, rucked and threadbare, an accident waiting to happen. I presume he tripped on it, as I did. So, other than that, I can't say how he ended up dead. I suppose he must have fallen on his own knife but Mr Kilgour, you are the expert. Make your own judgement. We say he tripped and, lucky for me, as he fell he stabbed himself. Don't we, Kat? So, end of story.'

'Zak is right. That's exactly what happened. Barry fell on Zak and stabbed himself. Honestly, Uncle Angus, that's what happened.'

'Enough of that righteous indignation, young man! We have a dead body out there to account for so calm yourself and indulge an old man by answering this last question. Are you fit and healthy? You don't have AIDS or anything of that ilk, do you?'

'Yeah, yeah. OK. Given the blood that's around here and Kat's face wound, I suppose that's a fair question. So, yes, as far as I know, I'm in good health. I have no ailments, no underlying medical conditions. Even my odd eye has perfect vision, if that's what you're hinting at. I suppose the other worry is whether Barry is carrying any infections. Corpses can remain infectious for days, I've heard.'

Angus stood and rolled his shoulders, rocking forward onto his toes to deliver his judgement.

'Zachariah, Katia, thank you both for being open and honest with me. I can see now, what happened here in this room tonight could be described as an accidental death, caused by drink and lust, leading to aggravated assault. In terms of natural justice, Barry Kelnet out there got only what he deserved. Some, and I am one of them, would say he has had this coming to him for many a long year.'

Angus smiled benignly and patted his pockets for his pipe, lowering himself back into the armchair, sitting upright, his hooded eyes flitting from one face to the other:

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Ach yes, it is clear this is the man she wants and she could go a long way to find herself a better.

'Be still now you both and give me peace and quiet to think through how we shall deal with this bourach¹.'

All three sat in silence, sipping what was now cold tea, thinking their own thoughts. Eventually, Angus gave a sigh, placed his empty cup on the floor, manipulated his dry pipe to the side of his mouth, clamped it with his teeth, crossed his arms over his chest and lay back in the armchair with his eyes closed, his long legs stretched in front of him with his ankles crossed. Had it not been for the empty pipe being chewed and sucked, his two observers might have presumed he was asleep. Zak and Katia grinned to each other. His hand moved back to rest on her knee, squeezing gently. At this, she moved her left hand to rest on it, squeezing and rubbing her thumb across the fine, soft, golden hairs on the back of his fingers.

The storm began to build again, making the windsock whine in the flue, at times screaming as the gusts hit the croft. After a while, Zak rose to make another pot of tea and, at Katia's whispered request, fetched her make-up bag, a pillow to support her damaged arm and the duvet to wrap herself in. Although the room was warm, she was feeling shivery, a combination of mental turmoil, lack of sleep and a growing excitement she could not explain.

Cups re-filled, Zak settled beside the fireplace in what Katia took to be a Yoga position, his eyes closed, back and head upright, legs crossed like a Buddha, wrists resting on his knees, hands cupped open, pointing upwards as if waiting for a blessing to be dropped into them. From time-to-time he stirred and sipped from his mug.

Cocooned in her duvet like a wee mouse, Katia opened her toilet bag, found her make-up mirror, examined the damage to her face and decided to apply more foundation cream, hoping it would help conceal the swelling, make her seem more normal.

Outside, the storm reached force ten, gusting eleven, veering from due south to due west then back again, filling the air with hailstones.

Angus's dogs were now curled together asleep under Barry's pick-up, directly below the faint remnant heat from its engine.

¹ Gaelic word for 'complete mess or muddle'.

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Daydream Believers

Zak and Katia waited for Angus to suggest what to do. From time to time, Zak opened his eyes to check on Katia, often finding her staring at him. Smiles were exchanged but they remained silent.

Going over in her mind what she had learned about Zak during his grilling, Katia was beginning to feel normal, even optimistic. The next time he looked across to check on her, she mouthed to him, pointing, asking him to switch off the overhead light.

Having done so, he whispered in her ear that he was still worried about being contaminated by Barry's blood. Whispering in turn, ear to ear, they agreed he should put his soiled clothing in her washing machine and take another shower.

Staring at the mesmerising glints of the candles in the hearth, listening to the sound of him splashing only a few metres away, Katia decided to apply her untrained version of Mindfulness to send a message:

Zak, please stay with me on Verstaall. With you to help me, I'm certain I could turn my life around. You could teach me about Mindfulness through Meditation, help me to eat healthier, slim down, get fit, really fit, like you. I'd drink only on special occasions. If you agree to have a child with me, I'd stop entirely, I promise.

Tucked inside her duvet, warm and cosy, Katia felt her skin prickling, irritated by the synthetic material of her new onesie. When this itching became intolerable, she unwrapped herself from her cocoon, padded across to again search through the boxes Zak had slit open, in the fading hope of finding her special kimono pyjamas. Disappointed, she chose a dark purple velour lounging top and matching pants which were flattering, soft and comfortable. In her bedroom, moving gingerly, trying to avoid pain, she stripped off the onesie and changed into her new outfit then checked in the mirror:

Mmm, yes, much better. Why did I not think of this outfit earlier? Not as nice as my silk pyjamas but perhaps even more appropriate, given Angus is with us.

On the tallboy, the largest candle still flickered. Easing up the windshield with her left hand, checking, she saw the candle did not need replacing, still about half remaining.

Studying her bruised face in the mirror brought back the terror of Barry's attack:

Oh, God, Kat, what a mess your face is. You've had a very lucky escape, my girl! Think what might have happened if Zak hadn't come to my rescue, the brute might have killed me. What must it have been like for Ishbell and her wee ones living with that

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beast? And Zak stood up to him, even when he attacked with his flick knife. He wasn't frightened of Barry, unlike every other man on this island.

The notion she might be responsible for Barry's demise was fading. As Angus had concluded, the brute had killed himself. Catching the reflection of her onesie lying on her bed conjured up a horrible thought:

My kimono outfit is back in Glasgow, locked in my cupboard with my sexy underwear and cat masks. Oh, Christ Almighty, why did I ever let Darrell take those nude photographs? The last thing I need now is for them to turn up on the Internet. He would never dare, would he? Thank God I insisted on wearing my masks.

To get her iPad, she reached to lift her backpack with her right hand and a stab of pain shot through her arm, bringing a yelp. Sitting on the bed, she found the code-protected folder containing the copies Darrell had sent her then skipped through them one final time before deleting them.

Focussing hard, she sent out an earnest Mindfulness request:

Please, Darrell, please - you must delete them from your iPhone. Please.

Back in her armchair, she swaddled herself into the duvet again, hoping the extra warmth would ease the pain in her body, particularly her knees which were aching and stabbing. Zak appeared in three-quarter-length grey denims wearing a tight yellow tee-shirt which revealed his muscular torso. On the tee-shirt there was a green logo in the form of a bicycle wheel circled by the words *Global Climate Change Collective*. On his feet he wore short lemon socks edging snazzy running shoes in vivid orange. Settled into a Yoga position but now closer to her armchair, he reached over to tuck the bottom edge of the duvet under her legs and feet. Katia felt warm, cosy, safe, dreamy.

We are a pair, in this predicament together. But Angus will get us out of this then our lives will be perfect.

Smiling at what the future might hold, she reached across, lifted Zak's wrist, saw it was just after five o'clock. Their eyes met briefly. His smile spread to a grin and she pouted sweetly, imagining his lips landing on hers. Snuggling back into her duvet 'nest', she arranged the top edge to form a hood to hide the damaged side of her injured face.

Peeking out, only her good eye showing, she saw Zak was watching her, smiling. Blowing him a hidden kiss, she closed her eyes and tried to follow his earlier advice by letting the tension fall from her body. After a few attempts, she began to drift away, enjoying the sensation of floating, weightlessly.

I'm a dolphin maiden now, she giggled.

Moving carefully, she eased her knees before wrapping her ankles into each other:

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Zak wants me as much as I want him. When this is over, I'll get us slathered in massage oil and we'll enjoy slow, slippery sex.

Imagining the scene, she grinned:

*Well, Zak, are you getting **this** Mindfulness message?*

Still smiling, she slipped under, floating down into a restful sleep.

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Zak raised himself slightly, leaned forward and checked first on Katia; she was sleeping with a happy smile on her face. Angus was dozing, from time to time chewing and sucking on his pipe. Weary from the long slow journey from Watford, Zak held off sleep by setting his mind to consider their predicament:

The old man looks terribly unwell. Let's hope he doesn't die on us or we'll never get out of this mess. It seems clear he's in this with us now, probably because of Kat. We need his help and local knowledge. He'll know the best place to dump the body, maybe bury it in the bog, near the Prayer Stone? And we need to get rid of Barry's vehicle. Maybe I could drive it out towards this Norness place and abandon it? Or is there a better way? We need to throw them off the scent when they search for him. We have the cover of darkness and the storm. But we must act soon, before first light.

His mind swung again to Kat, who had been filling his thoughts since he had first asked her for help at the Prayer Stone:

*How amazing to have at last found a girl who wants me as much as I want her. Not just any girl. Kat is beautiful, talented, clever. And she is **here**, a perfect place to live and bring up kids. She said it was fate, maybe it is. In any case, it seems to be a once in a lifetime opportunity. It's now or never.*

Zak reset his thought loop to the moment he spoke to Kat at the Prayer Stone, intending to run it through to the delicious erotic dream encounter he had been enjoying before Barry had smashed into their lives. He started with Kat's beautiful face, her coy smile, her bold, naughty eyes. No girl had ever looked at him like that before.

Outside, the storm raged, thudding and whumping at the walls, jerking and tugging at the roof and carrying windblown spume high onto the machair, blanketing the sheep hunkered down among the dunes, each small family group huddled together in their hefted nooks and crannies, their eyes closed, placidly chewing the cud.

Inside *Tigh na Mara*, time appeared to slow down.

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Feeling himself slipping over into sleep, Zak fought it off by cupping his hands upwards and taking deep breaths to re-oxygenate his body and mind, concentrating his psyche to access his inner reserves of mental and physical energy, knowing he must be alert when Angus decided to give his judgement.

Behind his mask, Zak was already planning a new life in the wildness of the Outer Hebrides. Sifting through mental highlights from his academic studies, Zak knew the seas around the archipelago were highly productive. He had read online of locals who hand-dived for scallops, crabs and lobsters, much in demand by the local hotels:

I'll start a dive school, reveal the wonders of the underwater world to visitors. I'll teach her to scuba and she can help too, operate the safety boat, make sure everything is by the book. I'll use my diving skills and knowledge to creel sustainably for langoustines, dive for scallops and spearfish for bass, cod, saithe and other coastal species which are out there in abundance. There must be places nearby where I could put in fine mesh net-cages or create protected sea pools to grow some of my salt fish species naturally, expand my fish breeding business at almost no cost. Seals and sea otters will be a problem, I'll need strong outer cages to keep them out. This needs further research to find the best methods. We'll use the extra money to upgrade the croft, maybe even remodel it completely, make it fully eco-friendly. With so much solar energy from the long summer days, the constant high winds and the tidal power available on our doorstep, it must be possible to generate enough free electricity to meet all our needs and more. We'll aim for a carbon neutral home, using free electricity to drive a heat pump using the sea as our source.

He recalled Kat's enthusiasm for home grown vegetables:

With polytunnels, we'll grow a full range of vegetables, fruits, fungi, herbs and sell our surplus to others. In spring and autumn, we'll use excess wind energy to pump heat into rock bed sumps to extend the growing season. Maybe we could crop all year round with low-light winter cropping plants.

Then he moved his focus to consider Kat's flock of sheep:

These sheep are home-grown, providing organic meat. We could add free-range chickens and harvest their eggs and meat to feed ourselves as the islanders have done for hundreds of years before imported, processed food became the norm. Maybe we could get a few milking cows and, with the excess milk make different types of cheese to sell on for cash. What about milking sheep to make ewes' milk? I must find out more about goats and how they might fit into the mix. Sheep and goat cheeses are high premium products. Surely there must be a farm shop nearby where we could sell our surplus from the land and sea? If not, we'll start one, maybe a community shop like the one Kat mentioned.

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Zak moved his focus to transport. On the drive to the croft, Kat had told him the campervan was over twenty-years old. With its noisy exhaust, squishy brakes and dodgy gearbox, driving it had been a hairy, uncomfortable experience. Like his father's truck, the campervan was clearly on it last few thousand miles and, for the sake of the environment, both should be scrapped, recycled correctly by an approved contractor, no matter what the cost:

For eco-transport, I'll bring my 'follow-on' bicycle trailer up from Watford. Can Kat ride a bike? I'll teach her. Maybe we'll get a tandem. Is there a cycling club on Verstaall? If not, then we'll start one and get a junior bike club going for the kids, wean them off dependence on computers, tablets and smartphones by physical exercise. On trips to the mainland, we'll travel by bus. Is Oban the nearest rail station. Or is there one nearer? If we find we do need a car for local trips, our journeys would be short so we should get an all-electric vehicle, charge it for free. Maybe I could make one, recycle a small car, like my Dad's Reliant Robin with its plastic body and galvanised chassis?

He rolled his shoulders and twisted his torso to ease the growing tension before concluding:

By using our minds, assets and energy, we will help make Verstaall into an eco-community, leading by example and helping others to move forward. I'm sure we'll make a great team. It'll be perfect, absolutely perfect.

He shifted his mind to consider Kat's plans for a ceramics' studio:

It's obvious from her candle holders she is a gifted artist. I need to find out more about the processes involved and learn how to help her. She needs a good website. I'm sure by working together we could create something 'classic' and get it targeted, perhaps by posting You Tube video clips of her at work. We'll need an online payment system and a PayPal account. Like my fish business, we'll need to build a reliable, verifiable logistics system to deliver her artwork safely and securely.

Zak could feel his mind drifting off into fine details best dealt with later and brought his focus back to the image of her staring hotly at him through the mist from the bathroom doorway. Unaware he was smiling, he began again to savour the night's earlier events, the sexy part before Barry's intrusion, this time playing selected scenes: the erotic shock when she had leaned into him at the boiler; standing close to her as he helped her undress for her bath, close enough to lean in and kiss her, as he had almost done; slowing and savouring the special moment when she had brushed past him to get her toilet bag and a minute or so later, as she made her way back to the bathroom when her hand had landed gently on his erection.

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Surely this caress must have been intended. Did it really happen or is this wishful thinking?

Leaving the door open enough to let him watch her getting ready to enter her bath had been deliberate. The living room had filled with the wonderful scent of her perfume, making him feel even more randy. He paused the frame at this point, relishing the moment. Before turning to close the door, she had stared at him boldly, looking him up and down and, seeing his condition, smiling at his embarrassment then grinning and giggling. When she had finally retreated into the swirling mist, he had almost called out to offer his help with hair washing, sponging her back or anything else:

*Is 'lewdly' the right word for the look she gave me? Perhaps 'lustfully' or, maybe, 'naughtily' would be more accurate. Yes, 'naughtily' as if tempting me, challenging me. Her face is gorgeous with a perfect, well-developed body which matches her kind and generous nature. Kat is an open and 'giving' person, the girl I've been hoping for all my life. The nicest think about her is her smile, her naughty smile. Best of all, she really wants me as much as I want her. We are **made** for each other. When this drama with Barry has been dealt with, we **will** make a fresh start. Does she want kids? I'm **sure** she does. She **will** make a great mother. Bringing up kids here **will** be perfect.*

Urgently, he skipped forward to the sexiest scene, switching to slo-mo, moving his mental film forward frame by frame.

He was heading from the shower to the spare bedroom, a towel around his waist. She called to him, leaning around her bedroom door, pleading with him to sleep in the living room, to be close to her. His mind buzzing, distracted by the knowledge she was probably naked behind the door and was most definitely 'posing' for him, he had been unable to focus on her words properly. She had leaned out further from behind the door deliberately revealing a fulsome breast and a beautiful nipple, pink, engorged, surrounded by a dark maroon areola. He had searched her bold eyes, trying to find out if this 'showing' was deliberate or accidental, like the gentle touch on his erection when she had swished past him earlier, trapping him against the radiator. Had she been daring him to walk forward, drop his towel and move to her bed? Why had he turned away? The disappointment on her face had struck his heart, causing turmoil, convincing him she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Alone in his bedroom, he had made excuses for refusing her offer.

The first 'reason' he had given himself was her injured arm, fearing if she suffered pain in the heat of the moment, this would spoil things, perhaps irretrievably. Another factor was that he did not have any condoms and unprotected sex carried many risks

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apart from pregnancy. However, he knew the real reason was his uncertainty, given he was still, technically, an unrequited virgin.

Would I have been able to satisfy her without spoiling everything, or would it have been a re-run of the disaster with Rosita?

Thinking this through after his 5BX routine, he had unzipped his sleeping bag placing the upper cover to one side. Lying naked on top of it, with a few tissues to hand, he pictured the final scene of their evening with her standing on display at her bedroom door, longing in her eyes. Moving his hands slowly across his stomach, he began savouring a long, slow indulgence. Strong come-ons from a girl had never happened to him before. Holding himself on the edge, he rewound the memory from the start, trying to recall every detail, enjoying her bold, naughty smile, making his pleasure last. Feeling the delicious, irresistible pressure building in his loins he at last gave way, bringing himself to a magnificent, grunting, head spinning climax. Cleaning himself with the tissues, he enjoyed the last ripples of pleasure before zipping himself into his sleeping bag and drifting down into an erotic, dream-filled sleep.

Time chose a slower rhythm, moving ahead in microseconds.

Outside the croft, the storm reached another crescendo with hail playing a loud snare drum rat-ta-tat on the living room window and the windsock whining and whistling in the flue.

Inside, Angus continued with his planning while Katia slept and Zak, dozing on the edge of sleep, enjoyed the thunder of the waves crashing on the shore and against the steep cliff edge which bulwarked the croft from the untamed wildness.

Zak tipped over into his dream world, to his future:

He was back in his sleeping bag. Kat was calling to him. Transported as if by magic, he was immediately by her bedside, in the flickering light of the single candle. They were both naked with Kat supine, her arms in a y-shape, smiling up at him, her eyes closed. He climbed onto her bed and, kneeling astride her, began to massage her breasts, enjoying her tiny squeals of pleasure as he tugged, squeezed and nibbled, sharing his attentions equally between each breast, whispering to her, telling her she was the girl he had been hoping for all his life.

The scene changed.

Kat was on top, her hands slippery with oil as he fought to contain his threatening climax.

The dream rolled back to an earlier scene.

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They were beside the faulty boiler. She leaned into his back, her body warm and soft against him, the scent of her perfume filling his nostrils, causing him to throb with desire. Both of her ample breasts pressed against his shoulder blades, her breath hot on his neck, a contact which lasted too long to be merely accidental.

He rose and turned to discovered they were both naked. Smiling, she turned away into a mist of steam, trailing her hand to caress his manhood, setting his entire body tingling with desire.

Once more the scene changed.

Another variation of his fantasy unfolded. He was naked, outside her bedroom door, knocking gently. Entering, she pulled back the duvet to reveal she was wearing only her thong.

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With the storm centred directly above the tiny croft, the wind, rain and hail had stopped, creating an air of expectation in the eerie silence.

Directly outside the living room window, a piping of oystercatchers competed, their urgent cries filling the intervals between thunderous crashes of landing waves and the low rumble of their retreat.

From the edge of his awareness, this shrill, haunting call from the birds jerked Zak back to reality.

Time resumed its steady, irresistible beat.

Opening his eyes, he was disappointed to find he was not in bed with Kat but seated beside her armchair. His dream subsided, leaving him with a pleasant, residual throbbing, glad he had swapped to baggier denims from his tight cycling pants. Now was not the time to be caught with an erection on display.

High above *Tigh na Mara*, the quiet eye of this early portent of the coming three-week superstorm was moving eastwards at walking pace heading for the mainland.

Rejection

Zak looked towards the window, still dark around the edges of the curtains. In the strange quietness, the boiler and its pump could be heard from beyond the kitchen door. Checking his watch, he was surprised it was only a few minutes after six o'clock. It would be dawn soon. Sneaking another look, he saw Kat was watching him, a smile playing around her eye. He smiled widely then forced himself to refocus on their urgent priority:

How to dispose of the corpse and the vehicle? If only I had accepted Kat's offer to make love to her, the whole outcome might have been different. Had I been in bed with her when the brute forced his way in, I could easily have sent him packing, bruised and beaten but still alive.

Squirming to re-arrange the duvet, Katia released a fresh charge of spicy perfume. Inhaling deeply, Zak allowed the problem of Barry and his vehicle to recede while he re-examined his memory of the last hours from a more critical viewpoint, checking again if he had read her signals correctly. Although he tried to resist, this process led him into unwanted territory. Unaware his hand had moved to shield his odd eye, the same old corrosive self-doubt welled up, releasing the suppressed negative flashback from his two years pursuing Rosita. Derailed from thinking pleasant thoughts about Kat, he began raking over what had transpired, wondering for the hundredth time why he had tried so hard and for so long to snare her.

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Zak had been in the second year of an Honours degree at Bristol University, spending hours in the library, cramming hard to make sure he did well. He was one of the older students, having delayed his start until he was awarded a bursary and had enough in his savings account to sustain him, knowing he could not call on his family for support.

From his chosen study desk on the gallery, Zak had watched Rosita for hours, surreptitiously following her tall, slim, athletic body as she moved gracefully returning books to the racks, mentally undressing her with lustful intent.

Infatuated, he was wildly jealous when she smiled at others or even when her dark brown eyes flashed with annoyance at stupid and suggestive remarks made by students at her desk as she processed their books. He noticed she seemed friendlier towards female students and, for a while, wondered if Rosita was gay. Although she had a firm and somewhat distant manner with most students, because he spent a lot of time in the library, she eventually acknowledged him and smiled when he tried to make small jokes.

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She had been thirty-one to his twenty-three when he first asked her out for a meal at a restaurant which specialised in organic food. During his planning period, he had learned from overheard conversations she was a strict vegan and a devout Roman Catholic. He also knew she went running every day, regardless of weather, timing herself, always seeking to improve.

After that first meal, he took up running with her, discovering she ran her 10K circuit at least twice a day, often extending her evening runs for up to two hours at a stretch. In his mind, Rosita did this to rid herself of pent-up sexual desire, a notion which had served to fuel his own lust, creating the belief that, like him, she was a virgin and keen to become physical. Although her behaviour remained aloof, secretive and dismissive, he told himself this was because she was shy and vulnerable. Accordingly, he had suppressed his early doubts by convincing himself Rosita would mellow and warm to him as she came to trust him.

It had taken nearly two years before he had finally persuaded her to lie beside him on his bed, both still partially dressed. When he moved to caress her intimately, she had pushed him away, punching viciously at his groin. He had pleaded, showing her a box of condoms, trying to offer the re-assurance of safe sex. This had provoked her further, causing her to knee him, rolling from the bed, standing over him, screaming and trying to punch and slap his face:

"Don't you understand? We agreed it would be just kissing and cuddling. I don't ever want to do this dirty touching! D'you think I'm your whore, bought for a few nice meals and concert tickets? You are despicable Zak Hacklet. I never want to see you again, ever!"

Ignoring his pleas, she had dressed quickly and left, leaving him frustrated, angry, devastated and filled with guilt.

In the immediate aftermath, he had convinced himself it was his eye which was the deterrent. However, a few days on, he decided the reason Rosita was afraid to commit wholeheartedly to sex outside of marriage was due to her deep commitment to her Roman Catholic faith. Because she had refused to meet or talk to him, he had written her a long email, professing his ardent love and making an offer of marriage. He would pay for everything, explaining he had just over £150,000 saved, promising he would find a bigger flat or a house with a garden. After several drafts, he also added the carefully worded suggestion that they could either start a family at once or use a 'natural' method of birth control until she was ready to have children.

Her rejection had been delivered two days later by email from Rosita's account. This was a rambling, unedited diatribe peppered with vicious, hurtful phrases written and signed by her older sister Giuliana who also worked at the university in the Bursar's office:

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"anyone looking at you can tell at once you are an ugly, perverted sexual deviant"

"how dare you defile my beautiful, vulnerable sister"

"if you ever attempt to contact Rosita again, I shall personally report you to the Police and the University Court for attempted rape and continual sexual harassment".

Rosita had refused to respond to his further emails, ignoring him when he trailed her from the library to her bus stop. As his final exams loomed, he had given up on her.

On graduating, he had accepted the PhD opportunity at Abertay, resolving to settle for a bachelor life.

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Pulling himself away from his past, Zak stole another glance and saw she was watching him from inside her duvet hood. Their eyes met and held. She stuck out her tongue. He smiled which became a grin. Closing his eyes, he shifted position slightly to make his groin area more comfortable then returned to his reverie, regaining the earlier positive track:

With Kat it will be different. She seems to accept my rogue eye. Why? At least there does not seem to be a mother figure or sister lurking to put her off. What about her other relatives, what will they make of me? If problems arise, I'll overcome them. She wants me as much as I want her. We can make it work.

He turned his mind to Angus Kilgour. Zak considered himself an expert when it came to reading people's reactions to his appearance and, for whatever reason, Angus did not seem to notice his odd eye. The old man was clearly important in Kat's world. Although he looked frail, he was clearly still strong, able to take his share of the dead weight when they had lifted Barry. But there was a greyness to his skin and a dullness in his blue-grey eyes, indicative of failing health.

Zak had seen the old man glare at the wine cartons with undisguised disgust and had watched Kat's guilty defiant reaction in her 'so what?' shrug. Although Zac also loathed addictions of any kind, her attitude to alcohol did not daunt him.

*If she has a drink problem, I'll help her overcome it through Mindfulness as I did with Amelia and Auntie Verity. Kat must know already about the risks of foetal alcohol damage. Together we'll break her habit, work on her diet and fitness. It **will** work out perfectly. We **will** make a great team. I can feel it. It **will** be amazing.*

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Determination

Peeking from her 'face cave', Katia continued to study the new man in her life, happy his eyes were closed so she could observe him without being caught, watching his cupped hands flexing gently as small frowns gave way to smiles.

What is he thinking? Is it me? God, look at the strength in his body, his arms. He is magnificent. What would it be like to have him caress me with his beautiful hands, make love to me with his powerful body? Oh please, Zak, please. And soon, my darling man.

Following his example, attempting her version of Mindfulness, she closed her eyes and tried to imagine what she wanted to become a reality.

She had always wanted dogs but living in Glasgow, had resisted, believing it was unfair to have dogs which could not run free:

I must have at least two dogs. No, I want three, like Gran.

As an only child, Katia had always longed for siblings:

A baby. I want a baby, maybe two, or even three. We'll need enough money to remodel Tigh na Mara.

Thinking of children always brought back the spectre of the rape, the pain of the abortion and the ongoing guilt and grief at how callously she had put herself first over the life she had destroyed, despising herself for how readily she had made excuses for pleading with her family doctor, saying she had to give her father all the attention he needed.

Before finally deciding to go through with it, Katia had made a flying visit to Tigh-na Mara to talk it over with Catherine. Together, they had agreed an unwanted child would spoil her life. As she left for Glasgow the following morning, her Gran had said:

"Katia, the Kelnets have evil in their blood. If you are certain sure the child in you is his, do not have it. If you do, it will only bring you a life of misery. Look to his mother, Mary-Anne MacLennan, as was, and did she not hang herself in the end, to escape from her own brood?"

Even as she mulled over these tawdry memories, Katia knew they concealed a hidden lie. The truth was, she had been ashamed of her part in what had happened with Barry, frightened to tell her father, terrified of pregnancy and of the stigma of becoming a single mother. But her over-riding shame centred on her selfishness: she had been

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unwilling to risk her chance of attending Glasgow School of Art. She had often thought this decision had driven her to make sure she was a top student, earning a first-class honours degree and the coveted award of 'Best in Year' three years in a row. With this old stabbing remorse came a shudder of tears then, inevitably, the memories of her abortion led her to thoughts of Barry's blood-soaked corpse lying nearby. Despite being cosy, she shivered and pulled the duvet tighter around her:

God, Kat, what the hell can we do about it?

Anxiety welled up. She sneaked another look at Zak. With his eyes still closed, he was smiling broadly and his words came to her:

"But Kat, sorry to disagree but mostly we make our own luck. At least that's what I think. So, we'll see what tomorrow brings, right? Remember, Kat, absolutely nothing is impossible, provided we set our minds to it. We must take one day at a time and seize every opportunity when it comes along, right? Now or never, eh? Chin up. The worst almost never happens, eh?"

Watching as his smiles waxed and waned she became filled with certainty, forcing her mind onto a positive focus:

*Yes, Zak, I **will** take one day at a time and make things happen by will power. I'll **work hard** and take opportunities as they present themselves. Even though it seems impossible, it **will** all work out, somehow. Yes, 'Now or Never' is a good motto to live by.*

Studying him, she concluded again he was a superb specimen, in his prime. Unaware her smile had become a lewd grin, she imagined lying on her bed watching him do his 5BX routines:

I'll pose nude for him, distract him into expending his full vigour in a very different way. God, Kat, he'll be like a bear, insatiable.

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Outside, the moonless night ebbed towards a coming black-grey dawn. The eye of the storm had moved on. The wind speed was rising again, as the next chapter of the storm's tale unfolded. Ten miles offshore, this warm front was already Force 6, increasing rapidly. The air temperature had risen by almost ten degrees. Black, rain-filled clouds scudded low across the machair.

Two hundred yards away on the beach below the rocky outcrop which sheltered *Tigh Na Mara*, the long-pitched Atlantic rollers moved majestically and unstoppably towards the end of their thousand-mile journey. Nearing the steep shore, their tops creaming above a curl filling with a fresh charge of seaweed, pebbles and sand, each new wave held itself as if suspended, creating the illusion of pausing momentarily before collapsing onto

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the bleached white sand and shingle in a roiling, crashing cacophony, creating a bubbling froth in the grinding debris, releasing a dirty brown spume immediately whisked away by the wind. After a short beat, as this higher sound receded, came the deeper, rumbling growl caused by the scouring, undertow dragging the matt of seaweed with it to be recycled in the relentless train of monster waves throwing themselves at the land.

Under the Isuzu pick-up, oblivious to the passage of time, the collies slept on.

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Pact

After what seemed like a lifetime, Angus opened his eyes, cleared his throat then eased himself taller in the armchair. Zak checked his watch: it was six-fourteen. Based on the day before when he woke in the truck at around this time, the first lights of dawn had been on the eastern horizon. He glanced at the gap where the curtains did not quite meet.

The storm clouds are masking sunrise but for how long?

'Right,' said Angus, 'this is what we will do. No, no, no, this is not a matter for the authorities. No, I will not be allowing any argument. No, we shall deal with this mess by ourselves. It may sound odd coming from a retired policeman but, what you both have to accept is, if we take this to the Police and the Fiscal, they will assume that you two both as incomers, are the guilty parties. It is the way it works out here. Even if you are getting yourselves the best of lawyers and the forensic boys and girls were to do their stuff right, we will, all three of us, get the blame for the brute's death, even though they will all say among themselves it is well and good that Barry Kelnet is gone from us at last. I tell you both, we will not have a single minute's peace from the whispers of those among them who will think what they want to think, despite the evidence. You know what I mean; no smoke without fire, if you are following my drift.'

'Mr Kilgour,' said Zak. 'Are you saying we must dispose of the body, pretend this didn't happen?'

'Yes, yes, but the second thing I must say, just to get it in,' he said, pointing the stub end of his pipe over his shoulder towards the outhouse before continuing, 'that one out there is the better man dead than he ever was alive. His father, Victor Kelnet, was riddled with the same kind of evil. Like Barry, Vic was a wife-beater and brawler, ending up in a Manchester prison. I heard through the grapevine, the man met with an unexplained accident in the communal showers and bled to death, just like his son. No, no, no, Barry Kelnet will not be greatly missed, especially by that wee lassie, Ishbell, the wee soul he was beating near to death every time he was back home from the ferries. It is a good riddance to Barry Kelnet as it was a good riddance to his father before him. The only pity is having to keep his just deserts a mystery from his wife and children. It is to be hoped they will move on in their new lives down there in Glasgow and soon forget all about the brute.'

'Hear, hear,' said Katia, quietly. Then, louder, 'So, Uncle Angus, what do you suggest we do?'

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'Well now, the first thing we will be after doing is to drive his vehicle up the road to the ridge then run it backwards over the side into Lochan na Domhain. I have heard the old ones say the water might be over a hundred feet deep. While I was away in Glasgow, they put down a cage into it for the salmon but the contraption was washed away out to sea in a storm and never seen again. Anyone who knows this place could have told them of their folly but never once do they listen to the locals. Ach, and sure the loch looks fine and dandy when it is a calm summer's day and makes a good swimming pool, jumping off the steep rocks, as we did all of us in our time as youngsters. But no, no, no, it is not the place to be in a storm.'

'Why tip the car backwards?' asked Katia.

'Because we will be leaving the doors open so the inside floods full and sinks quickly. I can almost guarantee you, when that car goes down, it will never be seen again.'

'Right, gotcha,' said Zak. 'So, we strap Barry in with his seatbelt and hey presto, the sea claims its own, sort of thing.'

'No, no, no, we will not be after risking the corpse of the brute washing up on a beach with a stab wound in his remains. It is amazing what the forensics can tell from a few bits and pieces even after the fishes and crabs would have had their turn at him. No, no, no, we will bury him. I will keep him in my tractor shed wrapped in a tarpaulin until you are digging out the base for the sheep pen then we will drop him into the middle of it and give him a nice concrete blanket.'

'Right, gotcha,' said Zak. 'No corpse, no crime. And hopefully, no car to bring anyone looking around here, right?'

The old man nodded and sucked on his dry pipe.

'Uncle Angus, that's genius,' said Katia. 'It really is. Thanks.'

'Hold onto your horses, girl. There is still the major problem which I am sure you will be getting to when you think it through.'

'You mean, getting the corpse out to the sheep pen field without being spotted?' said Katia.

'No, no, no, Katia, not at all. Leave that part to me and Zak. I am sure we will work out how to do it unseen. Anyway, half the time, Jenkins the Diver is away at the salmon nets over there on Colonsay. This sheep thing he has started, is for his girlfriend who is keeping the rare breeds over at her mother's croft and taking in the wee orphan lambs as need feeding every few hours. Ach, and I hear Jenkins the Diver is after doing the sheep-shearing too in these past months. Aye, she is slowly turning him into a crofter,

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hefting him to the land and, watch you both, in no time at all she will be busy enough feeding his own bairns for him. No, no, no, Katia, hiding the corpse is not the problem.'

'So, what is the problem?' asked Katia. 'What am I missing here?'

'Right, gotcha!' said Zak. 'You think we are the problem, Kat and me? That one or both of us will lose our nerve and want to tell someone, just to get it off our chest?'

'Well,' said Angus, 'I can tell you both from my own experience, many a 'perfect murder' has been solved years later when someone felt compelled to clear the air, share their part in confidence.'

'So, you want us to make a pact,' said Katia. 'To make a solemn promise never ever to tell anyone, no matter what? Is that it, Uncle Angus?'

'I presume this would be a three-way pact?' added Zak.

'A pact, yes, yes, a pact would be the word, if you like. Yes, yes, and three-way, although, to tell you the truth, I myself do not expect to last through another summer. They say the prostate cancer is taking over and I am left on just months now, not years. This has to be said; I am the one who is having the easy part of the deal, am I not?'

Tears spilled over and washed her cheeks. 'Oh, Uncle Angus, what will we do without you?'

'Now, Katia MacInnes,' said Angus, gruffly. 'Enough of that sort of nonsense.'

Catching Zak's eye, the old man nodded in Kat's direction.

Rising high on his knees beside her armchair, Zak passed her a handful of tissues and, leaning close, whispered, 'Shush now Kat, please don't cry. Try to stay positive, please.' After a few more sobs, she reached for Zak's hand, squeezed and held it tight to her chest.

Settled back on his heels, Zak turned to face the old man. 'Right, Mr Kilgour, I suppose you see me, the unknown quantity, the southerner, as the weak link. You think, if I carry on with this, eh, 'disposal plan' then go back home, eventually I will be struck down by guilt or bravado and fess up to my step-mum or someone else?'

'No Zachariah Mackenzie Hacklet. I, myself, think you are the strong one of the two of you. Katia here is the one I am worrying about. She has the weakness in her, like her father and your own father too, for that matter.'

'You know my father?' asked Zak.

'Yes, your father was from the Verstaall Hacklets. Ach, but Jimmy was born and brought up in Glasgow and he came here only as a summer visitor, just as Katia used to

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do. He was a rare winger on the football pitch they say, as fast and jinky as a wasp. After his time with Liverpool Football Club, he came back to his trade as a welder in the shipyards of Glasgow. For a while he was the big man in a small pool and, to be fair to him, Jimmy lasted sober almost three years, marrying himself onto my cousin's daughter, Irene MacInnes Mackenzie from down the road at Vetterness. Your mother, Irene, was down in Glasgow being a nurse and was a fine singer in the Govan Free Church. Like Katia's father, she had the merle eye which is in the Mackenzie genes. When Irene died in childbirth, along with their second child, Jimmy Hacklet went off the rails, back to the drinking. Eventually he was caught drunk at work for the third time and they sent him packing. He disappeared from Glasgow, taking you with him as a wee toddler and that was the last I heard of him until I saw you tonight. You could be his very double, when Jimmy was a younger man. The truth is, Jimmy was always a drinker. They say alcoholism is a disease, an addiction passed on in the genes. I myself have also come around to believing this to be true. My brother Kenneth was the same as Jimmy, good for spells then slipping. My father had the weakness in him too, as did my mother but less so. It has always been the big problem, out here in the Hebrides. There is but the one way I know to fight it and it is to stay tee-total at all costs. I myself have been dry since I came home to the croft from Glasgow. Are you listening to me, Katia? Dry you must be. Entirely tee-total. There is no other way.'

Katia felt her colour rise and sensed Zak's eyes on her. 'So, Uncle Angus, are Zak and I related?' she whispered, hardly daring to breathe, keeping her eyes down, studying Zak's beautiful hand gripped tightly in her own.

'Yes, Katia MacInnes, you both are distant cousins but not close enough to stop a wedding, if that is why you are asking. Is it?'

'For goodness sake, I hardly know Zak, do I? But, well, from the first minute I saw him, he seemed familiar. He looks so like my Dad I was beginning to think Zak's father and mine were related.'

'Right, gotcha!' said Zak. 'So, my real roots are here, in the Hebrides! Not in Glasgow or Watford. Yeah, gotcha! Cool! Maybe that's why I've always wanted to live beside the sea, why I chose to study sea creatures.'

'Well, Zachariah Mackenzie Hacklet, I have an offer to make to you both. Until you showed up here, I was planning to leave my croft to Katia but only if she settled to a clean and sober life in this place. That was the deal I made with Catherine, her grandmother but now I have a mind to make my property and land over to you both, if you will promise me here and now you will settle to live a decent life, look after my dogs, care for my sheep and do your best to ensure my very own bit of paradise thrives when I have gone.'

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'WHAT?' exploded Zak. 'Hey, Mr Kilgour, do you mean it? Really? So, Kat and I would be, eh, well, neighbours? But hey, I don't know anything about sheep. You would need to teach me, right?'

'Yeah, Uncle Angus, teach me as well. I want to be able to look after sheep too, please?'

'So, is it a deal? Do we have a pact?' asked Angus, his face lighting up, making him look younger.

'Yeah!' Katia and Zak chimed together then burst out laughing.

'So, do we shake hands or write everything down?' asked Katia.

'Yeah, we'll need to write it all down, to make it legal, right?' said Zak.

'No, no, no, there will be nothing of that sort in writing between us, not until you both give me your solemn word that there be no drink taken in my house. Or in this one, for that matter. Is that agreed? Both of you?'

Katia, looking down, unable to hold Angus's fierce gaze replied, 'Yes, Uncle Angus, I had more or less already decided to stop. I want to get fit and eat more sensibly, get back into trim. I want to turn my life around, start over and . . .'

'No, Katia MacInnes! *More or less stopping* will not be satisfying me. Let me say it plain. *Entirely tee-total* is what I am demanding of you both. As I know from my own experience, total abstinence is the only way it can be made to work. So, what is it to be?'

Katia and Zak looked at each other and after a few seconds, smiled then chimed in unison, more to each other than to Angus, 'Yes, we will be tee-total.'

'Good. Now I have your word, both of you, I ask you to remember this moment for the rest of your lives and to teach the same message to your children when they come, for surely they will come, as is plain to see from the way you both have been circling each other like dogs in heat while you were thinking I was near asleep.'

'Right, gotcha,' said Zak, feeling embarrassed at having so easily revealed his feelings for Kat. 'And thanks, Mr Kilgour, thanks a lot. But if there is nothing in writing about your gift to us, how will that work, legally, I mean?'

'No, no, no, I will have enough time left to be altering my Will and Testament. No doubt that man Peter Mackinnon will have us traipsing around pages and pages of big, long words for weeks and weeks on end. No, no, no, I have no doubt about that!' said Angus. 'It has to be said so I will say it, Peter has always been angling after this land for his grandchildren. No, no, no, I will take you both at your word, if you will take me at mine.'

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'Uncle Angus, the wine, I have an idea. We could make it into vinegar and use it for pickling.'

'Well now, Zachariah, what do you say to that suggestion?' asked Angus.

'No, I think we should remove temptation once and for all. We should pour it into the loch after we dispose of the vehicle. We'll keep the bottles for recycling, of course. Perhaps we might be able to use them in Kat's ceramics work? Does bottle glass smelt down in your kiln?'

'Yes, of course it does! Why didn't I think of that? We could sinter them to make a new installation version of my candleholders. Or maybe I'll use them to create a tableau of leaping dolphins?'

Angus stood, flexing his shoulders, easing the stiffness out of his body, reaching for his coat. 'So, Zachariah, are you ready for some heavy lifting? We may as well use the pick-up to transport him to my place first.'

From the kitchen, the alarm on the washing machine began to ping, signalling the end of its cycle.

'Right, Angus, gotcha! Time for action! Give me a minute to change into my work clothes and boilersuit, into my work boots. Sit tight Kat and I'll be back before you know it.'

Zak and Angus worked together to move the cases of wine out into the rear passenger compartment of the Isuzu. Assuming residence, the two collies jumped in, sat on the boxes, ears pricked, looking forward to an adventure. With the cases and dogs stowed in the pick-up, the men moved to the utility room to get the corpse. Draped in her duvet, Katia trailed them, watching from the kitchen, remaining silent, waiting for an opportunity to speak.

Peering out of the utility room window, Zak said, 'Angus, look, it's getting lighter now, will we not be spotted?'

'No, no, no. Listen to it man, the wind is getting up again and no sane person would choose to be out in this. My own nearest neighbour is Amelia MacPherson who lives on the edge of Midness and is over a mile and half away from me. She is eighty-seven and has glaucoma with bad knees and a weak heart. Amelia will not cross her doorstep until this storm blows through. No, no, no, Zachariah, I promise you we will have our wild peninsular to ourselves. Don't worry, after we have completed our business, you and Katia will have plenty time to hunker down together while I will keep an eye on the road end and deflect any enquiries which may be made about a missing man and his motor car. Anyway, we will drive without lights, as a precaution.'

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'So, Mr Kilgour, we are good to go, right?'

'Yes, yes, these first moves need doing **at once** but **after that** there will be no rush, no rush **at all**. This storm will **last** at least a week, maybe even two, trust me on that, I can feel it in my bones. **After** we move the brute and get rid of his monstrosity of a vehicle, we **can** take our time to remove **all** trace of what never happened.'

'Right, gotcha. When we finish with you know what, do you think maybe tomorrow you could haul my combo out of the bog with your tractor?'

'No, no, no, Zachariah, I will teach you to drive my tractor then you can do it for yourself.'

'Right, gotcha!'

'Angus, should I not learn too?' added Katia. 'I want to be capable, you know. I want to be a good partner for Zak, if he'll have me.' Katia emerged from her cocoon, sliding the duvet off her shoulders.

It was a 'Now or Never' opportunity:

'Will you, Zak? Will you have me as your wife?'

Their eyes met and held. Zak was stunned, mentally rocked back on his heels, his jaw slack, his head shaking slowly from side to side, his eyes wide in disbelief.

A concerned expression flitted across Katia's face. Her heart was thudding, her mouth dry, her thoughts were tumbling like clothes in a washing machine. Her hand reached forward to touch the side of his head.

'Please say yes,' she whispered. 'Please, please say yes, Zak. I won't let you down, I promise.'

Zak stepped nearer and cupped her face with both hands. Katia let the duvet fall to the floor; moving her right hand gingerly behind his head, pressing gently, leaning into him, she pulled his face closer to hers.

Behind them, Angus looked on, his face transformed by a wide smile, tapping his toes while whistling under his breath to the tune of *Mairi's Wedding*.

His voice trembling with emotion, Zak whispered, 'Kat, seriously, you want us to get married?'

'Yes, Zak, you must know how much I want you. I've fancied you from the first minute I saw you, on the ferry. The thing is, do you want me enough to marry me?'

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'Right, gotcha. Sorry, sorry, I mean, **YES!** Oh yes please, Kat! Yes, yes, yes! We'll make a great team. Talk about amazing? This is the very best moment of my entire life. But we must do this properly.'

Zak lowered himself to one knee, his body upright, his face upturned, grinning. Holding her hands gently in his own, eyes brimming with tears, in a firm, formal, controlled voice he made his offer.

'Kat MacInnes, will you do me the honour of marrying me and making our life together here on Verstaall, try with me for a family and raise them with love and goodness in their hearts? Please, say yes.'

'Yes, Zak, I will. I will. And I promise to be a good wife and mother to our children.'

Still holding both of her hands in his, Zak rose and leaned forward to kiss her. Their lips were almost touching when, in a tiny whisper which Angus did not catch, Katia added, 'Zak, I've fallen in love with you and I want us to make a start as soon as possible. Do you agree?'

Zak whispered, 'Yes, Kat, yes please. Yes, we must try for a family at once, right away. Oh Kat, how can I be so lucky? This *is* fate, as you suggested earlier. D'you know, even with your bruised face, you are the most beautiful girl in the world. You are clever, sexy and, well, totally perfect, the girl of my dreams.'

They kissed, lips to lips, just a tiny peck.

Katia said, 'Sealed with a kiss.'

Zak laughed, 'Brian Hyland, one of my Dad's favourites, plays it on his harmonica all the time. His 'party piece', he calls it. Oh, Kat, wait till they see you down in Watford, you'll blow them out of the water!'

Angus, who had watched the scene play out with a huge grin on his face, turned away. Placing his hand on the external door he coughed, cleared his throat. As the door cracked open, the chimney flue emitted a piercing, high-pitched whistle and the door from the kitchen to the lounge slammed shut. Raising his voice against the rising storm the former policeman said gruffly:

'Right then, Zachariah Hacklet, we should make our moves before this storm gets going again. Come now, man, you two both will have all the time you need for canoodling after the first part of our disposal business is over and done with.'