

# Operation Mongoose

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'Ladies and gentlemen, this is Melanie your conductor. Welcome on board this double voyager from Glasgow Central to London Euston. This afternoon we shall pass through track works just beyond Carstairs Junction. The anticipated additional journey time is thirteen minutes but after Carlisle we expect to pick up time and be back on schedule by Preston. We have a café bar in coach C which is now open. If you have any questions, please ask me as I pass through the train.'

Detective Chief Inspector Derek Baird settled in for the journey. He was in first class, befitting his rank. In plain clothes, he gave the appearance of a successful businessman. At thirty-nine he was at the forefront of the new wave of 'digital cops'. Against his mother's wishes, he had chosen to use his law degree and PhD to pursue justice in his own way, hunting crime in cyberspace.

The only other passenger in first class was a dainty Asian woman in her fifties wearing a sari with a white Bindu on her forehead, the colour denoting purity. His mother had worn a red Bindu, denoting mastery. The woman was engrossed in her iPad, earbuds in place, watching an omnibus of a TV soap.

Since the meeting with ACC Delaney, he had been in turmoil. He was trapped, neatly and completely. At their meeting, Derek had seen the tiny smile at the corner of his line manager's eyes. David Delaney was one of the old guard, due for retirement in a year, passed over for the top job because of his old-fashioned views on women and mixed-race individuals in policing.

Baird sighed, rolled his shoulders to ease tension and ran over the whole sorry mess in his mind, trying again to sort out the tangled web of conflicting versions of what had happened on the streets on Dundee three weeks earlier when the fourteen-year-old girl had been tasered then died of heart failure minutes later.

Delving into his leather rucksack he fired up his laptop to study the autopsy report yet again.

*The female was subjected to three simultaneous hits, see images. Her system was already overloaded with cocaine. There were track marks at seventeen sites on her body, see images. The combined chemical overload caused her blood pressure to peak. Cause of death, an abdominal aortic aneurysm. Further tests revealed she had unnaturally weak arteries, probably due to undernourishment in childhood. Her weight was 46 kg, 7 stones 3 lbs, height 1.57 m, 5 ft 2 in, making her unhealthily thin. Her lungs were pre-cancerous, damaged by heavy smoking.*

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He scrolled down to the investigating officer's summary.

*Aleena Vaastu was known to the officers attending the scene. She had been subjected to stop and search on many previous occasions but had never been caught with more than personal use amounts. She was nominally 'in care' but her social worker and probation officer had both 'lost contact' fourteen months earlier. The incident took place at the premises where she lived with a group of teenagers working the 'county lines' scam in Perth and Dundee. They had been under surveillance, dropped off by a minibus driven by Ralph Dubois, the number two in the Bolton drugs syndicate. Although she was the third youngest of the group of ten, she was the leader.*

***She was believed to be armed.***

*However, no weapon was found at or near the scene. The raid was timed for 01:00 hours but was delayed until 04:30 because the lead officer Sergeant Donna Finucci was detained at the scene of a street disturbance in Dundee town centre, near a city centre disco hotspot.*

*Because of the timing, a stealth approach was employed. The premises were entered by the front and rear doors simultaneously by disabling the door security system using an acid torch. Due to the threat level from Vaastu's expected firearm there was armed back-up but Sergeant Finocchi decided to use tasers, if required, as the first method of control. Immediately on entry the power to the premises was disabled by Scottish Power.*

*The officers used infrared visors and were mic-ed to a mobile control unit in the street nearby.*

*Initially a group of eight youngsters were located in an upstairs bedroom, five males, three females, covered with blankets and puffa jackets. Another group of six were in the downstairs living area, under the influence. The officers waiting outside in the corridor and on the stairs were attacked from above when Vaastu dropped from a ceiling hatch. It was later determined she had been sleeping in the attic with her boyfriend, Kamil Florence, aged fifteen. In the confusion someone shouted, 'She has a gun!' It was later determined to be a pistol-grip screwdriver. All three officers fired their tasers at Vaastu in what they believed was self-defence.*

*None of the officers has so far acknowledged who made this call but all three heard it. Sergeant Finocchi did not hear the warning nor did Constable Graffin who was in the upstairs rooms securing the sleepers.*

*Separate statements from these officers and from Sergeant Finocchi are annexed.*

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He re-read his own contribution and reflected on the outcome.

He had provided the intel used to plan the raid and had attended as an observer, wearing full personal protection but unarmed. Although he had gained a firearms certificate years earlier, he had let it lapse, uncertain he would be able to fire at another human being even to defend himself.

He read on:

*At the time of the assault on the officers, Vaastu was wearing a striped Lycra all-in-one outfit and a tiger's face mask. It appears she was known to her group as The Vish, short for Vicious.*

*After a thorough search by SOCO, no actual firearms or ammunition were found. There were however seventeen assorted NERF 'weapons', pistols and rifles and over five thousand NERF bullets, see inventory.*

*A search of the attic space revealed a removal plywood lining panel behind which six cartons of assorted packs of drugs were stashed, mainly mini doses of crack cocaine mixed with Molly, the powdered form of MDMA commonly known as ecstasy, see inventory.*

*Estimated street value, £78,000.*

*Due to operational pressures and resource shortages, all officers involved have been returned to duty but are currently office based pending an independent assessment by Police Scotland Internal Investigations Unit.*

Baird grimaced. He let his mind drift back to his off the record chat with ACC David Delaney the previous day.

*"Well, lad, this is your big chance, a way to put right that other cock-up last year and get back on the ladder. Need I say more. In and out as quick as you like. No delving into other people's dirty linen boxes. Remember the three wise monkeys. I'll expect to hear this business is done and dusted by Friday. I've got tickets for you and Jennifer for Saturday night's charity ball. Time to get yourself back out there, show them the past is behind you. After all, you were cleared of any actual wrongdoing. Some say you were caught by circumstances. There but for the grace of all our Gods, eh, lad?"*

As the train pulled out of Preston, back on time, his mobile rang.

Jen. Jenetta McCarroll, junior partner in Nevis &Co, Edinburgh.

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He pressed green and she immediately gushed:

'Hi! How are you, my sweetie.'

'Good, thanks, and you?'

'Fucked, actually. Corporate Law sucks. The whole fucking World sucks. Denis has flown out to Dubai to cover for Fraser, who refuses to postpone his knee operation. Vanessa, the bitch, has jumped ship to join McCartney's in Manchester, back to her roots. Good riddance. And, apparently, it's school half-term, so three of our darling Associates are on holiday or working from home. Ditto the para-legal team. And guess what, the 'Zandervolle' takeover Denis was handling has crescendo-ed and I have to fly out this evening to Doha with the odious Vernon Finlay of Rice International to handhold him through the negotiations.'

'Oh, so you'll miss. . .'

Jen hurtled on:

'Derek, is your late Mummy's cat still in Vet school having an extended course of chemo? Seriously, why don't you just let the dear moggie go? Really, Derek, it would be a mercy. Will I ring them and tell them for you? Hold on:

**'Trudy! Darling, get that phone please.'**

'Now, where did I get to?'

'But you'll be back okay for next Saturday's charity do at The Balmoral, will you?'

'I'll do my best sweetie, but, well, you know what Vern is like. If this goes down, he'll want to party, won't he?'

'But Jen, this is important, you do know that, don't you?'

'Yeah. I'll do my best. Gotta go. Love you.'

'Love you too and. . .'

The line was dead. Derek sighed, trying to shrug off the sadness and growing certainty that their twelve years together were coming to an end. He was well aware they had been drifting apart since the drugs raid incident. The first sign had been Jen doing more

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overnighting in London, allegedly on unavoidable business issues. During their years of living together she had been reluctant to commit. Again, the thought nagged: was it his skin colour. Or was it that she was wary of him because she was an occasional user of crack cocaine.

Her strident defence came in variations on the theme:

*What's the point of babies? There are already too many of us on the planet.*

Or:

*Children are not on my agenda, Derek, so give over, please.*

Or:

*Christ, Derek, give it up. No means no!*

When his mother died, the pressure was off. Things settled down. No more talk of kids.

They got into harness then the new agenda:

*"Derek, look, we need to work to support each other, right. In my world, you'll have to put up with some awful people, big egos, bores, so don't ram your job down their throats, okay. If they ask what you do, be vague. Say "internet security". For God's sake don't bang on about the police, yeah? I mean after all that's what you do, internet security isn't it. I mean you don't do chasing bad guys down dark lanes do you, not physically. Anyway, they won't quiz you, will they? No chance. They will be far too busy projecting themselves so keep shtum and smile, okay. Remember, we're both heading for the top, right?"*

Again, his mind reeled back to the other incident, outside the pub, the point at which he had been deflected from his steady, upward rise towards the higher echelons of policing. He knew that he was unlikely to break through the glass ceiling in Scotland where a man of mixed race was unlikely to rise to Chief Constable, no matter how pale his skin. But ACC in Police Scotland was possible and with it a move to the top in an English force might be feasible.

His father Bryan Baird QC, who had spent an entire lifetime defending criminals, had died when Derek was nineteen years old. His mother had contracted osteoporosis a few years later, detected when she fell from her bicycle on a charity fun ride with a group of friends, sustaining multiple breakages to both arms, her right hand and wrist smashed into confetti and her pelvis and left femur cracked.

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Disaster. A slow and painful recovery to uncertain walking with a Zimmer then gradual decline with further falls and breakages.

On the night he had been 'sidetracked', as he thought of it, Derek had been jogging back from his city centre gym, heading out to his quarter villa in Newlands, the home he had inherited from his mother.

*As he approached a pub near Shawlands Cross, a youth staggered into his path and fell headlong onto his face.*

*Derek leapt over him, skidded to a halt, turning to render assistance.*

*As he stooped to check on the young man, he sensed a presence catching only a glimpse of a hand holding a long bladed knife, a short sword. Using his Ju Jitsu skills, he rolled sideways and kicked at his opponent striking the girl's knee. The blade swished past his head. The slim girl staggered back then lunged at him again, mouthing obscenities. Back on his feet, he was jostled and pushed from behind. Again and again the girl swung her blade at him.*

*A crowd from the pub ringed him, corralling him, kicking and spitting. They were clearly drunk and possibly high on drugs.*

*Someone threw a glass tumbler full of beer at him. He ducked and the missile hit the sword girl directly in the face.*

*(Months later she was identified from a report made by the hospital surveillance unit, a team looking for drug addicts and youngsters abused by County Lines gangsters. Her name was Anna-Maria Calder. Before the incident, she had worked in a fancy shoe shop in Buchanan Street. Had she not waited two days before attending A&E, the medics may have saved her left eye.)*

*After her failed attack on Derek, Ann-Maria's skinny boyfriend picked up her weapon and charged. Derek side-stepped his rush and the boy fell over the first young man. As he stumbled, the sword embedded itself in the stomach of a large, overweight girl dressed in a belly top and wearing high stiletto heels. As she lurched forwards screaming, blood spurted. She went down on her knees then fell forward on top of her assailant.*

*As the skinny boy tried to free himself, the blade was forced deeper into the belly top girl and sliced through a vital artery.*

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Ten minutes earlier, inside the pub, the manager had called the police when the altercation began, something about which Vodka was the best.

A squad car arrived, it blues up and its siren whining and juddering.

The crowd of youngsters scattered, including the girl hit by the beer glass, leaving Derek as the only person remaining, uninjured but spattered by blood.

The first young man was dead, stabbed in the kidneys from behind as he tried to run from his attacker, never identified. His stab wound to his kidney area did not match the profile of the sword. The sword girl hit by the beer glass had also fled.

It was later established that the dead man had been Anna-Maria's ex-boyfriend. The belly top girl was treated at the scene but died of blood loss on her way to hospital. The skinny boy was never found, assumed to be helped by someone present in the crowd.

Also missing was Derek's bum bag containing his wallet and various cards, including his driver's licence and Police Scotland warrant card.

Derek had protested his innocence but one of the members of staff from the pub had seen him kick out at his attacker, the sword girl.

DCI Barid had insisted he was a policeman, that he did not drink and had not been part of the fracas but his protest was ignored. He was arrested and taken to Helen Street for interview. After a long wait while the late night police bureaucracy performed at snail's pace, he was identified, gave his account and was given a run home by a squad car.

Later, at the fatal accident inquiry he was grilled then dismissed and suspended, told to await the final report.

In total, he had been sidelined for a period of five months, suspended on full pay.

His career had stalled. Somewhere in the personnel system there was a report about him that did not make good reading.

Jen had become increasingly distant.

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The train arrived at Euston.

Derek had fallen asleep.



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The Asian lady was shaking him gently, whispering in broad Glasgow accent:

'Wake up sun, wur here noo.'

He caught a taxi to his room at the *Gravesend Premier Inn*, close to the Metropolitan Police Specialist Training Unit. He paid the taxi by business credit card and proffered an approximate ten percent tip with a Clydesdale Bank fiver. The driver, possibly Nigerian, examined the note curiously then smiled:

'Ah, Sellteek, yes?'

He learned later that the others attending the quarterly review were at the much posher *Best Western*. Derek had been downgraded, excluded, and not for the first time.

Next morning the group of senior officers, all DCIs like himself or higher, twenty men and women in total, met at the training unit, in a small secure seminar room. Each person was given a numbered table tennis ball. Derek's number was drawn first from the felt bag.

Detective Superintendent Denise Nicholson from Devon and Cornwall Police was in the chair:

'Ladies and gentlemen. I propose we adopt an interactive approach. If you have a question, use your laptop app to add it to the sidebar screen where we can all see it live, as it were. Then, as each presenter is talking, they can interact if they see fit or leave the question for the round up session before lunch.'

'Right DCI Derek Baird, off you go. Fifteen minutes maximum and I'll give you a warning at 90 seconds before you must stop.'

With his laptop connected to the Wi-Fi portal to access the display screen, Derek launched into his well-rehearsed presentation, one he had given several times already both internally to his team and to other senior officers at the Police Scotland Scottish Crime Campus at Gartcosh.

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the first question.

*Is this the same presentation you gave in Manchester nine months ago?*

He reacted:



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'No, this is updated, just setting the scene for others who missed the Manchester meeting.'

He continued, after another few minutes, a second question popped up:

*Still the same stuff, according to my notes.*

Another comment appeared:

*Yeah, that's what my notes seem to indicate.*

Denise Nicholson's voice intervened:

'Perhaps you might move directly to your newer material, DCI Baird, we are on a tight schedule here.'

Goaded, Derek reacted, fiddling then skipping to his slides for his latest project, the one he had initiated during his suspension. Although unrehearsed for presentation, it was free of errors, checked and double checked.

'Right, this is a new algorithm we are testing, it relies on collating disparate digital entries of sightings and reports by beat cops, street cameras, ANPR snapshots of vehicles known or suspected to be linked to County Lines drugs activities. We use digital interrogator software which captures key names and links to key locations. The algorithm imposes a strict timeline. At each review, we send the distilled output to the suite of AI programs released to us under license from the FBI Next Generation Initiative.

'At each review, which takes under five minutes to generate, the final output is a report in plain English which summarises the input data and provides graphics.

'For operational reasons this is a dummy version, but it gives the flavour of what we are aiming at.

'This slide depicts the supplementary graphs, pie charts and ranking tables.'

The sidebar exploded with screeds of questions.

DS Nicholson intervened:

'DCI Baird. Let's put this presentation on hold please.'

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'Take a comfort break folks, I need a private word with our Scottish delegate. Ten minutes. Prompt.'

Sotto voce:

'Derek, bring your laptop, please.'

In a small windowless interview room, they sat side by side:

'Let me see the rest of your presentation, please.'

On completion, she reached for her phone and fiddled.

'Derek, your line manager is ACC David Delaney, correct?'

'Correct.'

'Does he understand what you are doing. Has he agreed to this approach? Do you really have permission from the FBI to deploy their software in this way?'

'The FBI gave me an experimental version, now out of date. My cousin Dash is one of their key computer cops. Did you hear I was stood down for five months? No? A late night incident outside a pub. I was jogging past. I was attacked by a girl with a knife. It's a long story but I was completely exonerated. Well, during my suspension, I used the time off to work on their gamma version. I improved it, sent it back to Dash. My version is what the FBI are now using. Yes, I did a dummy run with ACC Delaney but, to be honest, I'm not sure he really understands what we are doing in Police Scotland CSSU, (Consolidated Surveillance and Syntheses Unit), our cyber sleuthing section.'

'Okay, right, gotcha. Derek, please stand outside while I make a couple of calls. Better still, go to the canteen and I'll send someone to recall you or whatever.'

Derek reloaded his rucksack:

'Okay. Where is the canteen?'

'Turn right, follow the sign for exit to outside and ask the doorkeeper.'

'Okay.'

Sitting in a quiet corner as others came and went, Derek became increasingly uneasy as time passed. Suspicious of what might follow, he took out his laptop, reconnected to the

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Wi-Fi system and systematically uploaded all his files to his private Google Drive account then wiped the originals from the laptop, including every trace of the program files sent to and received from Dash. Finally, he deleted the Google Drive App, knowing he could log in again at a future time.

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After two hours of waiting, a messenger arrived to recall him to the interview room.

DS Nicholson made the introductions:

'DCI Derek Baird, this is ACC Michael O'Riordan and his colleague Doctor Annette Barclay. Please excuse me, I have other pressing matters to deal with.'

O'Riordan waited until the door was closed.

He offered his hand:

'Take a seat, Derek. Please give your laptop and phone to Dr Barclay.'

Derek complied. The small wiry woman with crinkly reddish hair barked:

'Passcodes, please.'

She slid a leather bound A5 notebook across to him and a fountain pen, a Montblanc, the same model used by Jen.

Derek wrote both codes at the top of the blank page below his name and slid it back to her. He judged her to be about his own age and was almost certain he seen her odd, angular face somewhere, perhaps on a newscast or a TV program, maybe Newsnight.

She set to work, first on his phone, scrolling and making notes.

O'Riordan, well over six feet looked as if he had played rugby. Or had he been a boxer, or both.

Placing a Dictaphone on the table, he switched it on:

'Well Derek, you have certainly stirred up a hornets' nest. I'm afraid we will have to confiscate your laptop. Maybe even your phone. Depending on what Dr Barclay discovers, you may be charged with unauthorised use of FBI software. Please give me the name and email address of your alleged cousin, Dash.'

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Derek opted to remain silent. Clearly there was another agenda running here that was nothing to do with his cousin. Everyone knew the British National Crime Agency and the FBI had a long-established cooperative working relationship. This must, Derek reasoned, have another root.

The woman looked at O'Riordan and shook her head. She was now working on his laptop.

O'Riordan continued:

'So, DCI Baird, you have decided not to cooperate. Protecting your sources are you? May I remind you that as a serving police officer, you are obliged to answer my questions.'

Dr Barclay passed her notebook across to O'Riordan. He read it and shook his head:

'DCI Derek Baird, I am placing you under arrest. Please stand and empty your pockets.'

Derek's mind was in overdrive.

*Was this about Jenetta?*

Derek looked at the door, judging distances.

'Don't even think about it, laddie buck, nothing would give me greater pleasure.'

Derek emptied his pockets as requested. He had another personal mobile in a secret compartment of his rucksack which he did not disclose. O'Riordan grabbed the rucksack, searched it thoroughly emptying everything onto the table at his end, including Derek's multitool Swiss Army knife and a strip of Ibuprofen tabs.

Palming this strip, O'Riordan raised his eyebrows, shook his head again:

'If these are not Ibuprofen, you could be in deep doo-doo.'

They were from Jen's bedside drawer. Derek tried for a neutral face but said nothing. His left Achilles heel which had been firing off since the pub business began to throb.

'Annette, handcuff him to the ring on the table leg, then step outside and call our friends.'

O'Riordan turned off the Dictaphone, pocketed it then swept Derek's wallet containing his replacement Police Scotland warrant card, driver's licence and credit cards and other

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bits and pieces into a translucent evidence bag. Sealed it, annotated it and sat down heavily, stared at hard and said:

'A sad day for Police Scotland. And for you. To be honest, I've never been convinced about fast-tracking graduates. They have no cohort, no buddies, no provenance, if that's the right word. They live outside the police bubble, outside the common ethos. I should not tell you this, but we've been watching you for over two years. You and your bed partner, Ms Jennetta McCarroll. It's not her birth name but of course you know that.'

There was a rap at the door and a uniformed Sergeant wearing a side-arm entered. Behind was a tall, slim man with white-blond hair and one ear much smaller than the other. A second uniform eased past small ear and the two uniforms released Derek from the table and re-handcuffed him, one wrist apiece.

'Please, may I have my rucksack. It was a graduation gift from my mother.'

O'Riordan passed it to one of the uniforms and Derek was hustled out, along the narrow corridor, out through a side door into a BMW X5 with one-way tinted windows.

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I was delivered to a house somewhere in Finchley. I knew the area because I had roomed here with a lady called Ms Pamela Orchard, a Senior Teacher at Mill Hill International school where she taught Geography and Music. I was with her for just over three years while working for my PhD from Imperial College.

We entered by a rear door from a small paved yard accessed from a common lane by a remotely operated roller shutter just wide enough for the BMW X5. I saw four CCTV cameras covering the lane and the yard but suspected there may be others.

Inside, I was unshackled and pushed forwards along a corridor and into a room dominated by a conference table. My rucksack was placed beside a chair and I was forced down into it with my back to the door. I heard the door close followed by the sound of security bolts whining into place. Effectively, I was in a cell.

At the opposite end of the room, a hidden door opened and a youngish woman who looked Chinese or perhaps Korean stepped through and 'floated' towards me like a ballet dancer, her hand outstretched:

'Maya Song, at your service Detective Inspector Derek Baird. You are the first Scotsman I've ever met. Come on through and meet the team.'

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Her grip was dry and firm, her eyes cheerful.

I picked up my rucksack and followed her into the rabbit warren of rooms each with two, sometimes three casually dressed men and women working at computer screens. Only a few were my age or older. As I passed through they lifted their heads, smiled, waved and mouthed 'Hi' or 'Hiya.' It felt like an academic research lab.

We climbed two floors to a light and airy conference room. The windows had Venetian blinds, the shutters cast sunlight upwards onto the ceiling.

Maya pointed to the chair furthest from the door, inviting me to sit.

'Now, you don't use coffee, do you. I have English breakfast, Lemon and Ginger or Camomile.'

'English Breakfast, thanks.'

'Yes, you prefer it as it comes, bag in, no milk or sugar, yes?'

'Thanks.'

She clicked to switch on a kettle then pointedly pressed a stud button on the wall beside the door.

As she served the tea, two men in dark suits entered and Maya left.

'DCI Baird, this is Jim McFadden and I am Urquhart Neilson, both from Scottish grandparents. We are part of an FBI team outposted here in London, UK. Greetings from Dash Prasad in our Washington office. We have been watching you remotely for around three years, working with our buddies in MI5.'

The other man poured himself a mug of coffee from a bun flask, sat down, sprawling his long legs. At over six feet tall, with light brown hair and pale blue eyes and dark skin, he was, like me, mixed race. Possibly Nigerian?

'So, Derek. Tell us about Jen, Ms Jennetta McCarroll, junior partner in Nevis &Co, Edinburgh.'

'Sorry to be rude, but why the hell am I here and what does my private life have to do with you? Do you have an arrest warrant?'

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Urquhart swivelled to look at his partner Jim, a mid-forties white man, medium height with brown eyes, a buzz cut which made him seem ex-military, possibly a marine:

Jim tapped the blue cardboard folder on the desk in front of him:

'In here I have an executive order which allows me to rendition you to our home base where, by the application of certain chemicals, you will offer up the information we require. As of now, we own you. If necessary, we will dispose of you. You will simply disappear. No questions will be asked by your colleagues who will be told you have been recruited for a special assignment with MI5 and after time, you will be forgotten.'

Urquhart rose to his feet:

'So, tell you what, Derek, you take ten to think about that while we check out that fancy backpack that you're trying to hide from us.'

'Look, this rucksack was a graduation gift from my mother.'

Jim said:

'Yeah, we saw the tapes from Gravesend. We have your laptop and phone. Clean except for your emails and telecoms to Jen. We have everything you've said to each other on file covering the last eight months since we missed the last shipment at Greenock, Scotland.'

Urquhart spoke:

'How do you explain your £2.3 million balance in your Isle of Man account?'

'Rubbish. Look, yes, I do have an Isle of Man account, inherited from my father who was a Manxman. He opened it for me when I was born. Last time I looked I had three thousand pounds in it. It's sort of sentimental, just sits there. I never look at it.'

'And your £5.2 million in Guernsey? And \$7.6 million in the Caymans?'

'Rubbish, you've got the wrong end of a bent stick here.'

'Really Derek?' He opened a cardboard folder and fired a plastic sleeve across the table to me. 'Check it out. Nine accounts, all in your name, total in excess of \$34 million equivalent.'

I checked, did the arithmetic and groaned.



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It was Jim again:

'Derek, we have studied every aspect of your lifestyle and Urquhart and I are 92% sure you have been set up as a patsy. The pattern of deposits stretches back to the month after Jennetta moved into your house in Newlands, three months after your mother died. We have bracketed these accounts. If anyone attempts to move money out, even a cent, we will drop on them from a great height.'

It was Neilson this time, his repetition delivered with a snarling growl:

'So, Derek. Tell us about Jen, Ms Jennetta McCarroll, junior partner in Nevis &Co, Edinburgh.'

From near my feet, my private phone began to trill its callsign.

*Jen!*

Before I could react, Jim had moved quickly, grabbed my rucksack, opened it, felt for the vibrations. Ripping open the Velcro pouch he stared at the screen the pressed accept and then speakerphone. Jen gushed:

'Hi, Derek sweetie. Look, that do in Edinburgh but sorry, no can do. The deal here is going down the pan. Any chance you can duck out and meet me in Paris? What do you say?'

Neilson passed me a scribbled message. I read it verbatim:

'For you, Jen, of course my sweetie pie. Just say where and when and I'll be there.'

Derek, you're a star. I'll text the details when I get there. Leaving Oman in ten minutes, we almost missed boarding. Bye-ee!

Jim spoke:

'Well done, Derek. Now, let's get down to business. Give as much detail as you can and we will set the team downstairs to work on it. Start at the beginning. How did you meet?'

*'I was in a shopping centre in Glasgow called Princes Square. I was buying a pen for my cousin, Erica. She has arthritis and I discovered they had a special pen, easy to hold. Jen was next in line. She was buying a fountain pen. She asked me to help her choose. It took ages. Eventually she chose a Montblanc. It cost more than my first car, she paid cash, the counter assistant had to call her manager. While we waited, we had a drink. A large*

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*pot of Darjeeling for me a G&T for Jen. She had three. Then the pen shop manager arrived with a special marker pen, checked the cash and we left. Jen offered me a lift in her Mercedes sports car but I persuaded her to take a taxi with me to my place. Love at first sight. As you said earlier, we have been an item ever since. She moved in with me the next weekend.'*

It was Jim, the small FBI agent who suggested:

'Urq, why don't we get Maya in here and do this with backup from the team below.'

'Yeah, definitely. Derek, would you be okay with that? Maya can type like lightning. She'll be sharing live with the team downstairs who will be following up, checking what you say against what we know, trying to get a better handle on what Ms Jennetta McCarroll has been up to. We need better inside info to be sure we get the whole nest of vipers in our net. We'll put up a full team of resources and coordinate the arrests using Interpol warrants in Europe and our people on the ground in the US and Canada. We'll make sure your people at the Home Office and Police Scotland know of your vital role.'

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Jim kept prompting me, guiding my responses. When we were finished, Maya had smiled across from the door when she left and it was just the three of us.

We had been working more or less non-stop for eight hours. The interactive Smartboard screen was crammed with diagrams and code names for key individuals for what the FBI had labelled 'Project Mongoose', Jennetta McCarroll (real name Jennifer Scolaste, daughter of the capo of the UK Mafia, Manchester based). She was number four in their hierarchy.

The drugs were being shipped from Triest on coastal traders delivering premium delicatessen foodstuffs to Bristol, Liverpool, and Greenock on the West Coast, and Hull, Newcastle, and Perth on the East coast. A similar delivery system was in place for Spain, France, and Copenhagen. The Amsterdam operation had been shut down two years earlier, replaced by Gent, in Belgium.

It was Jim who spoke:

'Well, that's it. Derek, you've been an absolute star. Without you we would not have been able to complete the big picture. And thanks for the offer. But given your lack of field experience, we cannot let you become involved in the Paris arrest. We need you to camp out here with Maya, stick with your phone, pass on the text when it arrives. We must keep alert, there may yet be wrinkles on this one, 'as yet unknowns' we call them.'

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Both men stood, adjusted their suits and ties, becoming again the archetypal FBI agents you see in films. Jim pressed the stud button by the door and Maya returned. They shook hands and left. The Smartboard screen was now blank and it was just the two of us:

'Derek, did they explain? We have a few rooms here with their own facilities. Basic but secure. We have a freezer stuffed with gourmet meals.'

She fiddled with her iPhone and a menu appeared on the Smartboard.

'Anything take your fancy?'

I chose the vegetarian spicy vegetable option.

'Derek, you might find this weird, but I'm under orders to monitor you 24/7. Every minute. If I'm not actually within touching distance, I must have you on CCTV. If I'm asleep and you need something or act suspiciously, my deputy Ronnie will alert me. This is the biggest drug hit operation we have mounted in a decade and Jim and Urquhart are, shall we say, 'very tense'. They have been running Operation Mongoose for nigh on five years and tomorrow is showtime.'

'Maya, I get all that. Do they really think, after all we've been through today, that I 'm a threat or a weak link?'

'No, not really. Unsaid, I think they are worried someone might try to take you down. After all, although we have everything you gave us down in writing and on video, we are always alert to info leakage issues. We try to be discreet, low key, operate under the radar but every organisation is subject to penetration.'

'Really? You think I am at risk?'

'That attack on you outside the pub in Glasgow worried us. We monitored you for weeks afterwards and insisted you should be suspended, in case it had been a warning and you might somehow have leaked info to them, to Scolaste.'

'Really?'

'Then when you made contact with Dash, we began to relax. You did brilliant work on that software he gave you. There has been talk of inviting you to join our software team in Boston, when this is all put to bed.'

'Boston? I thought Dash was in Washington.'

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'He was but he moved, to be nearer his girlfriend who happens to be my sister. Sasha works in air traffic control. We share a flat but she's moving out next month so. . .'

'So?'

'Well, should you need accommodation, I'll have a room going spare.'

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Two weeks later I was set free, allowed to return to Glasgow but only after I had signed a series of documents binding me to secrecy. In my absence, my quarter villa in Newlands had been sterilised to remove all trace of Scolaste. Maya had whispered she had been taken to Washington for 'processing'.

A further month passed more or less uneventfully, in a professional sense. However, Maya and I were meeting regularly on FaceTime. Using my iPhone, I had taken her on a 'tour' of my home and she was impressed. I had been on a tour of her Boston flat which seemed small, cramped. I had taken her on a bike ride to Pollok Park and the Burrell Museum. She loved the Highland Cows and the amazing ceramics.

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The summons to meet the Chief Constable gave me no warning. As was usual when working with my team at Gartcosh, I was in smart casual dress. I did have a uniform but I seldom wore it. The call from his PA demanded I attend 'at once' at his office two floors above me.

I was ushered in, directed to a chair at a small table near to him. A pot of Darjeeling in a tea cosy was waiting for me. The great man poured.

'Derek, well done. Our American cousins have been fulsome in their praise. The grapevine tells me you have also made a 'conquest,' he checked his notes, 'Dr Maya Song. I understand she has two Doctorates. One from Oxford here in the UK and one from MIT. My source tells me there is a likelihood she is moving to take up a chair at Strathclyde University, is that true?'

'Yes, she moves here in September, we are planning to get married in October.'

'Good timing, given your impending promotion to Assistant Chief Constable responsibility for Cybersecurity. There will of course be certain formalities before this becomes

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official so Mum's the Word but you can assume you will be in post by mid-July. Congratulations.'

I had been hoping for a promotion to Chief Superintendent. This was a welcome surprise.

'Thank you, sir, thank you very much.'

'Fully deserved.'

'Sir Robert, we have booked our wedding for the *Brig a Doon* hotel for the first Friday in October. Would you and Lady Catherine be free to join us, please.'

'I'll give a provisional yes and get back to you soon. Did you know our daughter Emily was married there last November?'

'Eh, yes. It is a lovely place.'

'Well then Derek, off you go and snag a few more bad guys for us.'