

Under Contract

Viking Media

Cathy Sproul had always been a flirt, even as a child. It was her way of coping, her way of getting people to like her, to give her what she craved - attention.

Abandoned by her unmarried mother when she was twelve, the gawky teenager had endured short stays in a succession of foster homes in various locations in the Dundee area. In several of these refuges she had been fondled by substitute fathers and on one occasion by both husband and wife who took her to bed with them on a regular basis.

Cathy knew she had a married auntie called Agnes (Nessie) who lived somewhere in Glasgow near Jordanhill College, but without a surname or an address, the authorities could not contact this mystery person and so the orphan, classified by her case worker as *'flighty and prone to making up stories'* was on her own.

Eventually, when she was old enough, Cathy Sproul emptied her current foster father's wallet and with £73 in mixed notes, caught a bus which happened to be heading for Kirkcaldy. Initially she worked as a junior in *Boots the Chemist* but soon moved on to become a salesgirl in a ladies' shoe shop, earning enough to rent a room and get by, still living from hand to mouth. Over the next two years Cathy grew taller, filling out, becoming a very attractive young woman, flirting with any man who paid her even the slightest attention.

At eighteen, in her prime, she got a job at *O'Reilly's* working as a barmaid for Des O'Reilly, a job which suited her to a tee.

Des was short and dumpy, easy-going, full of blarney. Locals claimed:

"Des O'Reilly could charm the birds from the trees to feed out of his hand".

At his home in the poshest part of Kirkcaldy, he had a wife called Mairead who devoted herself to her six grandchildren from Sally and Janey her unmarried daughters, now in their late twenties. These girls ran a shoe shop called *"Stepping Out"* in Kirkcaldy town centre, set up with their father's money.

It was while working there that Cathy got the job at *O'Reilly's*. Des was used to women and their ways and never chided his latest barmaid when she decided to take a few days off claiming it was her 'time of the month'.

A bonus for Cathy was her new job came with a small self-contained flat over the premises, a place which Des had sometimes slept over if he had hosted a late night 'lock-

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in', usually after a big football match. For Cathy this was her first proper home where she had her own door key, a place where she invited her special men friends, to visit after hours, but only if they agreed in advance to pay for services rendered.

It was at *O'Reilly's* that Cathy met Billy Kendrick. When she found herself pregnant, Billy seemed to be the best option. To Cathy he seemed a soft mark with a well-paid job working for BP as a painter on a North Sea oil rig, three weeks on, three weeks off. She set her sights on him and they were married within a month after which she moved to his rented terraced house with its own front and back door, another step up for a girl who had next to nothing but some nice clothes, dozens of pairs of shoes and a winning smile.

Sadly, for Cathy, as her child grew into a toddler, it became obvious to everyone it was Des O'Reilly and not Billy Kendrick who had sired Arlene. Unlike Cathy and Billy, both of whom had red-blond hair and fair complexions, Arlene the toddler was small, dumpy with dark hair almost black, and an off-putting eye defect inherited from Des, a defect she shared with Sally and Janey.

To Cathy's dismay, she also discovered that Billy Kendrick was prone to intermittent dark moods and when he was in a black rage, he knocked her about, prior to subjecting her to painful anal sex. Their unhappy marriage continued for six years. During this time Cathy was planning her escape, learning to drive, using Billy's Transit van, when he was offshore.

As a more mature student, she blagged her way onto various college courses, leading to acceptance onto a course entitled, 'HNC in Computer and Related Studies', discovering she was not as dumb as she had been told. Using the college computer, she also managed to track down her aunt, Agnes Houlihan (nee Sproul) a widow registered as a voter at an address on Southbrae Drive, Jordhill, a property which backed onto a railway line.

Soon after she received notice that she had been awarded an HNC with Distinction, fate intervened; Billy Kendrick was killed in a fall while out on his oil rig during poor weather, an accident caused by a faulty harness.

When this tragedy occurred, Arlene was aged six and attending Kirkcaldy West Primary. In Arlene's mind, her father Billy Kendrick had been a hero, always giving her presents of sweets and toys. She was used to his absences and was sure he was not dead, believing he would come back to her eventually, blaming her mother for shouting at him so much.

Cathy was advised that, in due course, she would probably be awarded a substantial compensation for his unlawful death but meantime she was alone, with a child and many bills to pay. Her crisis was compounded by the discovery that Billy, an ardent supporter of the Tartan Army, had taken out loans to fund his trips to Europe, following the Scotland soccer team. Her debts were piling up. She had to find a job and soon.

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At the job centre, Cathy struck it lucky and landed a well-paid job as a travelling sales rep for a company in Dundee, selling greetings cards, travelling the length and breadth of Scotland with a huge briefcase of samples and dozens of boxes of starter packs for new customers. This job came with a leased Mondeo and a company credit card to pay for her hotels, food and petrol.

Most weeks Arlene was dropped off at a childminder before breakfast on Mondays. This minder, an unmarried mother called Siobhan Drury, had three younger children by different fathers and was scraping by on social security benefits. Siobhan, who was twenty-three when Arlene first came to her, was a large feckless girl but kind and caring. Glad of the extra money from Cathy, she 'adopted' Arlene as one of her own, giving her the role of big sister to her own children. Depending on Cathy's weekly schedule, Arlene might be left with Siobhan until late on Friday evenings. On occasions, when Cathy had found a 'date' on her travels, Arlene might stay with her childminder for two weeks at a time.

On her return, Cathy would share her romantic exploits with Siobhan, who listened in awe, judging Cathy's life on the road as glamorous verging on exotic. What Cathy did not share with Siobhan was that she had set her sights on her new boss and did not want him to know she had a child in tow, not until she had snagged him securely.

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Ruaraidh Maceasbuig, (son of the Bishop) was from Portree in Skye and had moved to the mainland to study Graphic Design at Duncan of Jordanstone College in Dundee. Within a few weeks of arriving, he changed his name by deed poll to 'Rory Bishop', this to avoid confusion and misspellings. He was the only child of Magnus Maceasbuig, an alcoholic widower who eked out a subsistence living as a crofter and part-time kitchen skivvy cum handyman in a local hotel. Glad to be free at last, Rory had never had any plans to return and from the very start, applied himself to his studies with the dedication of a zealot.

At the end of his final year, Rory won a poster design competition sponsored by *Timex*, under its *Community Support Initiative* scheme. The award had comprised a sizable business start-up grant to be disbursed under the guidance of an incubator mentor funded by the *Scottish Development Agency*. In their wisdom, the *SDA* appointed a freelance consultant on a lucrative two-year fixed-term contract. Myrtle Lees, a glamorous divorcee saw the tall, blonde, twenty-two-year-old Viking as fresh meat. Rory moved in with Myrtle and, within a year she realised he was very talented, a man with a profitable future. They married the week her *SDA* contract ran out. Sadly for Myrtle, Rory's genes placed him nearer to his female side and he could not satisfy her rather aggressive appetite for sex. Gradually their marriage began to crumble as she looked elsewhere for satisfaction.

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Rory, ignoring her blatant affairs, threw himself into his business, recycling all his profits to keep it growing. Myrtle soon grew tired of her obsessive, workaholic husband. To fund their acrimonious divorce, he drained his small personal savings account, and, with a crippling personal bank loan, he was free of her.

Myrtle, however, did not thrive in her new life. On the anniversary of her divorce, the forty-two-year-old, now living comfortably in a garden flat in Morningside, died of a drugs overdose, taken to escape the impending double mastectomy recommended by her surgeon as a last-ditch attempt to quell her rampant breast cancer.

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Soon after Myrtle's death, Cathy Kendrick had joined Rory Bishop's small sales team, becoming his top salesperson in her fourth month, a position she held for the remainder of her first year. At her annual review, at her suggestion, he moved Mrs Kendrick from field sales to a new role as his Project Assistant to help him create a telesales model which he was sure would give his business greater 'reach' into England and perhaps beyond.

Initially this was planned on a three months' trial basis but Rory was soon impressed with her computer skills, learning with surprise of her HNC qualification. As a married woman, Cathy seemed 'safe', unlikely to come on to him. What he liked best was her ever-ready smile and cheery nature, a complete contrast from his former wife.

Over a few months their office friendship blossomed and drip by drip, Cathy felt able to reveal the loss of her husband and the existence of her child, claiming Arlene was happy with her 'Granny Siobhan', a fiction which enabled Cathy to be available to work late together alongside Rory on their project when the office was quiet. It was a game she was used to playing.

Their affair had started simply, with meals out and visits to the theatre in Edinburgh and opera in Glasgow. On one occasion, by arrangement with her mother, (Granny Siobhan), Cathy accepted an invitation to a long weekend at Gleneagles Hotel where they registered as a couple, sharing a double bed. After a slow start, they enjoyed uncertain but gentle sex. For Cathy it was a new experience and a welcome relief after the abuse she had endured from Billy Kendrick and some of her one-night stands.

After that first weekend, Cathy allowed Rory to make the running, never pushing for a more, taking what he was able to give, and hoping for a good outcome. In the office they made a good team and in bed, Cathy did her best to stimulate his lower than hoped for libido, wearing fancy peekaboo underwear, burning joss sticks and scented candles, applying massage oils, stroking, kneading and tugging gently until he was fully ready for the condom. Then, with his agreement, she would mount him, riding up and down slowly,

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taking them both on a tantric adventure towards a gentle, shuddering climax. To her surprise, Cathy discovered she was enjoying the best sex of her life.

In the end, it was Cathy who took the initiative. One evening while they lay side by side in his newly built villa on the outskirts of Kirkcaldy, she took the plunge. Her soliloquy was rehearsed, structured, planned carefully.

"Rory, you know how it was with Billy. He was a complete brute. I really don't know why I married him. It just happened. At the time I was working in *Boots* as a sales assistant and there he was buying condoms, winking at me. When my shift finished, he was waiting. I agreed to go out with him later, just for a drink and well, it went on from there. I was only eighteen and I'd never been with an older guy before. He seemed amazing to me, so sure of himself. He had a Transit van. Yeah, I know, sordid, right? Anyway, whatever happened to his condoms I don't remember but almost at once I was expecting and then Arlene came along. By that stage, I was trapped. Then he got the job offshore. That gave me time to study, trying to get enough qualifications to escape. Mum knew about Billy, what he was really like, and did her best to help. My plan was to try to get to Glasgow, I have an auntie who lives in a place called Jordanhill. She's a widow now and said she would give me a room until I got sorted. She's a bit of a grouch is Auntie Nessie, bossy, always running back and forward to the chapel. I knew I could never stay with her long term. Then, as you know, Billy had his accident. Thank goodness BP have paid out at last. However, that money has all gone to clear the debts he left me with, but at least I'm totally free of him at last, ready to move ahead. You know, I keep thinking over and over, if he hadn't died, I might never have met you. That, Rory, would have been the *real* tragedy, right?"

"Cathy, what is it you want? Do you need a helping hand, with money? Now I've paid off my bank loans, I can easily afford it. Or I could award you a bonus. The business is doing well, and I mean really, really, well, thanks to what you've done to support me. I would have offered to help before, but I thought you might take it the wrong way, like I was trying to pay you for companionship especially since, well, you know."

"Actually, Rory, I was working myself up to asking if you would be willing to marry me."

"Marry you? Yes, if you want to, but only if you think you could put up with me?"

"Rory, of course I can *put up with you!* You're the kindest, sweetest man in the world."

"OK, Cathy, yes, yes, let's get married! We should do it as soon as possible, before my China trip. But no fuss, please, just a simple registry office job and no families or friends, just us, OK? Last time, with Myrtle, it was excruciating. All those speeches and some of the jokes from that vamp called Lorraine, her Maid of Honour, most definitely a misnomer. Quite simply, her jokes were obscene, constantly referring to my manhood and

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suchlike. Horrible. And you will never guess, after the speeches, while Myrtle was doing her Tina Turner karaoke spot, absolutely spaced out, high on something, Lorraine and I were side by side at the top table and she slipped her hand across and unzipped my fly and started groping me. She was drunk too, of course. When I tried to fend her off, she gripped my wrist and tried to get me to put my hand up her dress. She whispered, "Rory, I'm not wearing panties and . . ." Well, what she said then, I will not repeat. It was so, so embarrassing. Actually, Cathy, you're the first person I've ever talked to about it. Honestly, it was the very worst thing that has ever happened to me. And she's still out there, on the TV too. Despicable woman."

"Oh Rory, how absolutely awful for you. Yes, let's keep our wedding simple, no fuss. And let's do it soon, please."

"OK, we'll set it up ahead of my trip. Will you organise the paperwork, pick a date in my diary. I think they do Saturdays nowadays, do they?"

"Yes, of course, Rory. I'll get it done right away."

"Cathy, that contact in Beijing, the printing firm, you've seen the numbers, what do you think? I feel certain we can trim our costs and speed everything up and make the business grow faster and more profitably if we send them the designs and get them to ship directly to our customers. What do you think?"

"Rory, you work far, far, far too hard. I think you should lie back and close your eyes. Mmmm, now let's have a wee lookee-see. So, how is that? Nice? Now, there we are, my dear, dear John Thomas, here's some nice warm massage oil. That's it, come on JT, up you come, big and strong for Mummy."

It took a full year of regular unprotected sex and supplements laced into his food before Cathy was at last pregnant. But it was worth it. Declan was the image of his father, with Rory's blonde hair, a long, slim baby, destined to become a replica. Unlike Arlene who had been colicky, throwing up after every feed for over a year, Declan was a perfect infant, a good feeder, sleeping well overnight and teething without girning, walking by ten months, chirping and chortling away, adding new words every day, becoming a funny, cheeky toddler, perfect in every way.

While it lasted, the Bishops had a good marriage. With the help of 'Granny Siobhan' to care for both Declan and Arlene, Cathy continued to work long hours in the office.

On advice, they formed themselves into a limited company called *Viking Media*. Cathy became a director and equal shareholder, taking on the role of company secretary and treasurer, taking the strain on admin, finance and computer issues while Rory churned out his card designs by the hundred, the whole operation running with just six employees, all older women recruited by Cathy.

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To keep themselves fit and release the tensions from long hours at work, they took up jogging. Rory got the bug and soon progressed to half-marathons then full marathons, his way of escaping from work pressures, running in costume as a fur-clad Viking Warrior with a horned helmet and a plastic shield and sword, hauling a mini-float with a stuffed wolf and a charity donations bucket, a ploy designed to promote their business while raising money for local charities in the Kirkcaldy area.

Each quarter, the turnover of *Viking Media* grew steadily, as did its profits.

Then, for the second time in her life, the grim reaper came calling at Cathy's door.

Shortly after the tenth anniversary of their marriage, while running a charity half-marathon in Aberdeen on a baking hot day, putting on a spurt as he approached the finishing tape to try to beat his personal best, 'Rory the Viking Warrior' collapsed and died before the medical team could save him. The post-mortem revealed he had died of a massive aneurism, a weakness inherited from his mother.

Taking advice, Cathy Bishop had sold up, netting just over £5 million including the sale of the house in Kirkcaldy. She wanted away and thought of Edinburgh then realised she would probably find it easier living in Glasgow where she had always found people to be more friendly, more accepting of newcomers.

In any case, she had no friends in Kirkcaldy of the sort she wanted.

In fairness to Siobhan, Cathy bought her a three bedroomed ex-council house which she upgraded and furnished to the girl's taste. Cathy also put £20,000 in a building society account for her and encouraged her to apply for a post as a care assistant in a local old folk's home.

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Kirkcaldy No More

With completion of the sale of *Viking Media* and now financially secure, Cathy moved with Declan to Glasgow to live with her Auntie Nessie Houlihan at Southbrae Drive, a move intended as temporary, while she looked around for a place to buy.

Throughout his schooling in Kirkcaldy, her son had 'struggled' academically although he was always a popular boy in the classroom and playground. In her mind, a good secondary education would remedy the difficulties of his early years and be the making of her wonder child, Declan. At this stage, Cathy was in denial, refusing to consider that her beautiful son would not progress to university.

To be fair to Cathy, these problems had been masked because, although a poor reader and hopeless at maths, her son was a very good talker and, like Rory, Declan was good at drawing and sketching, but only when he was in the mood.

On first arriving in Jordanhill, Cathy was toying with the notion of enrolling him at the nearby *High School of Glasgow*. From its publicity material she knew it was a high-achieving school and although she could easily afford the fees, she feared the ethos might be too posh both for her son and for herself as incomers from Fife. With her move she discovered her aunt lived in the catchment area for *Jordanhill School* (formerly *Jordanhill College School*) an establishment which was specially funded as a centre of educational excellence with both the primary and senior departments listed as among the best in Scotland.

Like its owner, the house at Southbrae Drive was in a state of disrepair and decline. The roof leaked, the gutters were broken, and the central heating had not been operational for several years, allowing wet and dry rot to take hold. Agnes Houlihan was closeted like a nun in one small bedroom, living on a diet of shortbread biscuits and cups of black tea, suffering from advanced dementia and intermittent bouts of incontinence.

With the help of a friendly and understanding solicitor recommended by Nessie's priest, Cathy gained Power of Attorney over her aunt's affairs and moved her to Lillyburn Care Home at Milton of Campsie, near Lennoxton, the country town where Agnes had been raised until moving to Glasgow to attend *Notre Dame College of Education*. Sadly for Agnes, despite excellent and loving care, she died five weeks after her move, unable to adjust to her unfamiliar surroundings.

Free of daily trips to Lillyburn, Cathy threw herself into repairing and upgrading the rambling four-bedroomed stone villa and registered Declan at his new school, an easy

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five-minute walk away. Within a few weeks of his start at Jordanhill, Cathy was called in to meet the headmaster and her son's pastoral care teacher. Reluctantly, she agreed that Declan should be assessed. At last, after many lost years, Declan's conditions were at last exposed and quantified as dyslexia (moderate) and dyscalculia (severe).

A personal development plan was put in place to try to 'fix' the boy's problems. Specialist tutors were brought in by the school from *Dyslexia Scotwest*. In addition, (funded by Cathy), a dedicated classroom assistant was employed. Unhappy at being classified as a 'pupil with learning difficulties', Declan reacted uncharacteristically, embarking on a short-lived career as a truant, telephoning the school to offer long and involved excuses which usually centred on claims that he was needed at home as his mother was unwell.

With her new home trig and trim, Cathy decided she would look for a hobby business and after a few false starts, hit on the idea of an online estate agency. She bought a shop cum office on Great Western Road at Anniesland Cross and employed three older women answering phones and dealing with drop-ins while she made visits to sellers' premises to make measurements, take photographs and sign them up as clients, using this information to populate her databases for uploading to her website. Her sales 'patch' was mainly Jordanhill and Kelvindale and ex-council flats in Knightswood with occasional properties in Dowanhill and Partick and, more rarely, cheaper properties in Bearsden and Westerton.

In her mind, Cathy Bishop knew she was marking time, hoping that the 'problem of Declan' would somehow resolve itself.

Step, by painful step, her son progressed through his years at Jordanhill School, a less than happy time for mother and adolescent. Gradually, Declan learned to read, albeit very slowly. Simple number work was improved using a pocket calculator and provided he was not pressurised he could add and subtract with reasonable accuracy. In discussions with his visiting careers adviser, Cathy eventually accepted that her golden child would never be able to pursue an academic career.

Fortunately, Declan was keen on sport. During a summer camp, he discovered a minor gift for golf. Lessons were arranged at the nearby *World Of Golf*, a location Declan could easily reach from Southbrae Drive on his mountain bike.

When he left school aged sixteen, he had already made firm friends with the staff at this golf academy and was taken on as a trainee, driving the buggy which swept up the practice balls and working in the golf equipment shop where he proved to be an effective and likeable sales assistant.

Aged almost eighteen, Declan Bishop passed his driving test at the ninth attempt. To celebrate, Cathy bought him a new Mini Cooper, shuddering at the eyewatering insurance premiums. Fully mobile and progressing steadily at the *World of Golf*, he set about

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forgetting his underachieving past at Jordanhill, living an active social life, moving from one girlfriend to another, seldom at home. Cathy realised she was losing him, that he would soon be gone and accepted she must start again, find a new life, a new partner and settle to enjoy her wealth. She had been told by her financial adviser that, provided she did not take crazy risks, there was enough in her portfolio to last her two lifetimes.

It was time to move on from Southbrae Drive, if only to escape the constant stream of girls knocking on her door, hoping to have a "wee chat" with her handsome son with the winning smile.

As a first step, she revamped her property sales and lettings website ahead of offering it for sale. Renaming her business "*Glasgow One-Stop Property Online*", she appointed an agent who specialised in trade sales. In an auction, her business sold to an Edinburgh firm for £855,000 net, after fees and taxes, a healthy return on her investment of around £170,000 over the years she had kept herself busy, waiting for Declan to mature, believing he would soon find his ideal girl and settle to raise a family and provide her with grandchildren to spoil.

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After a few weeks searching various locations around Glasgow, Cathy Bishop chose a recently refurbished four-bedroomed red sandstone house in the highly prized Ledcameroch area of Old Bearsden, near to the station and an easy walk from Bearsden Cross.

Rather than sell Southbrae Drive, she put it up for rental and soon had a tenant, a Nigerian family who had moved from London while their two daughters attended Glasgow University as medical students. At this stage, Cathy Bishop owned eight other rental properties, all generating an income while increasing in value.

Her new home in Bearsden was a traditional stone villa, set in a manageable garden, protected by a security gate and CCTV cameras with an intercom which enabled her to check and reject the girls who had managed to discover where Declan was now living.

Almost from the start of her new life in Bearsden, Cathy felt she was being shunned by her neighbours. The adjoining premises were all larger and grander, most with three or four expensive cars in their driveways, all flashier than her much smaller and aging Audi TT convertible and Declan's runabout. Determined to establish herself, she devised a plan.

As a first response, to increase her profile and advertise her presence, she added a new top of the range Porsche Cayenne Coupe to her fleet. When she went to buy her new car, Declan insisted on coming with her to the showroom. While Cathy was out on a test drive, Declan was making friends with the girl on reception, learning her name was Leandra

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Kelmendi and that the dealership was owned by her uncle. Declan turned on his charm and the small chubby teenager willingly exchanged telephone numbers.

'True romance' ensued resulting in Declan applying for a position as a sales assistant with Leandra pleading on his behalf. When he passed his interview, he was taken on as a dogsbody, vacuuming, washing and polishing the used car stock, moving these expensive vehicles around at the whim of the Sales Manager. On rare occasions he was sent out with an older man to collect and then return cars pre-booked for a service or repair.

With her new home adapted to incorporate a home cinema and a small gym, Mrs Cathy Bishop, a dangerously attractive rich widow and retired businesswoman, moved ahead to implement the second strand of her plan to gain acceptance and discover the man she was seeking, now that Declan was tugging at his leash, eager to move out and live as a singleton.

Although not in any way religious, she attended each of the local churches at Bearsden Cross, visiting each in rotation, always on foot. Likewise, she shopped locally, patronised the local coffee shops and restaurants, tipping generously. She joined *Douglas Park Golf Club* and took lessons from the professional at the local golf range. Expanding her catchment area, she joined three local gyms, visiting in rotation to exercise diligently under the guidance of fitness instructors, giving her opportunities to display herself while checking out likely prospects.

In her second year living at Ledcameroch, newly forty-five, fit, slimmed down to almost trim, well dressed and carefully made-up for every occasion, she was now established in the area, attracting admiring glances from many of the movers and shakers who lived locally, including several of her neighbours.

Meanwhile, at Artan Kelmendi's Porsche dealership, Declan Bishop was making steady progress. After months of haunting the premises, working unpaid weekends and late nights he was at last given the opportunity he craved and was allowed onto the sales floor. From the first week he was making sales, specialising in 'awkward' women customers the other salesmen avoided whenever possible.

Shortly after her birthday, Cathy began her liaison with Donald John MacQueen (generally known as Donnie, sometimes as DJ). MacQueen was originally from Easdale, a small island on the west coast near Oban, once famous as the centre of the slate industry in Scotland. As a young man, Donnie had moved to Glasgow to join Strathclyde Police prior to its merger into Police Scotland. His wife had died of cancer shortly after their tenth wedding anniversary. He had no children and no local family. Their romance was a slow burner, mainly because of Donnie's long hours and his work obsession, something she was familiar with from her marriage to Rory. On his days away from the office he was a jogger, running out with one of Cathy's several groups.

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Before Donnie, there had been a small collection of carefully chosen others, try-outs, not all single like Donnie. However, from their first bedding, she knew Detective Inspector DJ MacQueen was the man she had been searching for, the man she had been waiting for since Rory was taken from her.

With the arrival of Donnie in her life, Cathy at last gave into her son's repeated requests by gifting him use of a grand top floor apartment she owned at Kelvin Court near Anniesland Cross, an impressive Grade B Art Deco building dating from 1938. Importantly for Declan, this apartment came with a secure parking place for his latest Porsche, a demo car he was allowed for personal use as a reward for becoming 'salesman of the month', three months in a row.

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Flying Solo

Two years before Rory died, Arlene now sixteen, headstrong and self-opinionated, the rebellious Goth girl, with piercings on her eyebrows, nose and tongue, and free of the school she hated, moved to Glasgow, to stay with her great-aunt.

Cathy Bishop, relieved to see the awkward, secretive and irritating teenager leave, saw this move as an echo of her own journey in life and so did not oppose the idea. The girl had been a poor student and, like Granny Siobhan, seemed to live in a fantasy land of TV dramas and movies. So far as Cathy had detected, there had never been any boys in her odd-looking daughter's life, just a few equally odd-looking girlfriends, helping each other with their hair and makeup.

The reality was that since the birth of her golden child Declan and with their *Viking Media* business growing fast and needing her constant attention, Cathy had almost forgotten Arlene existed. To try to heal the gulf between them, Cathy sent her daughter off with £500 in cash and asked her to keep in touch.

For the teenager from Kirkcaldy, living with Mrs Agnes Houlihan was always doomed to failure. Nessie, a devout Roman Catholic of the old school, a stern disciplinarian, was in her late sixties. Widowed at thirty-two, childless, bitterly retired at fifty-five after a dispute with her head teacher, the pensioner was now set rigidly in her ways. From the start she was determined to dominate and redeem her wayward grand-niece, demanding her lodger adhere to lights out at nine-thirty then rousing her at six to attend early morning Mass with her at Saint Peter's in Partick, beside the school where Nessie had taught infants for many years. This involved a fast hike, part of Arlene's penance necessary "for the good of her sinful soul". To the Goth, these services were a mystery. Back in Kirkcaldy, she had attended a non-denominational school and had only ever been inside a church for nativity services.

Arlene resisted and after a shouting match during her second week at Southbrae Drive, she refused to attend. In secret, during these early months of freedom, the girl was experimenting with Vodka and Coke and smoking cannabis, blowing rings out of her bedroom window. Fortunately, Nessie, whose sense of smell was poor, did not detect this errant behaviour.

Six months after arriving in Jordanhill, without a thank you or a goodbye, Arlene packed and left, determined to have her complete freedom at any cost. By this stage, she had acquired two large suitcases, now stuffed with clothes and dozens of pairs of shoes and fashion boots.

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In her first year entirely alone in Glasgow, supported by intermittent hand-outs from Cathy, Arlene stumbled along in a series of low-paid jobs, moving from one bedsit to another while working as a skivvy in hotel and restaurant kitchens. Her break came when, newly eighteen, she landed a better paid job in a fancy shoe shop.

"*Designer Labels*" was a franchise outlet located inside the recently re-modelled Frasers' multi-store on Buchanan Street, in the heart of Glasgow's premier shopping district. Being a 'shoe person', Arlene was soon doing well and at the end of her three-month probationary period, she was promoted to assistant manager and rewarded with a nominal increase in her wages. Now she had a steady income and a bank account and credit card, the Kirkcaldy girl found a two-roomed flat with a bathroom in Parnie Street, near Glasgow's Saltmarket, a location less than ten minutes on foot from Frasers' Store.

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With many ups and downs as managers came and went, the years ticked by. Then, one day, it happened - Arlene was promoted to become the Manager of the franchise outlet re-launched as "*A Fresh Foot Forward*".

She celebrated by booking a holiday in Ibiza at a resort for singles, hoping for romance at last, sadly without success.

The girl from Kirkcaldy was no longer a Goth or pierced. In her new role, she dressed in smart business clothes purchased at other designer outlets at Fraser's, items bought with helpful discounts on a *quid pro quo* basis, using her new authority as manager to mark down 'scuffed' items when her Fraser's colleagues came shopping for shoes.

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When Cathy moved to Glasgow with Declan after Arlene's adoptive father died, the mother became an occasional customer at her daughter's outlet. These visits, about twice a year, usually included a catch-up lunch meeting at nearby *Prince's Court*. During these encounters, Arlene would be subjected to Cathy's monologues describing the latest highlights from her busy life, lurid anecdotes about her several men friends and the occasional progress report on Declan.

One February evening, when she opened her mail at Parnie Street, Arlene discovered she had maxed out on all three of her credit cards, caused by a mad shopping spree at the January sales. Topsy, unaware it was after midnight, Arlene telephoned her mother to ask for help. She caught Cathy in a stinking mood, still cooling off after a blazing row with her latest boyfriend, a twenty-nine-year-old budding computer consultant who phoned earlier to break the news he had decided to join his friends on a golf tour of Portugal, rather than partner her on a luxury Mediterranean cruise, a treat to herself to celebrate her "fortieth" birthday.

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Tired of Arlene's seemingly endless fecklessness, Cathy refused to help, releasing a broadside which she later regretted:

"No, Arlene, not this time, and not ever again. Look, you're not a child anymore. Let's face it, it's time to grow up, take control of your life, right? And while you're at it, take a good look in the mirror, you're plumping up, verging on gross. And that latest hair colour is just not you. Never in a month of Sundays will crimson ever suit you. If you want my advice, it's time you joined a gym, right? And high time you gave up on the booze. I can smell it on you every time we meet. You'd better wise up or you'll lose that job of yours, right?"

Arlene saw this refusal as cruel and miserly, another proof her mother had never loved her. After all, with the proceeds from Rory Bishop's business, and the rent from the house at Southbrae Drive, with her mansion in Bearsden and driving a fancy Audi sports car, her mother must be rolling in money. It was all about Declan, it always had been. But surely, in all fairness, her mother could easily afford to help, maybe even buy her a flat, or let her live in one of her many rental properties, maybe even rent free, somewhere nice, like one of her places in Broomhill or even Knightswood.

A week after their telephone call, Arlene put all these thoughts into a long and poisonous email which she pinged off to Cathy.

There was no reply.

The two Glasgow Girls ceased to communicate.

Weeks became months, months became years and still the silence continued.

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Despite her off-putting appearance and her dysfunctional mother, Maureen Milloy had always been top in her class. By age six she could read and count with ease and took refuge from her chaotic home life in her local library, burying her head in books and computers.

When she set her mind to anything, she seldom failed. Dictated by her genes, she was a gambler by nature but not reckless, always careful to prepare her ground, research her foes diligently and bold enough to strike hard and ruthlessly when the time was right.

Clinging to the adage that success breeds success, not all her decisions were correct or ethical, but her win rate was high. Failure was rooted out without mercy.

Aged sixteen, she had been an early entrant into the odd and secretive world of online Chess and poker, playing boldly, matching herself against other gamblers from around the world, signing on using various pseudonyms and invented 'profiles', often posing as an older woman, a recent widow, vulnerable.

At eighteen, when Maureen left for university in Edinburgh, her mother Teresa Milloy moved to Aberdeen, embarking on a new career as a call girl serving workers in the booming oil industry.

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By age twenty, halfway through her university course, the reclusive young woman from Kirkcaldy had amassed £500,000 from these hobby activities. With each win, she put her new wealth to work, buying low grade tenement properties throughout the central belt of Scotland, properties she refurbished cheaply then rented out, mainly to tenants in receipt of social security payments, their rents re-directed to her landlord bank account with RBS, registered in her mother's name, without her knowledge.

In a bolder move, after further careful research online and private investigator reports she commissioned, she rented a string of down and heel business premises in off-pitch locations chosen because of their proximity to business hotels and night clubs.

With make-overs, she set them up as spas and massage parlours, sleazy operations trading from mid-evening to just before dawn.

To manage these businesses, she installed older women recruited from online escort agencies, women at the end of their careers as call girls. She controlled these operations remotely, using CCTV and booking websites linked to her PC. By their nature, these were

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cash only businesses and Maureen was wise enough to incentivise her managers by giving them freedom to set their own prices and recruit their own personnel. In effect, they were running a franchise which must return an agreed weekly amount in 'rent' paid in cash, delivered to an industrial unit at a derelict business park on the outskirts of Dalkeith, another part of her growing portfolio of land and properties, bought cheaply, putting her money to work rather than have it sitting idly in a bank account.

At this unit, always on Sunday mornings, rents were accepted at pre-set times, scheduled at fifteen-minute intervals, delivered by each of her franchise holders in person. On entering the premises, the payee was required to pass her box of rent money through a hatch behind which Maureen used a cash counting machine to check the payment. They were not permitted to see her. Conversation was by an intercom, Maureen using a voice changer, impersonating a gruff male with a Russian intonation.

Those who did not deliver on their agreed rental target were replaced without compunction. In accordance with the contract they had signed, no excuses were countenanced. However, since she had recruited them to her business only after very careful research, these failures were few. If they protested, they were punished or, in extreme cases they were 'disappeared', using a disposal service she had discovered on the Dark Web.

Now that Maureen Milloy had learned the ropes, there was no shortage of replacements or additional franchise holders to operate her growing empire.

An integral part of her new operation was a special arrangement with a very private bank in Zug, Switzerland. This money-laundering process involved shipping her cash by *DHL* and other reputable couriers. Her income from these brothels came to her in used notes which she packed and sealed in boxes labelled 'Premium Photocopy Paper', each box with an individual RFID label and bar code recognised by the bank's goods receiving department.

These boxes contained mainly Sterling notes but when clients offered cash in other currencies, this too was shipped to Zug. In return for the cash, the bank discounted her 'dirty' payments by 7.5% before depositing 'clean' money to her master account as US Dollars now available to her inside the global banking system. Working online, Maureen was free to move the money electronically to wherever best suited her.

Enforcement at these back street operations required hired muscle. For this she used a Glasgow hoodlum call Hugh Bartlett, a man with a criminal record for violent behaviour, now living a quieter life in Broxburn under an assumed name with a job as a flesher in an abattoir. A decade earlier while in hiding from the Police, Shuggie had been her mother's live-in boyfriend for a few months, Teresa Milloy's 'bit of rough'.

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As with her poker and Chess winnings, Maureen used her income from her DHSS rentals and the cash from her brothels to fund further investment opportunities, reforming her portfolio to shield her enterprises from the Inland Revenue by creating a string of Scottish Limited Partnerships.

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On graduating from Edinburgh University with a First in *Law with Accountancy*, she was awarded the Best Student in Faculty prize, making her a target for all the top firms in the UK.

Maureen used the £2,500 prize to buy her first ever 'real hair' wigs, both blonde, one white gold, the other red gold, purchased online from a highly rated firm in Copenhagen, chosen after careful research. These wigs came with a starter pack of specialised shampoos and conditioners formulated to keep her purchases in tip top condition. The firm, whose target market was rich older women and men, some victims of hair loss due to their cancer treatments, also offered a postal service whereby a hairpiece could be sent for professional maintenance. Maureen, who had been born hairless due to an untreatable genetic flaw, was already adept with wigs and preferred to care for them herself.

Although tall and painfully thin, she was otherwise healthy, eating carefully, an early aficionado of organic home cooking, abhorring alcohol and drugs of any kind, a strong reaction to her mother's dissolute lifestyle.

With the joint honours degree she had been striving for, Maureen Milloy was convinced what she needed to grow her portfolio was a training pathway which allowed her to qualify both as a solicitor and an accountant. With these qualifications, she would be able to bypass her reliance on expensive external professionals and operate freely and speedily as a sole practitioner and self-investor, without being continually questioned and challenged by stuffy dolts.

Dressed in an expensive professional trouser suit, she did the rounds of interviews in Edinburgh and Glasgow but came away unimpressed. Maureen, from a background which had made her determined and stubborn, had no intention of being shoehorned into an overcrowded office learning to be a 'team player' with a bunch of yah-yah morons from expensive fee-paying schools. With low expectations, she flew to London and did a further week of interviews. Being a home bird, she hated travelling and living out of a suitcase. Once again, she drew a blank. None of the 'packages' offered her the freedom she needed to be able to operate her other enterprises without restraints.

Back in Edinburgh, she refocussed, beginning a new search, visiting the sites of recruitment agencies, gradually extending her search to the rest of Europe and beyond,

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sifting hundreds of Internet job advertisements, looking for a specific form of employment which matched her needs.

After many hours, she came across a synoptic flyer on a Malaysian recruitment agency site, a teaser offering 'a flexible working apprenticeship in professional financial services' which she thought might be what she was looking for. She clicked the link. The sales blurb described a dispersed team of dedicated professionals working on a global basis, focussed entirely on property purchases and disposals, a sector where Maureen was already active on a personal basis, albeit on a smaller scale.

Maureen Milloy decided to apply, filled out the online form and, as instructed, attached a two-minute head and shoulders video clip in which she 'presented herself', outlining her strengths and her vision.

Within an hour she received an email from *NewmanLaw.com* offering a rewards package which, if she met set targets, would exceed what she estimated junior Partners might earn at the top London firms, the very people who had been interviewing her a week earlier.

The *NLC* offer defined her role as a Trainee Solicitor/Accountant with the prospect of an associate partnership after fully qualifying at the end of her initial two-year contract, provided she met all the challenges set for her.

The position with *NLC* required her to work online, remotely, from any country she wished. An attached PDF of a flashy brochure described an organisation which operated personalised round-the-clock professional support tailored to clients' demands and timescales. Checking online, she was impressed by their list of clients and projects, recognising many well-known high-worth individuals, global investment houses and major pension companies.

Maureen, who had been a committed techie from her early teens, saw *NLC* as a trailblazing firm, at least a decade ahead of its peers. She revisited the offer document and the supporting blurb again and again, looking for weaknesses and hidden meanings until eventually concluding she should accept their offer and try her best to make it work, provided the demands of working for *NLC* left her time for her own business activities.

By attaching her digital signature, she accepted and logged off, deciding to go for a long run to release the tensions of the previous few days.

An hour later, she checked her emails and followed the link to the *NLC* site where she was invited to read a series of further induction documents and sign off on them.

On completion of this assignment, an email arrived.

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"Maureen Milloy,

welcome aboard.

You are now part of NLC.

Please read through the further documents attached and sign off on them.

Lois Delaney."

At the end of a marathon session of checking and signing off on these documents, Maureen was learning in more detail how NLC was able to afford her enhanced rewards package.

"By operating a virtual organisation without expensive corporate offices, we do not incur the burden of rigid protocols required to manage 'teams' riddled with in-fighting and competing egos."

"In return for dedicated and focussed application from each NLC employee, we promise a fair and generous remuneration as a self-employed consultant, responsible for your own taxes and NICs."

Reading on, she now discovered there was also a further batch of forms which she must sign to trigger the release of the first tranche of payment to her account.

"You must commit to provide a minimum of fifty verifiable billable hours of online effort every week during your six-month probationary period, during which no holidays or sick days are allowed. To protect ourselves, you must sign the attached Direct Debit mandate to allow us to retrieve monies should you fail to perform as promised."

Before accepting and signing off on this mandate, Maureen logged on to her RBS account and transferred the balance to her offshore international RBS account in Guernsey, leaving only a nominal balance of £50 in her personal current account at RBS Edinburgh.

Less than two minutes after signing the NLC documents, RBS Edinburgh 'pinged' her a message. Checking online, she saw that, true to their word, NLC had deposited an advance payment to cover her initial six-month probationary period. Checking the payment transfer code, she discovered the money had been routed to her through a bank on the Isle of Man, details she noted for the future.

A parallel email from NLC advised:

"Maureen,

please bear in mind the real rewards come with your expected performance bonuses. You may wish to set up a separate account to process these free of tax as you are allowed to classify yourself as an 'overseas worker' under the terms of your contract with NLC. This

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we can discuss when we meet online. Please acknowledge receipt of this within two minutes and stay online. Going forward, these emails will be encrypted for our mutual security. Software will be provided.

Lois."

After she had acknowledged receipt of the NLC payment, in a further email Maureen was invited by Lois to an online meeting:

"Maureen,

time to start work. We must chat, face-to-face. There are decisions to be made. You must complete the following action before the access window closes. Check your mobile phone for a text which provides the first eight characters of a sixteen-digit alphanumeric access code. The second part of the code is your mother's date of birth in eight-digit format. Go to the NLC website, click on "Lois Delaney MMS" to download the software package waiting for you. This includes an encrypted portal to a one-to-one video link between our computers. The clock is now running.

You have 30 seconds. Press return to acknowledge.

See you soon!

Lois."

Five minutes later Maureen was chatting with Lois, a tiny, fifty-something, grey haired woman wearing a smart business suit and a string of pearls, a woman who looked as if she might be a family doctor or a clergyman's wife from the 1950s.

In a long and languid monologue, Delaney explained the designation "MMS" referred to her role as Maureen's "line 'manager', professional 'mentor' and online gateway 'supervisor', adding she was speaking from her virtual office, a single room within an anonymous business centre, in central Dublin, with a view onto Merrion Gardens,

Two hours later, now an active member in the virtual world of NLC, operating under the business pseudonym of 'Kate Carter-Smythe', Maureen was settled and working on her first project. In the weeks and months to follow, Maureen would be assigned additional nom de plumes and codes, building up to twenty different names, each serving a different client.

Physically, Maureen Milloy was based in a mirror image of Lois's office, on the top floor of Dundas Court, a six-storey rambling multi-occupancy business centre less than five minutes by foot from her own home in Edinburgh's Cannonmills area. The tenancy was set up and paid for by NLC, listed with dozens of other micro-businesses on the board at reception as 'Edinburgh International Financial Services. com'.

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From her corner window, Maureen had an excellent view of the newly completed offices where *Standard Life's* elite cadre of property investment managers had their main base. These were the men and women who would soon be among Maureen's most valued clients although she would never reveal she was nearby, watching their comings and goings with interest, as a voyeur.

Her role was to support Lois who was the Designated Point of Contact (DPC) at the *SL/NLC* interface. In this arrangement, *NLC* were contracted to provide *SL* with comprehensive legal and project budgeting control services under a Rapid Response Agreement (RRA).

It was not all plain sailing, particularly in the early months while Maureen as the new member of the *NLC* team was more dependent on others. On several occasions Maureen had felt exposed, uncomfortable when she almost failed to deliver on time. Part of the problem, Maureen concluded, was that many of her colleagues were not native English speakers. This meant that routinely she was required to correct and re-draft their support documents, often under extreme pressure of time. An added difficulty was these were people she knew only from email conversations. However, she decided to 'stick with the program', (a phrase Lois used repeatedly when difficulties arose). As she learned her job, she became less dependent.

It took several months for Maureen to discover the underlying subterfuge of Lois Delaney's business model. Although *NLC* gave the impression it was a large organisation with many employees scattered around the globe, this was an elaborate fiction. By carefully studying the email traffic she was party to, Maureen concluded that Lois Delaney was the prime mover employing around ten other highly skilled and well-motivated people like herself, orchestrated by Lois as Queen Spider. Over her two-year spell with *NLC* the names of those she interacted with slowly changed as one left to be replaced by another recruit while the overall numbers remained around ten.

For reasons never explained by Lois, *NLC's* demands on her time were 'lumpy'. During the slow times, Maureen found ample opportunity to continue growing her own much smaller business empire, drip feeding new capital from her *NLC* salary and bonuses while continuing with her online poker and Chess sessions, almost as a recreational activity but always for money. Playing for fun was not part of her mindset.

There was also another important personal aspect which she enjoyed. In her *NLC* role, her entire effort was contributed online. This meant she did not have to suffer the wasted time and frustrations of business travel. Further, even more important to Maureen was she had no nosy and irritating colleagues to fend off.

Maureen's two years of well-paid servitude under the demanding Lois Delaney flew by. She creamed her professional membership examinations and with Lois's glowing

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endorsements and excellent client references, (all factual but 'adjusted' to her real name of Maureen Milloy), she achieved her career ambition to become licenced both as a Solicitor and an Accountant.

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During their roller coaster ride Maureen and her mentor had become close business friends, enough for the older woman to share her retirement plans. In one long debriefing session after a mega-deal for a German client, Lois became talkative and switched their meeting to a rare face-to-face video call. In her rambling monologue, Lois revealed to Maureen she was planning a new life in Malaysia where she had a younger brother. Kieran Delaney was married to Christine Liew, a local mixed-race Anglo-Chinese woman. There were six nephews for Lois to spoil. Kieran and Christine ran their own online recruitment agency, placing professionals, computer software and technical staff serving major inward investors such as James Dyson.

At the conclusion of this two-hour session, Lois had offered to sell out her entire operation to Maureen over a five-year term during which Maureen would continue to contribute as previously while agreeing to a reduced salary and deferred bonuses to fund the purchase of Lois's ownership. Maureen graciously declined, explaining that now she was qualified she intended to pursue her own plans. Since Lois had another willing buyer waiting, she agreed to let Maureen reduce her three months' notice period to two weeks, time to be used finalise the minutiae for recently completed projects.

Although tempted, Maureen did not raid Lois's databanks for information which she might use to her future advantage. She had too much respect for her mentor and knew that if she was discovered, Lois would exact retribution.

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Pollokshields

During her time at NLC under the tutelage of Lois Delaney, Maureen Milloy's portfolio of properties and businesses had expanded steadily. Each enterprise was a standalone entity, operating as a Scottish Limited Partnership (SLP). These SLPs were in turn now also hidden inside an offshore shell company called *Dalgety Developments*, registered in Malta but operated online from an automated facility hosted by a second very private bank in Zug, one which allowed only high-worth offshore entities as clients.

By her twenty-fourth birthday, retrenched after her breakdown with lessons learned, and now fully professionally qualified, Maureen Milloy estimated her worth was just over £23 million, returning around 23% per annum, money which eventually appeared in her Swiss account, free of taxes, funds she continued to deploy to grow her property and business portfolio, as viable opportunities presented themselves, large or small.

At this stage, Maureen was operating only in Scotland, a jurisdiction she felt she understood. From her third year at university, she had been gradually moving her investment focus from Edinburgh, shunning the people who dominated its commercial life, many of whom she judged to be aloof and pretentious in equal measure. More importantly, with the establishment of the new Scottish Parliament, good bargains were harder to find in the capital.

Maureen had roots in Glasgow where her mother was raised as Teresa Madden before she fell pregnant to John Joseph Milloy, then an engineer at Templeton's carpet factory. Newly married and six months pregnant with Maureen, the couple migrated to Kirkcaldy where John Joe had secured a well-paid position as a foreman shift engineer at nearby Longannet Power Station. On this basis, Maureen considered herself to be a Glaswegian.

From age seven Maureen had been dispatched to Glasgow to spend her school summer holidays with her grandmother, Mavis Madden. On the first visit, she had been taken by Teresa who was sporting a black eye and swollen lip, a punishment meted out when John Joe caught her in bed with a punter she had lured from a fancy pub while her husband was on night shift. Pleased to escape the endless shouting and intermittent domestic violence of her life in Kirkcaldy, Maureen became a regular escapee, travelling alone by train and underground to White Street in Partick, using money filched from her mother's purse or father's wallet, or both, while they were comatose after another drunken fight.

She remembered with fondness the bookish tranquillity of Gran Madden's ground floor tenement flat, just off Byres Road. It was here the retired widow lived with her mangy

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old collie called Donnie - short for Donegal. Donegal was where Mavis Morran had been raised before her move to Glasgow aged fourteen in search of work and a husband.

In a cage hung from the ceiling by the window over the kitchen sink, a roller canary sang sweetly from dawn to dusk. His name was Tipper - after Tipperary, Bernard Madden's hometown. On moving to Glasgow, Bernie had become a tram driver until his death from kidney failure, a few years after Teresa was born.

This calm oasis in White Street was where Mavis had comfortably lived out her final years on her state and work pensions, following her long career as a single mother. She had started as a lowly clerkess working for Glasgow Corporation before it morphed into Glasgow City Council, rising to become the personal assistant to a series of incumbent Lord Provosts.

In her final years, Mavis had returned to her Roman Catholic faith, attending locally at Saint Peter's every morning, insisting Maureen attend and participate fully, as a good Catholic girl should. This was the child's first experience of the quiet theatre and drama of the Mass in its various forms, of Confession and Absolution. Encouraged by Mavis, she was Baptised and for a while became convinced that she was being called to become a nun, a phase which lasted until she moved to secondary school and puberty arrived. When Granny Mavis died, Maureen let her faith slip away.

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It had long been Maureen Milloy's intention to make Glasgow her patch, convinced she would succeed on her own account, working to her own plan. She believed that in Edinburgh, very few 'outsiders' had succeeded in making inroads into the deeply rooted legal and business establishment, a largely male preserve, an old boys network run by those with a private education and membership of the right clubs. She was certain that it was in the West of Scotland she would be more able to gain influence and control.

Applying the skills of due diligence learned from Lois Delaney, Maureen had spent months online doing in-depth research, concluding her 'targets' would be among the vibrant and upwardly mobile ethnic communities which had made Glasgow its new home, proprietors operating in a business environment which preferred 'cash only'.

An online survey had revealed the high number of wealthy Asians who lived in the Pollokshields enclave south of the River Clyde, an area she had yet to discover. Further research revealed that the tipping point for Pollokshields had its origins in the influx of New Britons taking advantage of the 1948 British Nationality Act. This document stated that "*all Commonwealth citizens could have British passports and work in the UK*".

This first wave found willing employers in the newly formed NHS and in the burgeoning central and local government agencies of post-war Britain.

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Inward immigration to the UK was also affected when Britain joined the EEC in 1973, these new immigrants turning from a trickle to flood with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent rafted of defections from the USSR as many of its satellites looked West, rather than East for succour. For those who spoke English, Britain was the place to go to try for economic betterment.

In Glasgow, Maureen was convinced most of the new entrepreneurs were living in the grand old houses of Pollokshields.

Based on her online Chess and poker matches, she believed she understood their 'type', certain that these men were gamblers, risk takers like herself. If she could lure them into her 'game' through her business offering, some might be vulnerable, open to exploitation and predation.

As she had learned from Lois:

"Remember, Maureen, in essence, these individuals have no more right to their tax-free wealth than you and me. We can take our fair cut, do it wisely and they will never know any different. Be ruthless, no mercy. It's how the game is played."

Maureen Milloy was under no illusions: instinctively these men would not wish to do business with a mere woman, not unless she could provide them with the service they needed, a haven for their monies, safely laundered then hidden in SLPs and shell companies, a process she understood, an arrangement which would give her ongoing control and opportunities.

She also knew she must not approach them directly. For her plan to work, they must come to her.

By checking the electoral roll and property ownerships, Maureen believed her potential clients lived at residential addresses to the south and west of Maxwell Road. These vast properties were the former homes of the owners of the Glasgow shipping lines and traders who had served the British Empire in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries, when Britannia had ruled the waves.

Day after day for several weeks, leaving her car parked at the sports centre on the edge of nearby Bellahouston Park, Maureen pounded the streets of Pollokshields, criss-crossing it, circumnavigating its perimeter, watching its inhabitants, learning their daily rhythms, getting a feel for her intended patch.

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Opening Gambit

Following a period of online searching, Maureen Milloy made a move to secure her first purchase, a property intended both as an investment and a temporary home for herself. It was a large top floor flat in Dryburgh Gardens, a quiet side road off Wilton Street, North Kelvinside, within easy walking distance of Byres Road and Saint Peter's.

The attraction was that the flat was already 'a project', partially renovated and upgraded by a Danish couple in their late forties, both Architects, childless. For the Hanssens, sadly while their dream home was edging slowly to completion, Erik died of a heart attack. On the day after his funeral, his distraught wife Mette had also died, from a brain haemorrhage. Officially, she had mistaken Erik's blood-thinning heart pills for her type-two diabetes medication.

When Maureen discovered the property, it had been on the market for many months. Buyers were wary because the premises looked exactly what it was, a building site. They were also put off when they learned the work had been undertaken without prior Planning and Building Warrant approval. From the trainee solicitor handling the sale, Maureen learned a few offers had been received, conditional and bounded with unrealistic caveats. Another factor was the Danish couple's Wills, being handled by a solicitor in Copenhagen. In these documents, the entire proceeds from both Hanssen estates had been gifted to a dog charity based in their hometown of Esbjerg, a charity much in need of funds to fend off closure.

Maureen solved the dilemma by making an unconditional low-bid cash offer and the deal was closed in under a week. She then took up immediate residence, embarking on a fast-track programme to complete the outstanding works in accordance with the original drawings and specification. In parallel, she applied for retrospective planning and building approval.

While the work at Dryburgh Gardens was underway using *Turnkey Projects*, a high-end shopfitting business she owned, Maureen was embarking on a plan she had been incubating for many months. It was an idea which had arisen from her experience at *NLC* where most of Lois's new clients came to her from personal recommendations and not from visits to *NLC's* rather opaque website.

Starting from scratch, she would emulate Lois Delaney who had set up her first offering in Birmingham twenty years earlier with a simple walk-in office premises, a converted drapery. Maureen resolved to do the same, start at the bottom and work her way up,

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creating her reputation by word of mouth, dealing with minnows initially, certain she would attract the bigger fish who controlled them, given time.

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During her jogging 'tour', she had identified a potential location for her proposed one-stop business advisory centre. On a corner site on busy Maxwell Road, she discovered a shop signed - "A Goldberg, Ironmonger". Directly adjacent was a Halal butchery and a string of garish shops including Asian mini-markets, fast food outlets, phone repair shops and ethnic beauty salons. The Goldberg shop was fully shuttered, covered in abusive graffiti, its letter slot stuffed with flyers.

Later, working online, she checked the ownership of the premises and was only mildly surprised to learn Abraham Goldberg not only owned the ironmongery shop, purchased in 1937 but also two tenemental properties, comprising six five-bedroomed flats in the adjoining close in Kenmure Street and four similar properties directly above his shop. The record showed these properties were acquired over a six-year period in the early 1950s, when these tenements to the east of Maxwell Road had still been the preserve of well-to-do families.

Later that afternoon, from her rental car parked outside a modest detached villa in the Orchard Park area of south Glasgow, she rang the number obtained from the shop signage.

A tremulous female voice answered with, "Hello, who speak, please?"

There was a definite twang of a Birmingham or Coventry accent, Maureen thought. This was not what she had expected.

Speaking slowly, Maureen asked the 'smart question':

"Mrs Goldberg, if I were to make you a fair offer for your amazing portfolio of flats and your shop in Pollokshields, would you be willing to meet me to discuss how to proceed to a sale?"

"Eh, excusing me, you wait, please."

The phone clattered, dropped on a hard surface. The woman sobbed then blew her nose noisily, muttering to herself. Composed, she picked up the handset again.

"Eh, how you say, complicated? My husband stuck to bed? He fall bad, from stair. His back broken. No can heal. He no speak no more. He take hard painkiller, or heavy? He stay bed, all time. No more walk. He sleep. I feed tube."

"Mrs Goldberg, I may be able to help you. Can we arrange to meet, at your convenience?"

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'I no can leave him."

"I can come to you, Mrs Goldberg."

"You come me? When?"

"I am sitting in my car, right outside your house. Would now be convenient?"

"Eh, what your name, please?"

"I am Maureen Milloy, Miss Maureen Milloy."

"Miss Milloy, I explain you, excuse, my house smelly. Cause by him."

"Mrs Goldberg, I have a very poor sense of smell. Will I come now?"

"Eh, yes. Eh, yes. Come back door, please, kitchen no smell."

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Rebecca Goldberg's story took several hours to reveal itself. As she talked, her English improved. Maureen realised she had probably not talked to anyone since the accident.

Maureen drank tap water and nibbled at a ginger snap while Rebecca drank many mugs of instant coffee and consumed the rest of the packet of biscuits. With her permission, Maureen recorded her tale.

"I thirteen. I come this house with my mother. I no go school never, only speak Yiddish good, no read English, speak only. And learn piano from my teacher Jennifer, who live upstairs. I think I am come here to see Gramma because she is unwell. My mother is sister-in-law to my Uncle Saul, my father Abraham is his younger brother. Saul and Abraham are enemies. I know this from child. I am left here to care for my Gramma. She tell me she needs me to help her. She tell me when she my age, she pretty girl too. Her name Ferka, refugee of Poland. She tell me her dowry used to pay for shop. Her husband, Grappa Abraham was hard work man, not like her sons who both lazy, good do nothings.

"Later, I see it. My future is fix in advance. I sold to my uncle. Sold.

"It start two days after my mother leave me. Uncle Saul come to my room after Gramma asleep. He tell me he love me, want married to me. I say cannot be. He say yes, no problem. I say want go home. He say he pay good money for me. Then he say I bad girl. He know about Jennifer. He say it an abomination to God to kiss another girl. Then he kiss me and do it to me. Then he say, that is it, we are married. It happen again and again. He use Durex all time. I never pregnant. I know I bad girl to do it with my uncle. God forgive me, I like do it."

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"Gramma die. I lonely each day. I try to telephone my Mummy. Number disconnect. I write. No reply. I write, I write, I write. No reply. I forgotten to my Mummy. I write Jennifer. Many letters. She no reply. I try forget about Jennifer but she in my head, my heart.

"Saul nice to me, buy me things, nice clothes. We live as man and wife for many years. I OK, happy. I no think Jennifer no more."

"Saul change. Business bad, he say. He drink all time. No more nice sex. He do bad to me, back passage, blood. I fight him. We no talk. Years, years, years. I am undress to have bath, he comes hit me with belt. He very drunk. I fight. He falls down all stairs. Accident. I no push to him, honest. Two days I wait. I hope he die. He no die. I call ambulance. They take hospital.

"I am here by self. Two months. I write Jennifer. Many week, no reply. Then miracle. She write New Zealand. She live small farm with petting zoo. We talk on phone. She still love me. I still love her. I need money. I search, find papers in attic but no can read full. Saul come home. He Zombie. I his nurse, they tell to me. Two years he live now. I stuck. You help? Please?"

Maureen studied the papers and prepared a retrospective document in the form of a Will forging Saul Goldberg's signature where required.

It took a few months to arrange a transfer of the Goldberg assets to Rebecca Goldberg niece of Saul Goldberg, his sole surviving heir. A fair deal was struck for her properties and business.

With the agreement of the local GP, Saul was assessed and declared to be brain dead. He was then placed on the Liverpool Pathway and slipped away six weeks later.

A passport was obtained and, with the help of Miss Jennifer Bellingham, Rebecca Goldberg was granted an inward investor residency visa and moved to New Zealand to begin her new life as a rich woman, aged only forty-two.

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AdvantEdge.com

Maureen Milloy's business advice centre at Maxwell Road had been running for almost six months but it was not working as expected. Apart from people trying to sell her goods and services, no potential clients had entered her premises although a few had called on the telephone. Two had sent emails. Perhaps her insistence that these contacts must call in person was off-putting, but she was fixed in her mind she needed to see potential clients face-to-face. Only then could she judge if they would be suitable.

While she waited for the expected breakthrough, she kept busy finding properties to upgrade, to add to her buy-to-rent portfolio. The key was not to become fixated on any market segment. There were bargains to be had everywhere not just in Pollokshields but in Shawlands, Strathbungo and Langside.

In Govanhill and Crosshill she discovered a vibrant multi-cultural community which reminded her of Leith, in Edinburgh. What she was looking for were low-grade, run-down properties where the owners were desperate to sell, mainly tenements where her aim was to purchase an entire close, often comprising eight or more flats, usually with sitting tenants. These she would attempt to refurbish which often meant doing side deals with the local 'Mr Big', a self-styled community leader. When needed, she called on the services of Shuggie Bartlett and his team of helpers. If this failed, she would sell them on to the local housing association. It was frustrating work but helpful in that she was building up contacts, spotting people she might use in the future.

From her reception desk, she could often see men standing outside, alone or in small groups, peering in at her mission statement, discussing, arguing, scoffing, spitting, laughing, smoking, and drinking from carryout cups while reading aloud from her placards. These large boards, printed in English, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and Bengali, were hung from the ceiling, easily seen through her new full-height shopfront windows. She would pretend not to see them shaking their heads at the large gold lettered signage above the windows before drifting away, to her relief; these were not the sort of clients she was hoping for.

One day a smallish, plump man in an expensive business suit entered, carrying a large well-scuffed leather briefcase.

She rose and moved from behind her desk to offer her hand in greeting.

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"Welcome to *AdvantEdge*. Maureen Milloy."

Initially the man refused to accept her outstretched hand. She waited. Eventually the man obliged with a cursory touch of his fingers before returning his hand behind his back where his left hand held his briefcase, as if to make it invisible.

"Sir, how may I help you."

"You are the owner of this business?"

"Yes, I am the owner, the sole proprietor. Who are you, please?"

"I am Artan Kelmendi. I sell cars, among other things."

"Ah, thank you Mr Kelmendi, I already have a car."

"I know, last week you bought your car from one of my dealerships. You paid cash, in used notes. Why?"

"Is cash a problem?"

"Are you working for the Inland Revenue?"

"No. I only work for private individuals."

"I think you are working for the Police. Or maybe you are trying to steal my business."

"Certainly not. As you can see from my little wall of fame, I am a qualified Solicitor and Accountant. I know nothing about buying and selling cars. But if you have a problem with my cash, give it back to me and take your car away. I was thinking of upgrading to a Porsche in any case."

"OK, OK. Do you have a private room we can use? I want to discuss something with you."

He reached for his briefcase.

"No, not yet Mr Kelmendi. I cannot discuss business with a man I do not know. If you would please wait here for ten minutes, I will decide whether or not we are compatible. Would you like a coffee while you wait?"

"No."

"And Mr Kelmendi, I do not permit smoking in my office."

"I will wait in my car."

"As you wish."

Maureen watched him cross the street and enter the rear of a Mercedes S Class but in black livery, not silver like her own. There were two men in the front seats, large men,

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shaven headed, wearing black leather jackets. Maureen was almost certain the car would drive away but it remained where it was, its engine running.

She moved to her laptop and began to search. After a few minutes she moved to the Dark Web. Under her breath she whispered, "*Bingo!*" Shutting down her laptop, she moved to stand in the window. Artan Kelmendi looked across. She waved him forward.

As he entered, she again offered her hand and this time they shook hands properly.

"Mr Kelmendi, I think I now understand your difficulties and yes, I am able to help you. Shall we move to my conference room? It is highly secure, no bugs, no hidden cameras. If you wish, you are free to 'sweep' it. Whatever we discuss will be entirely between ourselves. Unlike you, I have no employees. Better for security, I find, in my line of business."

Their meeting lasted just under two hours with Maureen Milloy taking it slowly, explaining step by step what she would do on his behalf. On three occasions, the Albanian went outside to top up his nicotine levels.

The estimated timescale would be two weeks, probably less.

After a short haggle, her initial and ongoing fees were agreed and the contract signed.

When Artan Kelmendi left, his step was lighter. His briefcase was lighter too, its contents left with Miss Milloy who had assured him she would deal with all the paperwork and make things right. She had guaranteed his worries were behind him, that he would not lose his business and would not go to jail.

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Second Chance

A few weeks after completing the stabilisation of Artan Kemendi's enterprise, Maureen was invited to visit Artan's Porsche dealership to collect her new car, a gift from a very grateful client.

Kelmendi's top salesman was Declan Bishop.

In the aftermath of the pain of losing Valeria, Maureen had not expected to fall in love with anyone, far less a man. After their first week cohabiting at Kelvin Court, she had mastered the art of satisfying them. She was certain Declan was not faking his orgasms and neither was she. At the end of week two, she concluded that in bed at least, they were fully compatible.

The night Maureen and Valeria confirmed their love by an exchange of rings, the gorgeous fair-haired Spanish girl had balked at Maureen's plan to share a child with her using the donor sperm Maureen had already purchased from a Danish clinic, the phial stored in the refrigerator, ready to use. Months of debate had followed but Valeria could not be persuaded. She had her own plans, intending to return to Tenerife when she had fully qualified as a GP, to fulfil the solemn promise she had given.

Although the two young women parted on good terms, this unexpected rebuff had shattered Maureen's dream of being 'the mother' of a settled, loving, happy family.

Hopefully, if they moved to the next stage, Declan Bishop's sperm would be strong and healthy.

Like Valeria, Declan seemed happy to accept her baldness, trading his own story of the suffering he had endured as the odd one out at school, always wondering if everyone was talking about him behind his back. It seemed to Maureen that at last from Life's Deck of Cards she had been dealt a perfect hand.

Listening to his pillow talk extolling Cathy Bishop's rise to fame and fortune from humble roots, Maureen closed her eyes to conceal her rising irritation at the tales of his '*amazingly clever mother*', a feeling which changed to anxiety when the wonder woman's relationship with the policeman was mentioned. After a failed online attempt to dig up any dirt on her potential future mother-in-law, Maureen commissioned a report from a private detective, sure that there must be more to learn about Mrs Catherine Bishop of

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Bearsden, previously Cathy Kendrick from Kirkcaldy, nee Sproul of Kirkcaldy, born in a slum in Dundee.

Cross-checking the details provided, Maureen decided Cathy Bishop, retired businesswoman and minor property developer, worth around £7 million gross, was no genius, merely an opportunist who had used her good looks to prey on the men around her. Lurking in Maureen's mind was the notion Cathy might have been responsible for Rory Bishop's untimely death. Unfortunately, this was something she could not prove. However, given the woman's educational background and track record, Maureen judged that Declan's mother was not a threat in herself, merely likely to be possessive about her son and almost certainly inquisitive about Maureen's activities.

Cathy Bishop's relationship with DCI Donald John MacQueen was the real concern. This was a man Maureen knew quite a bit about, a man she kept a constant watch on through her several moles at the Scottish Crime Campus. At Gartcosh, the taciturn man from Easdale was a revered figure dedicated to hunting down people like her and her clients. Although he was old school, barely computer literate, MacQueen had garnered success by native cunning, flashes of insight and doggedness, traits which Maureen respected and feared. He also had a reputation for nurturing the rising breed of 'new digital cops', recruited and fast-tracked from university, the very people she feared most.

Unfortunately, unlike many of his colleagues, Donnie MacQueen appeared to be incorruptible. She asked one of her moles for an update on the policeman; thankfully, he did not seem to be aware of Declan's liaison with her, so far.

The thought of ditching Declan hovered at the back of her mind but Maureen could not bring herself to do it, knowing it was most unlikely she would ever find such an almost perfect match again. With Declan as her husband, she could revitalise her earlier plan to have a family, sired by this beautiful, charming, sexy Viking, a man she would mould to her requirements as her front man. With his stunning looks and guileless charm combined with her cleverness, she was sure they would make a perfect team

As their secret weeks together at Kelvin Court ticked by, Maureen was hatching and refining a plan to bring Declan into her business in a role she was sure would suit his skill set and relieve her of many of the administration burdens which were already beginning to slow her down. Believing she understood him inside out, she was confident he was 'malleable' and just bright enough.

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What Maureen Milloy required was a way of isolating Declan from his mother, turning the woman away, a plan she was scheming, already making the moves in the Chessboard of her mind. Could Arlene Bishop, Declan's half-sister be the key? As Declan had already

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revealed, mother and daughter were no longer on speaking terms although he did not know the reason for their bitterness.

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Background Check

From Arlene's school records, unearthed by Maureen's private investigator, the girl seemed to have been pretty enough in Primary School photographs. In her teenage years she had been a Goth. Recent shots taken by the sleuth showed she was now grossly overweight. There were no lasting links with Kirkcaldy and no active Facebook friends although she was a joiner and voyeur on many open sites.

Checking back through recent years, the investigator could find no record of any intimate relationships, male or female. Her odd eye defect had made her a loner, a situation Maureen understood from her own baldness.

Her credit card spending records revealed her splurges on clothes, ongoing high spending on alcohol and junk food, and her subscriptions to *Netflix*, *Amazon Prime* and several soft porn girl-on-girl channels.

The woman's bank records purchased from a credit ratings agency, showed her monthly income at the shoe franchise was variable, fluctuating with sales. A further check revealed she was employed on a three-month rolling contract as a freelance salesperson responsible for her own NI payments and tax returns.

Checking her rubbish bins revealed in addition to high consumption of Vodka, Diet Coke and Toblerone chocolate bars, Arlene was a regular cannabis user, taken in high-strength tablet form, bought on the Internet from a site in Holland.

A 'silent visit' to check inside her flat, an authorised extra carried out while the subject was at work, revealed no evidence of smoking, either tobacco or cannabis, or other forms of drug use. Photographs of her acrimonious correspondence with the tax authorities and DHSS were taken.

From the family's Kirkcaldy days, during the years when Cathy Bishop had dumped her children with 'Granny' Siobhan, information emerged which surprised Maureen. Questioning Declan about these events, tiptoeing, she discovered he had no adverse memories. It seems it had been Arlene who had suffered, acting as his shield.

Taking this information with what she had learned from Declan, Maureen judged her potential future sister-in-law to be a needy fantasist, frustrated sexually and likely to be self-delusional - ready-made for what Arlene had in mind.

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Job Interview

To be sure about her assumptions over Arlene and get a direct measure of the woman she needed to draw into her web, Maureen visited the shoe outlet at Frasers as a customer, arriving early, just after ten on a Monday morning, shortly after the franchise opened for business. The entire floor was deserted. Maureen was the only customer.

Arlene was slightly hungover with a whiff of alcohol and coffee on her breath. To Maureen, the thickly applied makeup was a surprise but not the tinted glasses, worn to camouflage her eye defect.

"Hello, madam. As my first customer of the day, you qualify for a 10% discount if you spend more than £100."

Remaining silent, Maureen picked out a pair of red leather boots priced at £355.

"Now, am I right, you are a seven, slim fit?"

Maureen nodded.

"Drat! We do not have that size in stock but if you would give me five minutes, I'll ring HQ and see if they are available and I'll get them sent overnight. Now, how about these gorgeous green boots crafted from genuine Italian leather. I know for certain we do have those in your fitting but they are slightly more expensive at £450 but, if they appeal, I could let you have them for £385?"

"Yes, very nice. Yes, green is one of my favourite colours, after red. Do you take cash?"

Maureen watched as Arlene's jaw dropped slightly.

"Cash is always welcome, madam."

"I'll take them."

"Would you not like to try them on first, to be sure?"

"No need, I trust your judgement. Declan tells me you are an expert where shoes are concerned."

"Declan? My brother?"

"Yes, Arlene, your little brother. He tells me you were good to him when he was a laddie, back in Kirkcaldy, keeping him safe from the attentions of Granny Siobhan's next-door neighbour, a rather strange woman calling herself Evie Gilchrist. For your information.

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Evie, is now a permanent resident at Carstairs State Mental Hospital under his real name of Erik Gilbert."

"Oh God! Does Declan remember any of that stuff?"

"No, thankfully, he was too young. I gleaned it from other sources?"

"Not Granny Siobhan? She really didn't understand what was going on, poor dear."

"No, Siobhan Reilly died three years ago. A simple soul, I understand, with a low IQ. Feckless but kindly seems to be the judgement. Still, she did leave her legacy. Seven children, all from different fathers, according to my sources. Best left to their own devices, I recommend."

"Oh, yes, I can imagine. Poor Siobhan."

As Arlene accepted the fold of crisp new £50 RBS notes, Maureen accepting the bag containing the boots in return.

"Thank you very much, madam. I'll need to trot over to the cash desk to get your change, I don't have enough in my till or my purse."

"No need. I'm pleased to pay the full price of £450 for them, no receipt necessary. As you said, they *are* gorgeous. It was good to meet you, Arlene. Bye-bye."

"So, excuse me asking, but how do you know Declan."

"Ah, so he hasn't told you yet?"

"Told me what?"

"That we're getting engaged. Tonight, actually."

"What!"

"You sound surprised?"

"Well, it's just, well, actually, I didn't ever think Declan would settle down to marriage. So, eh, watch out. Declan is, well, a bit flighty."

"I'll take good care of him, I promise. Again, Arlene, bye-bye."

"Oh, sorry, what's your name please?"

"Later. I have an idea which might interest you but right now I'm out of time. Must fly. Check your *WhatsApps*."

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Later that day, after reading through the various private investigators reports for the last time, Maureen scanned them into her laptop before shredding them.

That evening, Maureen proposed.

The couple were married at Glasgow's Park Circus Registry Office with Declan's stepsister Arlene as their witness.

By mutual agreement, no other family members had been invited.

(As if by an afterthought, on their fifth wedding anniversary, the couple's marriage was blessed by the parish priest at Saint Peter's in Partick, again in private, with Arlene as their only witness.)

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Sleight of Hand

Two months after her wedding, with the building blocks in place, as if in a grand Chess match, Maureen closed her eyes to review her plan one final time, checking for flaws or additional moves which would make it seem believable to Cathy Bishop.

By teasing Arlene with a fifty-percent hike in salary and a position as a full-time employee on an open-ended contract with a generous non-contributory pension plan, Maureen was confident Arlene would sign the contract she would offer. If necessary, as a welcome gift to her new sister-in-law, she would offer to clear Arlene's credit card debts, currently around £13,000 spread over four cards and undertake to sort out her dubious tax position with HM Inland Revenue and regularise her unpaid NI contributions.

Maureen's desired outcome was to create lasting division between the mother and her precious son. To achieve this, Cathy Bishop would be presented with a dilemma which she must feel unable to share with anyone, especially not Declan or Arlene, trapping her into a choice in which their mother would be compelled to split with MacQueen or, if she wanted to keep her lover, minimise contact with Declan and Arlene to ensure they did not come to the attention of the policeman.

Her fiction was centred around two premises Maureen already owned.

The first, currently called "The Honeypot", was a topless 'private member only' night club used by girls operating as freelance hostesses, renting private lap dancing booths on a per client basis. The discreet entrance to this premises was from a lane off Buchanan Street, near Fraser's and less than ten minutes on foot from Arlene's flat in Parnie Street. Maureen deemed this premises to be too overt for her purpose. In any case, business was in decline and the premises needed a makeover. She had another location in mind for an upmarket version of this lap-dancing cum brothel using a grand villa in Pollokshields standing in its own grounds with good undercover parking.

After careful thought, she decided to remodel The Honeypot premises to create a salon called "Glasgow Nail and Beauty", a new venture to be registered using Declan Bishop as its owner and managed by Arlene.

The second premises, named "Hidden Wealth", was in Parnie Street a few steps from Arlene's tenement flat. This dowdy shop was one of several similar premises around the West of Scotland set up to give the appearance of failing pawnbrokers. In truth, they were money laundering drop-off points where courier drones brought cash to be counted

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and certified in return for an online receipt emailed to the principal. On security grounds, Maureen opened and closed these fake pawn shops on a frequent basis.

Under her planned deception, she would remodel Hidden Wealth as "Done and Dusted", a massage parlour/brothel and drugs outlet, also to be made to appear as if Declan Bishop was the owner.

Maureen planned to use Shuggie Bartlett supported by his second-in-command Howie Oswald as her ciphers. Howie's hobby business was making porn films.

The cornerstone of both Plan A and Plan B was to lure Cathy to attend two back-to-back meetings.

In Plan B, Howie's stills and video footage of the two meetings would be interwoven with other salacious material to create the fiction that Cathy Bishop and her son and daughter were involved in low-life businesses which Cathy was funding, laundering their income illegally.

Plan A was more daring. Using Declan's phone, Maureen would invite Cathy to meet her son outside GNB. While she was waiting, Maureen would arrange for Shuggie to accost her, asking if she was 'looking for a shag?', this encounter to be captured by Howie using his telescopic lens.

While Cathy was retreating from this confrontation, Maureen, watching from nearby, would send her patsy an apologetic WhatsApp message purporting to be from Declan, asking her to meet him, directing her to Parnie Street, using the pretext that Arlene, supposedly now eight months pregnant, desperately wanted Cathy to come to help her cope as her contractions had started.

As Cathy approached Arlene's flat, Shuggie would exit Done and Dusted to stop her in her path and ask if she was 'open for business'.

Acting quickly, Cathy would use these files from Howie with clips from his porn collection and a walk-through video of the spa and massage business at Done and Dusted. Compiled in a documentary reporting style, Maureen's sting video would be sent to Cathy Bishop's phone as hyperlink in a message purporting to be from Darius Darscalu.

Using a voice changer, in a commentary to this sting video, Maureen would relate the history of the GNB premises where she had been first seen with Shuggie, explaining it had previously been a lap dancing bar called The Honeypot, adding that Declan was now using the nail bar as a recruitment portal for a string of brothels he owned, new ventures operated by himself assisted by Arlene, the pair fronting it for a Romanian Godfather, the man with the money.

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Working to a script provided and rehearse by Maureen, she would pre-record a head and shoulders 'threat message' delivered by one of Shuggie's more articulate thugs, a hit man originally from Montenegro, on the run from Europol. Carefully coached, Emel Bulatovic (generally known as The Little Black Bull) would appear in a head and shoulders' view, in low lighting, wearing dark glasses, claiming to be a Romanian calling himself Darius Darscalu.

"Mrs Bishop, if I had not promised your children, you would be already dead. This policeman you are shagging must never be told what you have seen on my little video. This is a one-off warning. Stay away from my business associates or else."

After Cathy's visit, the web site would auto-delete, thus delivering a one-shot emotional hammer blow which, Maureen judged, would destroy Cathy Bishop's trust in her son and confirm her existing enmity and guilt towards her daughter.

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Bath Chambers

From her first contact with Kelmendi, other clients followed, a diverse mix from different ethnic backgrounds, all seeking to secure and stabilise their businesses while avoiding tax wherever possible. If they required cash to be laundered, Maureen arranged it. If these men needed help to establish additional 'legitimate' SLP businesses for brothers, sons or nephews, Maureen Milloy was the 'go to' person, provided the individuals passed her interview process.

When the flow of new clients increased, Maureen Milloy relocated her established business at Maxwell Road to a dowdy, old-fashioned multi-occupancy office tenement called "*Bath Chambers*", sited on the corner of Bath Street and Hope Street in the city centre, a five-storey building dating from the nineteenth century, a property she owned.

Serving four floors only, a very slow four-person hydraulic lift was crammed into the well of a steep walk-up stairway. Access to *AdvantEdge.com*, located on the fifth floor, was through an ultra-secure motorised door of Swiss manufacture, marked 'Cleaner's Cupboard'. All visitors to Maureen's eyrie gained an audience only by appointment. Provided they arrived *exactly* on time, they were admitted only after CCTV scrutiny.

The narrow, unmarked entryway to the building from Bath Street was also monitored by CCTV. This door entry system was operated by the ground floor tenant, a business named *First Concierge 24/7*, one of several such locations operated by Shuggie Bartlett and his growing team of hand-picked ex-cons, Maureen's 'muscle'. The tenants on levels two, three and four were also hand-picked, businesses dependent on Maureen for their ongoing profitable operation.

Premium Quality Express, the business on the fourth floor, was connected upwards to *AdvantEdge* by a dumb waiter. This firm supplied specialist pre-printed 'stationery' in distinctive A4 sized green and gold boxes, containing shrink-wrapped batches of outgoing dirty money collected daily by *DHL* and other couriers for shipment to banks in Zug, Zurich and Berne.

New clients were never seen at *Bath Chambers*. Initial screenings were usually at face-to-face meetings at a suite rented for the day at *The Grosvenor*, a rambling four-star hotel in the West End, situated at the junction of Byres Road and Great Western Road, opposite Glasgow's Botanic Gardens. At *The Grosvenor*, Maureen was known as Mrs Felicity Carruthers, a journalist working for *Reuters*.

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Not all applicants referred on by her established clients were accepted. Those she did not chime with, she turned away quickly, politely but firmly.

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After her move to *Bath Chambers*, Maureen converted the shop on Maxwell Road to an estate agency offering sales, lettings and property management, a business she decided to call "*Maximus Homes*", owned by another SLP sheltered inside *Dalgety Developments*. The nominal proprietor of this business was a twenty-eight-year-old woman called Chewa Bhaduru, a Bangladeshi with Hindu roots.

Maureen had found Chewa by chance. Three years earlier, after a supreme effort, the small, wiry mixed-race woman had gained a first-class honours degree in Podiatry from *Glasgow Caledonian University*. When she first applied to Maureen, Chewa was at her wits end. Maureen learned she was the mainstay in a family of dependants which included three unmarried sisters, a widowed mother with Alzheimer's Disease and an eight-year-old illegitimate nephew with Asperger's Syndrome. This small tribe was living in squalor in a two-bedroomed tenement flat in Annette Street in Govanhill, struggling by on what Bhaduru earned working part-time making domiciliary visits as a freelancer employed by Govanhill Health Centre.

During an intensive six-week period Maureen trained Chewa, set up her computer systems, populated her databases and launched her online advertising campaign.

As a key part of her contract of employment with *Maximus Homes* and to bind Chewa into the new enterprise, Maureen provided her with a flat directly above the shop, offered at an affordable rent with the prospect of a future buy out, when she could afford it. Like Declan, the Bangladeshi was malleable. Over the years to follow, Chewa would prove she was loyal, hardworking, discreet and unquestionably obedient.

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As the recommended provider for *Maximus Homes*, "*South Side Legal Services*" (*SSLS*) (a daughter company of *AdvantEdge*) was the main source of mortgage funds and the provider of conveyancing and legal services to sellers and renters.

This meant Maureen was well placed to assist some of Chewa's clients in their desire to avoid the attention of the authorities, assist in the avoidance of 'unnecessary' fees or overcome difficulties of 'ownership'. By using her powers as a Notary, (as in the Goldberg dilemma), *SSLS* gained a word-of-mouth reputation for their expertise in smoothing the path for sellers who may have become 'entangled' in family disputes with uncles or cousins no longer resident in the UK, relatives or co-investors who in retirement had moved back to their country of origin or had died without leaving a valid Will and Testament.

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For established or rising property entrepreneurs manipulating their portfolios using a barter approach, mutually advantageous increases or reductions in property valuations could be facilitated. Conflicts of interest were avoided by using Maureen's daughter company called "*Sabre Legal Services*" (SLS), an organisation always happy to act in parallel to SLS to support either seller or buyer.

For suitably vetted purchasers, cash payments or part-payments for properties both large and small could be provided, these money laundering arrangements often leading to new business opportunities for *Dalgetty Developments*.

This was a variation of what Lois Delaney had called a Mutually Beneficial Business Operation (MBBO), a devious virtuous circle, providing a steady flow of funds and opportunities into *Dalgetty Developments* growing empire.

Over the next decade, as they refined this MBBO operation, Maureen and Chewa would open a further four branches of *Maximus Homes* serving local markets in Shawlands (also serving Strathbungo, Queens Park and Newlands) , Clarkston (also serving Netherlee, Muirend and Stamperland), Giffnock (also serving Orchard Park) and Newton Mearns (also serving Whitecraigs and Rouken Glen).

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Obsession

At the outset of their marriage, the Bishops had dedicated themselves energetically to regular intercourse as Maureen sought to fulfil her dream of creating a perfect family, aiming for a squad of boys.

Over a five-year period, Maureen suffered four miscarriages. Repeated tests showed the fault lay with her genetic makeup. By contrast, Declan was passed as fit and healthy with exceptionally high sperm motility and a profile likely to produce healthy male offspring.

The damage caused by these traumas to her womb eventually led to her needing a partial hysterectomy, an operation carried out in Geneva by a top surgeon, ending the dream of birthing her own children. When her mother challenged her about her condition, Maureen suspected that Declan had somehow found out and shared what he had discovered. As often happened, her discussion with Teresa Milloy escalated quickly into a full-scale slanging match culminating in another rift.

As a punishment, and because further sex was dispiriting, Declan was banished from their marriage bed.

Cast adrift, he eventually reverted to his former self, seeking release and satisfaction elsewhere.

For her part, when she had recovered from her operation, Maureen took up running as a serious pursuit, competing in half and full marathons. As in everything she did, Maureen gave her all, becoming a respected and feared competitor among the best in the West of Scotland.

To satisfy her nest building instinct, and as a distraction from her pregnancy 'failures', she moved from house to house every six to nine months, upgrading to ever-larger properties, discovering a flair for interior and landscape design. Over a period of frenetic activity, she produced a catalogue of stunning new build designer homes and gardens in iconic locations. These properties incorporated every modern feature such as home cinemas, games rooms, hi-tech gyms with jacuzzi, sauna and spa baths, tennis and squash courts, indoor/outdoor swimming pools, ten-pin bowling alleys and the like. Some, set in larger grounds, had nine-hole par-three golf courses designed by top golfers.

On completion, these exclusive properties were marketed using lavish feature articles in *Travel and Leisure Golf*, the top US bi-monthly online subscription magazine popular with American business moguls and media celebrities. Her campaigns usually spanned three

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issues culminating with an online auction on her glitzy website called "*Scottish Homecoming*", a website operated by *Overseas Imp-Exp*, a further SLP hidden inside her shell company *Dalgetty Developments*.

By this stage most of her online operations were supported from a secure server farm at the IBM Global Data Centre, physically located in Raleigh, North Carolina, backed up by a mirrored server located at Oberengstringen, Switzerland, owned and managed by a consortium of Swiss banks.

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As Maureen Bishop became stronger physically and psychologically, she refocussed, becoming determined to have children she could call her own. In secret, she trawled adoption agencies for the Holy Grail of a perfect white child, a boy with blond hair and blue eyes after Declan, a baby she could rear as her own, a child without strings attached. A few months into her quest, in desperation she turned to the Dark Web and was immediately bombarded with offers, all of which she judged to be scams.

However, this experience did plant a seed which, over time, grew into an obsession.

She began to plot her moves.

It did not come to fruition overnight.

It grew out of opportunity and by subterfuge and, when required, ruthless action to protect her new and highly profitable business, skewing her already unstable moral compass.

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Demise

Maureen Bishop's plan took root with the demise of an Indian entrepreneur called Sabeesh Patel. At first it was just another opportunity to turn over a good profit without a high outlay. It would prove to be a key component in another scheme but at the outset that was hidden from her.

Although Patel was not one of her client's, Maureen knew of him. Years earlier, when Patel first moved to Glasgow from Leicester, she had checked him out and rejected him judging the secular Hindu to be arrogant, superior and slapdash with too many weaknesses in what he had described as: "my well-oiled machine". Not only was Patel laundering money for several brothel operations in the north of England, he was also smuggling drugs into the UK, heroin from Afghanistan and a variety of cloned pharmaceuticals of Chinese origin, this contraband concealed in boxes of saris imported from his homeland.

The jewel in Patel's small business empire was a private crematorium on the outskirts of Glasgow, just off the M77 motorway, near a disused quarry which served as an unlicensed landfill site. Gradually, from the underworld grapevine, Maureen learned Patel offered a disposal by cremation service for anonymous corpses, his tariff varying between £5,000 to £15,000, dependant on the pickup location and circumstances of the deceased. Unlike some Dark Web disposal services, Patel did not offer abduction or assassination add-ons. Many of the corpses Patel cremated were elderly relatives who had passed away while in receipt of DSS benefits. By this subterfuge, the departed were enabled to 'live on after death', allowing their families to continue to harvest steady incomes from state benefits while selling on their medications and renting out disabled parking car permits.

As Maureen had expected, Police Scotland eventually took an interest. However, Patel had several insiders on his payroll and absconded before they could nail him. It was widely believed he had returned to India, probably on a forged passport. In the aftermath, as Patel tried to salvage what he could from his imploding UK business empire, Maureen pounced. Using a newly formed entity called '*Golden Slumbers*', a further SLP hidden inside the shell of *Dalgety Developments*, she purchased the crematorium at a knockdown price and set about landscaping it to screen it from the landfill site.

Later, she used her *Golden Slumbers* business to purchase the quarry and put an end to the landfill operation, thereby eliminating the seagulls and other vermin it attracted. She then arranged to have the landfill covered with a membrane to harvest the off-gassing

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methane then added good quality topsoil and leased the upgraded field to a contractor who planted Christmas trees.

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Jerry Thomas, aged fifty-three, (real name Jericho Tolentino) was a Filipino who had served as an engine room machine-man before he jumped ship at Liverpool. When Maureen found him, the illegal runaway was one of a small team who came each week to valet her fleet of cars and people carriers, when she lived at *Ridge Mount*, her home in the exclusive village of Thortonhall. At that stage the Filipino was a modern-day slave working from dawn to dusk for *Premier AutoKlean*, a business owned by one of her Romanian clients. At nights Tolentino used a rota of men's hostels, his sole possessions carried with him each day in a small suitcase.

At *Golden Slumbers*, Tolentino was pleased to have at last found a secure job ashore, free from the constant abuse which he had suffered as a gay man trapped at sea since his teens on many different ships, under many different flags of convenience.

Mr Bishop, the owner of the crematorium, who always spoke kindly to him, had provided a British passport and matching driving licence. As caretaker and handyman, he had sole occupancy of a luxury residential caravan hidden behind the new outbuilding which housed the gardening equipment Jerry operated in the daytime. This is where the Filipino lived quietly with his dog, a white toy poodle called Chico. In his new life, Jericho was free to cook his own food. Of an evening, dependant on his mood, he was also free to glam up and wear what he liked. He had his own TV with a satellite dish and a subscription to *Netflix*, *Apple TV* and *YouTube*, and could watch whatever he fancied.

On Sundays, his day off, he was allowed to drive the unmarked Mercedes van owned by *Golden Slumbers*, sometimes dressed as Jerry the man and sometimes as Jerri the girl. Mostly he went to *Silverburn Shopping Centre* at times when it was quiet, making it easier to park. Here he would stock up on food, beer, white wine and the occasional bottle of Prosecco.

In summer, on warmer, sunny days, he would set out early and drive westwards along quieter roads to a remote sheltered spot he had discovered in a field high above the beach near West Kilbride. With Chico at his side, hidden behind a high, all-round windbreak, he would sunbathe, sometimes in a full bikini, sometimes topless or on rare occasions fully nude, as a man. These were special days, outings which provided Jericho with exotic and erotic reminders of his youth, in the fishing town of Tanza, overlooking Manila Bay, when life seemed sweet, before he lost his left eye in an unprovoked attack by a drunken client, ruining his previous life as a lady-boy.

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In return for this, Jerry Thomas did *exactly* as he was told by Mr Bishop, without question, as stated in his contract.

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Glasgow Nail Bar (GNB)

It was another Wednesday.

Arlene Bishop sat behind the one-way glass of her office at *GNB*, filled another large thermal drinks cup, downed two further paracetamol tabs and waddled back down the stairs, cup in her left hand, electronic detector in her right.

Although the salon did not open until noon, she had been in since ten o'clock, alone, following orders, 'sweeping' the open plan treatment booths, toilets and back of house areas with her wand, checking for signs of listening bugs or miniature cameras, looking for anything unusual. Year after year she had been doing this every working day, yet to find anything untoward. Another blank loomed.

Muttering just under her breath:

"Fecking witch. This is all bollocks. Paranoia. "Krap" with a capital 'K'. So, Maureen Bishop, according to you, my feckin' checking is 'peremptory' is it? And where are you this fine day Maureen? Not stuck here with the Zombie Brides of Dracula like me, that's for sure."

After a quick round of the thirty-two 'personalised treatment salons', (three-sided open-topped cubicles), and before heading back to her office, she checked Jen's reception desk and the display of beauty products and cosmetics on offer.

Still single at forty-three with no close friends, Arlene Bishop was struggling both mentally and physically. Lonely, bored, educated well below her potential, with no academic qualifications or special skills, she was trapped, as she had been all her life, chasing a dream of meeting someone special, a dream which receded into the future when she let rip to hit the stores and online sites in search of glamour.

Standing five-feet-two inches unshod, her fourteen-stone bulk was constrained by a dark pin-striped £300 trouser suit, six weeks old but grubby, needing dry-cleaned. Back in her private office, always kept locked and alarmed when she was not in occupation, she was on her fourth large cafetiere of strong black coffee since waking three hours earlier from her stupor, trying to shake off her familiar hangover and kick-start her working week.

If only she could get away, start again. Arlene knew Maureen had a long file of her many failings and, crucially, she had confiscated her passport after her fracas on Ibiza when she had been arrested, high on pills and alcohol, dancing naked in the street on leaving a foam party, a situation which had forced Maureen to fly out to pay backhanders to free

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Arlene from police custody. As a result, she was trapped, shackled to her boring job and constantly reminded by her sister-in-law that she was still on licence.

So far as she knew, Jen and Sasha did not know of this embarrassing misdemeanour. No doubt Maureen would have some hold over them too. The skinny witch had dirt on everyone. Although she had no proof, Arlene was certain Jen and Sasha had been told to keep a close eye on her, just as she had been instructed to do with them.

With her hair now short again, blue-black and curly, her face was made up like a painted doll, a Geisha, her current favourite look, a style she thought made her appealing to both men and women. Recently, using her personal laptop, not the office one which she was almost certain Maureen could monitor remotely, Arlene had been reading a lot online about 'gender-swingers' and had decided she would be open to an approach from a nice girl, should the opportunity present itself.

Her constant fantasy, always just beyond any reality she could envisage, was a move to a house with a garden and the possibility of a dog, a choice which flipped daily between a miniature poodle and a long-haired Dachshund.

Under the caked makeup, Arlene still had a pretty face with good bone structure and, despite the ravages of alcohol, when washed clean, her skin was still in good condition. Slimmed down to her curvy, eight stone and sixteen-year-old self she might have passed as attractive had it not been for the unnerving defect in her left eye, the very slightest inward and downward turn, the reason she wore tinted glasses when in company. Had she paid more attention to her coffee-stained teeth and cut out her nightly binging on boxed-sets, crisps, chocolate and Vodka-Cokes, she might have had more success in the dating stakes. As she knew from scanning couples in the streets, even girls much less attractive than herself could somehow snag a man, even a reasonably good looking and well-spoken one.

Perhaps have another trawl online. Then again, maybe not. It never worked out. Never.

Sighing, Arlene closed her eyes and braced herself for the boredom of the day ahead. The nail bar closed early at five o'clock on Sundays and remained closed until Wednesdays at noon when it re-opened. Wednesdays were always the worst day of the week for Arlene.

Unlocking her desk drawer, she slipped out her last bottle of Vodka, holding it out of sight as she slipped past the lens of the laptop camera, topping up her thermal coffee flask with a hefty slurp, slipping the nearly empty bottle inside the microwave she used to zap up her daytime snacks. Then came the familiar anxiety attack. She would not last to closing time; she must slip out at some point to replenish her stock of Vodka. There would be hell to pay if Maureen uncovered her absence. In recent times Arlene only

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smoked hash using it as an appetite suppressant and to help her cut down on alcohol, trying to reduce the frequency of blow-out binges. The recent batches of supposedly high-strength cannabis pills were fake; whatever they had contained had given her the runs.

The buzzer sounded from the rear door, the staff and service entrance. She checked the CCTV monitor. Jen and Sasha. She buzzed them in then opened her office door and called down. "Jen, you take over the rear door from your desk. I may have to pop out for a few minutes. I forgot my phone, its back at my flat. OK?"

Without turning, Jen held up her thumb and wiggled it. Sasha giggled. Arlene closed her office door and muttered:

"Feckin' stuck up bitches. What good did their fancy education do for them? Why did they get to go to Notre Dame? Thick as two short planks."

Arlene knew she had to keep her voice down as Maureen could be listening via the office laptop. Tears of frustration and despair welled up and with the recurring thought:

If only I could away from all this. Somewhere nice with someone nice.

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Security Measures

In keeping with everything Maureen had set up to protect *GNB*, its security system was, Arlene thought, completely OTT. It was arranged in two zones; zone one, everywhere downstairs was designed as a first barrier for zone two, Arlene's office, located upstairs and separately alarmed with its own keypad and code.

Access to *GNB* outside working hours was only possible by the rear door, from the lane. In theory, Arlene and Declan were supposed to memorise the two codes, paired sixteen-character alphanumeric strings, one for access and one for resetting the alarm after an intrusion or a mis-keying event.

These access codes were always changed on the first Sunday of each month. At around eight Maureen called on Arlene's special business mobile phone to advise the new characters to be used, going over and over them until Arlene could recite the code perfectly. Usually by this time of night on a Sunday, the start of her 'weekend', Arlene was often tipsy, trying hard not to slur her words. In the early months, this learning process could take up to an hour, but Maureen was relentless, repeating the characters slowly, expecting Arlene to reply with equal accuracy.

During the first months of running *GNB* together, Declan and Arlene made a pact, agreeing that memorising these codes was only possible for folk with exceptional memories, like Maureen.

Arlene cheated by writing the code on a pad. Later, she would transfer the codes to her personal mobile phone.

Declan also cheated, using one of his personal phones to record Maureen's call. He was prone to losing phones. Usually he carried at least two, sometimes three. Recently, he had shown Arlene his latest top-of-the-range smartphone purchase, he said the salesgirl had told him that, if lost, it could not be breached because it had combined fingerprint and eye scan access, making it ultra-secure. This had induced him to buy two back-ups which the girl had cloned so that they communicated automatically with each other, mirroring all activities while operating under the same account.

These long *GNB* security codes operated electronic door locks linked to a series of disorientating banshee alarms scattered throughout the building. If activated by an intruder or accident, the system set off an ear-splitting cacophony, making it almost impossible to enter the reset code without error. So far, over seven years, this had happened only three times on final exit when Arlene had left inebriated after a

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particularly bad day, and twice on initial entry when she had been badly hungover, both Wednesdays. In every case, within minutes, Maureen had called on Arlene's special phone, to check up on her. Arlene had deduced, rightly, that every such activation was repeated immediately to Maureen's mobile phone or laptop.

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For direct communications with Maureen, both Declan and Arlene had been given dedicated 'business only' mobile phones.

These unbranded 'phones' looked like throw-backs, not unlike slimmer versions of early Nokia phones. However, they were not mobile phones but high-security comms devices, voice only. Their keyboards were fake, used only to speed dial Maureen alone, provided the sixteen digits were pressed and simultaneously voiced by the owner in the correct sequence.

Unknown to Declan and Arlene, only when the voice recognition software in the device had verified its user, was a signal transmission enabled by connecting the phone to a secure satellite communications global array, not the usual terrestrial telephone networks. These 'phones' incorporated other hidden features which Maureen could activate remotely by sending enabling codes.

The lookalike Nokias had been designed in a collaborative venture between Mossad, GCHQ/MI6 and the CIA. Once a device had been 'married' to a particular individual, it was believed to be 'uncrackable'. Even when these devices appeared to be switched off, they remained active, allowing Maureen to monitor the recipients' locations in real time. If attempts were made to hack these phones, they were designed to react, to defend themselves from 'assault'. Maureen had not shared this information with her husband or sister-in-law or with the few trusted others who had been issued with these special phones.

Under firm direction from Maureen, to make sure he did not lose it, Declan kept his special business phone in his trouser pocket, inside a zipping pouch. Arlene kept her 'Maureen phone' in the rear zipped pocket of her fashion rucksack, resting against her back when worn, inside a similar pouch, as per Maureen's 'commandment'.

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Arlene did not have any sway over the evening cleaning arrangement at GNB. Her day job was mind-numbingly boring and she resented having to remain there after normal hours to 'supervise' the cleaners. She also resented the whole hyper-security regime that Maureen insisted on, believing it to be a waste of her time. Most of all, she resented the fact that she was being continually spied upon although she was not sure how Maureen always seemed to know everything about her. Using her detector wand she had checked

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her office for hidden devices, extra cameras and mics but failed to find them. In the end she concluded her surveillance was probably through her laptop, the special one she must lock in the safe every night. Every morning, she must then go through a fixed rigamarole to get it started or it would lock-up then shut down.

On working days, after the beauticians left, she must make a physical check to be sure the office was empty, no stragglers lurking. Watching the rear door CCTV camera from her office, she must wait for the cleaners to arrive, check as the leader entered her personal password correctly at the keypad, yet another sixteen-character alphanumeric string which kept changing, sometimes week to week or even day to day.

After this check, Arlene would buzz them in, counting their numbers. On completion, she must buzz them out, making sure the numbers tallied.

Every few months, Maureen would advise the cleaning crew contract had been awarded to a new firm. Over the years, when these new squads arrived, as directed by Maureen, Arlene tested them by planting pieces of jewellery, expensive gloves and scarves, money (coins and notes), even a few high-end mobile phones. Every planted item had been placed on Jen's desk. This told Arlene that these women had been well drilled and knew that they were being watched.

One particularly scary crew had been grim-faced, slightly Slavic, short-haired, mannish, no makeup, led by two older women in their fifties. By their nearly identical faces and short slim build, Arlene judged these two were probably sisters, perhaps even twins.

Over the few months they cleaned at *GNB*, their number had varied from six to ten with a few younger ones, maybe daughters or granddaughters, everyone smartly dressed in dark purple boilersuits wearing matching skip caps, no logos or identification but clearly highly professional. Working quickly, they cleaned every nook and cranny in less than thirty minutes, the fastest of any of the crews.

In a new development, while Arlene watched as their witness, they used a powerful shredder to anonymise the rubbish (everything, including cans and bottles, glass and plastic). These shreadings were bagged and taken with them.

Without explanation from Maureen, this shredding step was dropped for subsequent crews.

Another squad had lasted around nine months, the most enduring group so far. From their chatter, Arlene judged them to be Croatian or maybe Serbian. In fact, they were Albanians. One evening, after they had been coming for about six months, Arlene had tried to converse with them, but they had shunned her with silence, keeping their eyes down, standing like statues until she gave up and returned to her office.

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When they judged she was safely out of earshot, (they did not know about the microphones at the cubicles), they had exploded into raucous conversation peppered with laughter, enjoying jokes at her expense, she suspected.

Arlene knew there was no point complaining to Declan or Maureen about this dull insolence but, behind her office window, as she watched them unseen night by night, she envied their easy camaraderie. She was always sad when this happy crew departed from *GNB* in a chattering, laughing huddle, leaving her to follow Maureen's 'protocol' by making a final check of every part of the building in case someone was hiding in a toilet or cupboard.

During this final inspection round, she was constantly visited by a miasma of sadness, knowing that what lay ahead was another night alone at Parnie Street. It was a final step in Maureen's protocol Arlene had come to dread and, on occasion, a step she skipped.

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Front Man

Declan enjoyed being Maureen's front man, relishing the respect he was given as the 'owner' of *GNB* and the dozens of other similar establishments in his 'portfolio'. Apart from the nail bar run by Arlene, so far as he could tell, none of the other managers he 'employed' knew anything of Maureen's involvement behind the scenes. In essence, provided he did his rounds in accordance with the weekly voicemail schedule she sent to his special 'business only' mobile phone every Sunday evening, he could please himself what he did with the rest of his time.

This arrangement suited Declan Bishop very well indeed. Provided he did not get caught, he had a free hand to move around his patch and many opportunities to enjoy himself. Nowadays, since the arrival of the boys, his wife was too busy to pay much heed to him and, even when she caught him, after her tirades, she always let him off, for the simple reason that she needed him as her shield and because he knew too much.

Maureen's early passion had faded with her miscarriages. He still missed her 'performances', the best sex he had ever enjoyed. In these sessions, always at a time of her choosing, she had taken the lead, playing the harlot, treating him to amazing slow, teasing foreplay. This was followed by her sitting astride him as their jockey, beginning 'the walk', onto 'the rocking trot' followed by the more energetic 'canter' becoming the pounding 'tölt', culminating in a headlong 'flying gallop', her voice working in unison from an initial soft moan to noisier, groaning obscenities, ending with her screamed imperative, "**NOW!**", her signal to him to arch himself up into her as they shuddered into a mutual climax.

Officially, he did not know about her partial hysterectomy, the procedure carried out in a clinic somewhere in Switzerland. Instinctively he had known he must preserve this secret as it was central to her plan:

"Declan, I want a family of boys, no matter what it takes. You *must* play your part without argument or resistance, provide what I need, whenever I ask."

Maureen had pretended she was harvesting his sperm for IVF treatment even though he knew this was a sham. Nonetheless, because he still craved her attentions, Declan went along with her demands, accepting the partial sex on offer, lying back, closing his eyes, letting his mind run free as she talked dirty while her hands worked their magic, probing, kneading, tugging as she applied warmed massage oil, her fingers slipping and slithering over his testicles, gently probing his anus with the long slim middle finger of her left

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hand while her right hand feathered his penis in long slow strokes bringing him to a tantalising finale before clinically removing the condom in which she harvested his sperm.

For full sex, Declan Bishop occasionally used spa outlets, carefully avoiding those he 'owned' as part of his portfolio, knowing that Maureen monitored everything in all her premises using hidden CCTV cameras linked to her private office at *Ben View*.

However, when the opportunity beckoned, Declan preferred the challenge of 'the chase', seeking random girls he picked up for free, usually career women willing to invite him into their home or share a hotel bed, swapping enjoyable sex for a fancy meal and a few drinks, perhaps a trinket such as a necklace, pendant or bracelet. The problem was picking the right ones, the ones who were *not* looking for a long-term relationship. Married women were best, especially those visiting Glasgow for business purposes. For Declan, still in his prime, it was like reliving his bachelor days when he had been a car salesman, before he met Maureen.

Declan Bishop had never been all that interested in kids. When they came along, he was glad Maureen did not want his help, relieved she wanted them entirely and exclusively for herself.

The problem was his mother. Cathy Bishop was keen to be involved with Milloy, her firstborn grandchild, but Maureen cut her out, pointedly and viciously.

Cathy had turned to Declan who tried to defend Maureen, claiming she was suffering post-natal depression.

Unwilling to be fobbed off, Cathy had mounted a 'campaign' with a daily barrage of emails and voicemails until he was forced to change his mobile number and email address to escape her pursuit. In response she sent long daily letters, versions of the pleadings he had already seen in her emails. After the first month he tore them to shreds, unread. Eventually they stopped.

With the birth of Madden, Cathy tried again but less fervently, eventually accepting she would never be allowed to be part of her grandchildren's lives.

In recent months, out and about on his rounds, driving his car illegally or while riding in a taxi, he had spotted his mother with a tall, distinguished looking man, chatting and laughing. Twice he had seen them embracing and kissing, once in the Waitrose car park at Milngavie and once on the cycle path near the Allander Sports Centre.

Declan knew he should be happy for her but instead he had felt only intense jealousy. Before Maureen, Mummy had been all over him, cuddling him, stroking his face, kissing him, often directly on his lips, pressing herself against him, telling him how much he reminded her of his father and how much she missed him.

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The day after the second kissing incident on the cycle path, he tried phoning Cathy on her mobile phone to learn she had changed her number.

He sent emails which bounced.

He tried *Facebook* but she refused to re-enrol him as a 'friend'.

To Declan, his rejection made no sense.

Why does Mummy not love me anymore?

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Hand to Mouth

Declan called to see Arlene once a week, bringing the Sunday pay envelopes for the beauticians with the amounts Arlene had advised by email. On most weeks, Maureen scheduled his visits to *GNB* on Thursdays, arriving by the back door at about eight o'clock, passing the cleaning crew as they left for the night.

The format for these visits was rigid, following Maureen's protocol.

In line with Maureen's training, Arlene opened the safe, accepted each envelope in turn, checked it had the correct amount as per her list, ticked it off and then placed it in the safe. When this transfer was over and the safe re-locked, Arlene passed him two envelopes, one with cash takings from walk-in clients and Jen's envelope with the money from beauty product cash sales.

At this juncture, Declan usually took over Arlene's chair and peered at her business laptop as he pretended to check her bookings register. She knew he was hopeless with computers and smiled behind his back as he nodded:

"Oh, yes, very good work, Arlene. We'll make a manager of you yet."

Because of his high tenor voice, Arlene sometimes thought Declan was gay, or half-gay like his father had been but, as far as she knew, he had always been fixated on women, especially older women, some even as old as their mother. So far as she knew he had no interest in men or boys.

Smirking at her, he opened both envelopes, removed the money, made a show of counting, stuffed the notes into his wallet, rose, gave her a short bow before whistling off down the stairs to whatever his next duty might be.

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During her long boring days, Arlene spent time thinking about her stepbrother, wondering what he did and what he was thinking.

She knew Declan had lost his driving licence for repeated speeding offences and one conviction for reckless driving. This made him reliant on taxis and public transport. However, by trailing him on foot after his visits to *GNB*, Arlene discovered he regularly cheated by using his Maserati, behaviour which Arlene knew infuriated her sister-in-law who was determined never to attract the attention of the police or authorities, desperate to maintain her squeaky-clean low profile as a dedicated mother and homemaker.

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Resenting his condescending attitude, Arlene thought of Declan as smug, super confident and not half as smart as he liked to think himself. Why Maureen put up with him, she could not understand but it had to be admitted, when dressed in a smart suit he looked the part of a successful and elegant entrepreneur. He had always had the gift of the gab and when he turned on his charm, he was usually funny and likeable and she knew she needed him as her 'shield', a bulwark against visiting health inspectors and the occasional persistent weirdos and dirty old men asking for a 'deep massage' or similar.

Now she was older, Arlene realised that her mother had been desperate to have a baby by Rory Bishop to seal their marriage and cement her position as first in line to his wealth, ahead of his many cousins back in Portree and elsewhere in Skye.

When Declan the baby had arrived, he was a perfect, beautiful, fair-haired, blue-eyed boy, the golden child. Arlene, who had always felt herself to be a burden to her mother, was suddenly popular but only as a makeshift nanny.

Looking back on her teenage self, Arlene saw a truculent and headstrong girl with thick-rimmed sunshades, dressed in Doc Martens, torn jeans and a leather bomber jacket, a rebel who smoked pot, drank neat Vodka and hung about with a rough mob, trying to snag boys into full sex only to discover all they ever wanted from her was a hand job.

From the start of her solo living journey, Arlene had been struggling, getting by on intermittent hand-outs from her mother to help clear her debts. That was, until the break-up with her mother.

When Maureen had recruited her as the manager of *GNB*, she had been in deep financial trouble, fearing she might lose both her flat and her job. Being the manager of the nail bar had provided financial security for the first time in her life and at one stage she started looking again, hoping to find Mr Right. This had resulted in a series of unsuccessful 'dates', meeting in glitzy cocktail bars with strange men found in the '*Seeking Romance*' columns in newspapers and magazine.

Her most bizarre encounter had been with a trans 'girl' sporting unbelievably large breast implants while conversing in an insistent baritone growl as his hands tried to fondle her under the table. This had been her last date.

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Arlene suspected her brother Declan skimmed the cash sales takings as extra pocket money and to fund his trips to *Gentle Hands Sports Therapy*, a seedy massage parlour she had seen him dodging into on several occasions, an establishment close to the Tron Theatre, near her flat. A year earlier, before its most recent make-over, this establishment had been called *Thai Hands*. In a previous incarnation, it had been called *Well and Truly* and before that *Done and Dusted*.

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Once only she had dared to pay this establishment a visit, when it was called *Thai Hands*. Despite a delicious surge of anticipation, Arlene had not enjoyed the £50 experience. She had expected a small, slim, gentle Thai girl. Instead, she had been oiled, pounded and kneaded by a huge, semi-naked Moluccan woman who talked rubbish in a marked Edinburgh accent about her flatmate whom she claimed was the loader on freight planes flying flowers and fresh fruit from Amsterdam to Glasgow, a man who supplied her with pot in return for sex.

With a final painful skelp on Arlene's buttocks, the woman had propositioned her with:

"Twenty spondoolucks if ye wad like me to finish ye aff, hen".

When Arlene refused, the woman had stormed out of the booth, cursing under her breath:

"Feckin' wee fat specky cow".

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The Spotter

It was another Friday around six o'clock, only two hours to go to meet up with a bottle of chilled Prosecco and an M&S ready meal for two.

As expected, all her treatment booths were occupied. Tired of listening in to the 'same old, same old' meaningless chatter from the hidden microphones, Arlene stood at the large one-way glass window which provided an elevated view of the four rows of cubicles. In the past, she used to wonder what it would be like to be one of these girls; nowadays, she hardly cared anymore. If she fired one on a whim, there were dozens of girls waiting. Because the website indicated top wages, girls were always dropping their details onto the nail bar Facebook recruitment portal. Apart from the hassle of ever-changing passwords, the site worked well.

Yet again she wondered how much the business made in clear profit. Although it had started out as a straight nail bar, it was now a gateway for the other business Maureen was running, yet another devious and secret activity Arlene must not discuss with anyone, not even Declan.

Except for Jen and Sasha, all the others were self-employed. Each girl earned her rewards based on an individual rate per client, Arlene's assessment of their competence, the nature of the treatments and the online customer feedback rating received. Paid one week in arrears, these wages were determined using a spreadsheet provided by Maureen which Arlene populated with data from her recording diary, a process which had been drilled into her by Maureen.

The beauticians were paid in cash on Sunday afternoons, the end of the *GNB* working week, their wages delivered to their desks just after the front door was closed, each white envelope named and annotated by Arlene to show how their payment had been calculated. Occasionally a girl might query her reward but since Arlene was meticulous in her data entries to Maureen's spreadsheet, generally the pay envelopes were accepted with grateful thanks. The girls were entirely responsible for their own tax and NI contributions. Since most were illegals, living in the grey economy, using only cash, there were few complaints.

As Maureen's nieces, Jen and Sasha were classified as family, paid a salary to their bank accounts. Like Arlene, they had a generous pension plan. They also received quarterly bonuses, these determined solely by Maureen, without consultation. Arlene resented this as she felt it undermined her authority. Maureen had been deaf to her protests.

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Direct tips, if detected, must be pooled, with Arlene taking fifteen percent for her role as website minder and complaints handler. However, the main power she held over them was her ability to hire and fire them at will and to schedule their hours, giving the best slots to her 'pets', the girls who giggled at her silly jokes, quips she got from the internet using her personal laptop. Arlene knew most of these girls were 'acting up' but, desperate for people to like and admire her, she convinced herself some of these girls were her friends.

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Arlene's salary was set at £3,000 per month net, paid to her bank account. Maureen covered her tax and NI payments through an online arrangement, providing the forms to which Arlene added her digital signature prior to submission by Maureen. She assumed that Jen and Sasha worked under similar arrangements.

As Maureen had reiterated whenever Arlene asked for a rise:

"You, Arlene Bishop, are a very lucky lady to have someone like me looking after you. You have no qualifications, and without this job you would be working in a bar or a call centre. Or, more likely, banged up in a prison somewhere in Spain. Try to remember that. So just mind your Ps and Qs and do your job. Remember, no one is indispensable. Do you understand? No one! There will be no more second chances, Arlene. Ibiza was the last straw. Knuckle down, keep saving hard for the deposit for that house you want and grow up, for God's sake."

During these dressing down sessions, Arlene would stare at the floor, thinking:

Perhaps Jen is being groomed as my successor?

Afterwards, when she was alone again, Arlene felt almost certain her position as manager was secure because, over time, her remit had developed, expanded.

Primarily she was tasked with the smooth running of the GNB operation, with full authority to hire and fire the girls on the floor, apart from Jen and Sasha.

Then one day, as if by magic, everything changed for the better when Maureen had recruited her as her 'spotter', offering £10,000 per girl, but only if her nominees proved suitable. Arlene was almost certain that Jen and Sasha did not know of this new arrangement.

During her first year she found two successful candidates for Maureen's program, a Croatian (already pregnant) and a Danish girl. Both girls were stunningly beautiful, each in their own way. Using this money, paid into an *American Express* debit card which Maureen provided, Arlene had cleared her other card debts, began a course of driving

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lessons, put down a deposit and signed a contract for her dream car, a pale blue Mini Cooper.

After these two girls, Maureen had been pickier for a while but Arlene got better at finding suitable nominees and soon her spotter bonuses began again and over time, Arlene had finally paid off the money owed to Maureen for her Ibiza debacle.

Now she had bonuses which she might choose to save and invest, Maureen had suggested she contact Kate Carter-Smythe of *Imperial Personal Finance*. A Skype meeting was set up and the papers signed online. For the first time in her life, Arlene now had savings, in the form of a string of Stocks and Shares ISAs with the ambition of one day having a deposit on a new town house like those planned for a site near *Silverburn Shopping Centre*. So far, the current valuation of her account stood at £23,534, well short of the down payment the on-site estate sales agent had said was necessary to secure a good plot.

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The recruitment guidelines Maureen gave Arlene must be applied strictly. Her job was to obey and never poke her nose into what Maureen called 'her program'.

Likely individuals were selected mainly from the ever-changing flow of girls who worked for her in the nail bar as beauticians. Maureen had also expressly forbidden Arlene to employ local girls, girls with family connections which could cause trouble. Most of the beauticians were illegals: Romanians, Bulgarians, some Polish girls, Pakistani and Bangladeshi runaways from Bradford or Leicester or similar locations. Some of these girls were fleeing from forced marriages, others seeking a Western lifestyle. There was also a steady trickle of Africans and Asians in colours of every hue. All of Arlene's beauticians were singletons. Married girls must be winkled out at initial selection. The best girls for the program were loners.

In her new role Arlene began to take more heed of the conversations between the beauticians and their clients. In such intimate surroundings, even with complete strangers, her girls would often reveal themselves quite openly, sharing their fears and worries or bragging about their future plans, current boyfriends and so on, information which Arlene might use to move them on when it was time to create space for a new potential candidate for the program.

In rare cases, if a client visiting the nail bar was spotted as a potential candidate, she was evaluated remotely, in the first instance. This was done by listening in to the conversations with her beauticians. If required, these eavesdropping sessions could be recorded to a digital file for fact checking by Maureen.

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If a client rather than a beautician appeared suitable, broaching the subject of recruitment to Maureen's program was often tricky. Arlene's favoured method was to issue free online vouchers to encourage the client to return several times to establish a loose bond after which Arlene would make her move and invite the girl to her office for a one-to-one chat. Over the years the program had been running, only three clients had been selected. All the other girls she had passed on to Maureen had been beauticians.

The preferred age range varied from as young as eighteen, girls who might be 'skippers', escapees from child brothels or an abusive brother, father or foster parent through to girls as old as their late twenties with thirty set as the upper limit. Many of these girls were from elsewhere in the UK or Ireland, girls who were already pregnant, deserted by their boyfriends and without alternative support circles.

Arlene's first check for either employee or client who might be suitable for the program was to assess their health and habits. The primary requirement was that candidates must appear to be fit and healthy. No smokers or drug takers were allowed. Maureen hated smokers.

If Maureen had other spotters in other places, Arlene had not heard about them. However, she knew this was highly probable as Maureen and Declan had many fingers in many pies.

Only one in a hundred of her initial targets might qualify as a candidate for Maureen's program making it imperative that she hire and fire to maintain a steady throughput of fresh candidates. This was made easier by the generous rates Maureen had authorised.

When Arlene passed on her nominees, her involvement ceased and she had to wait a few weeks to discover if the candidate had been successful indicated when the bonus money appeared on her *American Express* card.

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When Maureen accepted a nomination from Arlene, she interviewed each girl at *The Grosvenor Hotel* posing as Mrs Hanlon. In the initial stages of the assessment the chat centred around the girls' futures. If selected, after preliminary training, they would be offered a two-year contract during which they would be well paid with safe and comfortable living accommodation. In addition to food and board, they would be paid in cash which they should store in a personal safe in their room. They would also be given English lessons, gain valuable work experience, issued with a record of employment and good references. If required, they would be sponsored and coached to help them gain British citizenship, helped with the completion of the official forms and sponsors necessary to guarantee a UK passport.

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In effect, she was offering a rescue package, a chance to reset their lives and kickstart their new, better futures. Maureen soon learned that cleverness was not a good attribute, bright chatty ones were usually more trouble than quieter, slower girls.

Although it was preferable that a chosen girl should be of good appearance, this was not essential as those buying infants from Maureen's Dark Web sites were always shown a picture of a stunningly good-looking smiling girl whose skin colour matched that of the baby on offer.

To qualify, the candidate must agree to a two-day residential selection interview covering personal history and a thorough health check during which samples were taken: urine, blood and sputum. Those with unsuitable backgrounds, hidden diseases or underlying genetic defects were rejected at this stage and sent away with a cash payment of £1,000, a reward for their participation as a pay-off ending their employment at the nail bar.

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The Croatian

Maureen's primary idea was to find girls who might be suitable surrogates, girls to be impregnated with Declan's sperm to yield a boy child. Unsuitable infants would be sold on the Dark Web.

When the twenty-year-old Karmela Pacevic was spotted by Arlene at *GNB*, she was already six months pregnant. Interviewed by Mrs Helen Hanlon in a private suite at *The Grosvenor Hotel*, Karmela bleated the pregnancy had been the biggest mistake of her life. All she wanted was to get past this inconvenience, sell her baby to an adoption agency and continue her round the world journey, unburdened by a clinging infant. Questioned about the father, Maureen learned his name was Giovanni Gruber from Bolzano, in the northwest of Italy, near the Austrian border. His photograph showed him to be a tall blonde, blue-eyed Adonis. Sadly for Karmela, Gio had disappeared soon after she shared the news that 'they' were pregnant.

Maureen made her pitch and Karmela willingly signed the proffered contract in return for a thirty percent down payment of £5,000, the balance of £10,000 to be paid when the adoption papers had been signed.

Karmela saw out the remainder of her pregnancy in a private clinic on the outskirts of Aberdeen, a highly profitable operation owned by Maureen. This clinic specialised in discreet 'midwifery services' including abortions and the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases. Its usual clients were local celebrities or public figures who did not wish to seek help under the NHS.

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Three days after the baby was born, Karmela signed the adoption papers, pocketed the balance of her fee and caught a flight to Ibiza to soak up some winter sun.

Disappointingly for Maureen, although healthy, the child, a girl, was dark-skinned with thick jet-black hair, small and runtish. It seemed unlikely that Gio was her father.

At two weeks old, with a certificate of good health from the clinic, the anonymous infant was sold for £81,345 (paid in Bitcoin) via Maureen's pop-up auction site on the Dark Web.

Three months after the sale of her infant, the Croatian girl returned to *GNB* and asked to see Mrs Carruthers. For a second time Seller and Buyer met at the *Grosvenor* where Karmela demanded a further £20,000, threatening to go to the police.

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Maureen activated her pre-set backup plan. While pretending to negotiate, Maureen spiked Karmela's drink. When the girl was unconscious, Maureen injected her blackmailer with a measured, non-lethal heroin overdose, leaving her comatose. On exiting the hotel, she passed the electronic room key to a swarthy man wearing reflective glasses, a black boiler suit and a skip cap displaying the logo, *Eder RTS*. From her car, Maureen watched as her problem package, now inside a coffin-sized trunk marked 'Fragile, Musical Instruments', was rolled out of the hotel on a trolley and eased into the rear of a white Transit van. The sides of the van were emblazoned with garish decals proclaiming, "*Eder Road Trip Services*". The decals and cloned numberplates were magnetic, easily removable.

Maureen had pre-booked this disposal service on the Dark Web at a cost of 5,000 US Dollars equivalent, paid in Bitcoin to an account she traced to a private bank in The Principality of Liechtenstein.

Later, as midnight approached, the Croatian, belted into the driver's seat of a stolen Corsa, was rolled over a cliff edge near Finnart Deep Water Terminal on Loch Long.

In her determination to succeed, Maureen Bishop had often encountered people who had attempted to cross her, to ignore or bend the rules of the contracts they had signed with her. In general, she had been ahead of them, asserting corrective action, imposing a fiscal penalty or physical warning, as required. Normally these renegades had learned their lessons. Others, more headstrong, had needed the ultimate sanction. The Croatian was her fourth contract with *Eder RTS*. Operating throughout Europe, the Serbs also offered a complete menu of services including discreet abduction, with or without torture if information was required from the hostage, escalating to elimination before final disposal.

For Maureen, an important lesson had been learned. To guarantee the baby boys she wanted, she needed better control and zero risk of comebacks or consequences.

Immediately after the disposal of Karmela, the idea which had been swirling in her mind since the disappointment of the Croatian's baby, settled to a definite plan. What she needed now was a secure system, totally under her control, not reliant on *Eder RTS* or others who might possibly discover her identity or raise their prices if they sensed she was becoming dependent on them.

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Perfect

The Aberdeen clinic where Karmela had spent her final weeks prior to the birth of her child was already part of her scheme, but only as a backup. Although the new matron was fully compliant to Maureen's directions, the recently re-launched *Inverloch House* was subject to regular visits by the Care Inspectorate which made it too public for Maureen's intended baby farm operation.

However, she must press on and her Aberdeen clinic would have to suffice, meanwhile.

Arlene had spotted another promising candidate who had been working at *GNB* for two months, a beautiful twenty-three-year-old Danish girl called Karin Karlsson who exactly matched the revised profile Maureen had given her sister-in-law. Provided she could be persuaded to be a surrogate, this girl seemed perfect. In addition to her good appearance and compliant nature, her story rang true. Maureen had listened to Arlene's booth recordings eavesdropping on Karlsson and became convinced the Dane's tale of woe sounded genuine. Evonne Richards, an Edinburgh based private investigator who worked for most of the top criminal defence lawyers was hired. Everything checked out exactly as Karlsson had told her clients many times over. There was nothing unfavourable about this girl in her record.

Karin had been studying medicine at *Glasgow University* but had dropped out, unable to cope with the stress of exams while trying to support herself by working in a call centre, running up credit card debts in the process.

At her usual private suite at *The Grosvenor Hotel*, Maureen met Karlsson in the guise of Mrs Helen Halon, an agent for *Perfekte Familien*, a Berlin based charity which sought to provide surrogate infants for childless couples willing to pay handsomely. Maureen showed Karin a brochure of happy adoptive parents with their new surrogate children.

After a long discussion about the details of the proposed online paramedic training course to be undertaken during her pregnancy, Karin willingly signed Mrs Hanlon's proffered contract, agreeing to act as a surrogate mother in return for a total of £90,000. In their arrangement, this payment would be immediately deposited in a bank account in joint names. Both Karin and Maureen would be allowed online access, on condition this money must be held intact until the adoption forms had been signed after the birth, when the payment would be released.

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As a first step, Karin must agree to have a full medical screening at *Inverlochy House*. In return for this three-day residential investigation, she would receive £1,500 cash. All tests proved entirely satisfactory.

When she shook hands at *The Grosvenor*, as a parting gift, Karin received an immediate cash payment of Euro 500 for her attendance.

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By the following week, Karin was installed at the Aberdeen clinic (off the books) as a residential trainee nursing assistant. To remove the stress the girl was under, Maureen cleared Karin's credit card debts, a total of £8,342, before closing these accounts.

During her time at Inverlochy House, Karin would receive £300 per week, cash-in-hand. To keep her busy and focussed, she was registered on year one of an intensive online degree course entitled 'Primary Care Paramedic' with support provided by a college in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, an establishment franchised by the University of Northumbria.

Donor sperm was provided by Declan. As expected, Karin was immediately pregnant.

This child was a golden-haired boy in the image of his father.

As Maureen had anticipated, despite having signed the agreement to the surrogacy/adoption arrangement, the Danish girl changed her mind. She wanted to keep 'her child'.

Mrs Hanlon acted immediately. Pretending to go along with the Dane's wishes, Maureen invited Karin to go on a shopping trip to Edinburgh to buy clothes for herself and her new baby. The Matron was told a different tale - Karin was leaving, heading to Morocco, to meet with an old boyfriend.

Buyer and Seller left the clinic in a dark grey Toyota people carrier masquerading as a private taxi, driven by Declan, dressed as a chauffeur. Maureen sat with the girl in the rear where she dispensed a doctored coffee from a flask. Karin slipped over into a deep sleep after which Maureen delivered a lethal injection of barbiturate.

With the corpse zipped in a body bag in the boot, concealed under a travel blanket, the Bishops returned to *Inverlochy House* where Maureen collected her firstborn son.

With Milloy snuggled to her breast inside a fleecy coat, the people carrier drove south and west, heading for Balloch where Maureen's car was parked at the Vale of Leven Hospital. Mother and child moved to the Range Rover to complete the three-mile journey to *Ben View*, her new dream home perched high on the southern shore of Loch Lomond overlooking its scatter of islands towards Ben Lomond and the Arrochar Alps.

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The Toyota drove onwards to the *Golden Slumbers* crematorium. The body bag was accepted at the rear service door by Jerry Thomas who wheeled it inside on his gurney before transferring it to a coffin which he placed first in line for his overnight batch in his role as furnace operative.

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Bainholm Castle

Within a month of bringing Milloy home to *Ben View*, Maureen was ready to move ahead to the next phase.

Having established *Golden Slumbers* as a legitimate business operating smoothly under Declan's supervision, the notion of upscaling her baby farm business was bubbling in Maureen's mind. She needed a secure place to house her recruits while they were waiting out the weeks and months for their babies to arrive. What she was looking for was a place she could operate securely, somewhere off the beaten path, preferably already established as a care home, an operation she could remodel for her purpose.

After many months of searching, Maureen Bishop found what she was hoping for. *Bainholm Castle* was a grand old country house built in the 1890s as a hunting and fishing lodge by William Bain, a Lanarkshire mine owner. When Maureen discovered it, it had been converted into an upmarket hotel-style 'supported living in retirement' nursing home.

At first opening, it had been well subscribed but its remote location south and east of the tourist town of Moffat, sixty-five miles from Glasgow and fifty-five from Edinburgh, made it increasingly unpopular. The original budget set by *Quality Living in Retirement* had been £3.5 million but the final bills had soared north, exceeding £5 million. One by one, the residents left or were removed by their families. By its third year *Bainholm* had been forced to shut down, initially on a temporary basis. Eventually, two years later, it had been put up for sale. The well-meaning charity which had raised the money had gone under, leaving the solicitor handling its affairs desperate to re-coup sufficient to pay off the monies owing to staff, suppliers and utilities while hoping there would be enough of a surplus to pay her fees or at least defray her expenses.

Aware there were no other suitors and certain she would eventually succeed with an offer, Maureen set up an initial *Skype* call, posing as Ms June Brownlee and purporting to represent a Malaysian family who operated a group of similar homes under the banner of "*Global Retirement Living*" (*GRL*), a further SLP nestled inside *Dalgetty Developments*.

As expected, Ms Julie Coulson representing the charity had rejected *GRL*'s opening low-ball bid of £250,000. After a series of further *Skype* meetings and a damning condition report from Maureen's tame surveyor, *Global Retirement Living* bought the property out of its two-year care and maintenance regime for a bargain price of £732,000, an amount

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Maureen had estimated would be just enough to allow the solicitor to clear her feet with a surplus of around £25,000 as a contribution to her fees and expenses.

During the final negotiating session, Julie Coulson had confessed:

"D'you want to know something, Jane? What galls me is that I was sucked into doing this job for them because Annette, my older sister, had founded *Quality Living in Retirement* as a way of helping people like our mother to stay independent for as long as possible. Of course, it was a laudable concept, I know that, but why she chose Moffat and not somewhere closer, I have no idea. Then, as soon as the dreadful place opened, using her Power of Attorney, Annette sold up Mummy's flat in Morningside and emigrated to New Zealand to be nearer her son and family, nominating me to take on the thankless task of Overseer and pay Mummy's monthly fees and bills without any funds from Mummy's estate. Annette always was a selfish besom.

"Of course, we both knew Mummy was a townie. Although she needed twenty-four-seven nursing care after her fall, mentally she was still one hundred percent. Within a few months, she began to hate *Bainholm Castle* with a vengeance and formed a committee of likeminded among the residents. They were vociferous and bitter, complained horribly about everything, the food, the staff, the weather, the lack of visitors, the non-existent TV reception, just everything. It was such a huge relief when Mummy caught pneumonia and died eight months before the place went under. I know I sound heartless but you need to understand I was driving up and down to *Bainholm* at least twice a week to visit her and quell the staff. On other days I was on the telephone to Mummy and to the manager, sometimes two or three times a day, towards the end.

"Really and truly, it was obvious the place was doomed to failure. I told Annette at the outset it was a mistake, but my big sister was always headstrong, just like Mummy. I just couldn't believe it when you contacted me. Of course, I had hoped we would get a much higher price but, actually Jane, you are the first person who has shown real interest. Thank you so much for persuading your clients to up their offer. I've been worried sick about what to do. I really need to move on from this nightmare. I think I'll sell out my partnership and move to France, like that woman in *The Glasgow Herald* magazine. So, yes, let's settle. I'll fax you my signature and get this behind me."

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Immediately the sale had been completed, *GRL* leased the property to a fledgling organisation called "*Health Care Training Services*" (*HCTS*), a charity whose articles of incorporation stated:

"Our mission is to provide a high-quality training experience for young women caring for terminal dementia patients from deprived backgrounds."

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This application for charity status was never submitted.

With her contacts in Pollokshields and Govanhill, Maureen was confident she would easily find cleaning and catering staff who would be willing to work for her without asking questions. It was a matter of knowing the appropriate gangmasters.

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Closed Loop Control

With the location for her baby farm settled and modifications and renovations in progress, Maureen set about tracking down a woman she had met years earlier at sessions of *Gamblers Rescue Online* where she had called herself Helen Hanlon, claiming to be an insurance loss adjuster from Paisley. Her target's other problems were alcohol and cannabis, a potent and insidious cocktail of addiction.

Miriam Kellock had once been a Consultant Gynaecologist at a hospital in Liverpool, until a series of unsatisfactory outcomes caused her to be struck off. Maureen found Kellock working as a therapeutic advisor at the *Roosevelt Centre* based in a leafy suburb of Manchester, an apparently legitimate clinic offering private advice and treatments relating to reproductive health for both sexes. Delving deeper, Maureen had discovered, in addition to its normal menu of treatments, the *Roosevelt Centre* was also a gateway to a secondary clinic which specialised in unethical terminations. These clients were often grossly overweight daughters of indulgent rich parents, wayward teenagers who had hidden their condition for too long before seeking help, making them ineligible for an abortion under the NHS. This expensive treatment, rendered entirely at each client's own risk, was provided only after payment in full to the *Roosevelt Centre*, in advance.

Miriam was not an owner or an executive at this annexe, employed only on a case-by-case basis, cash in hand. Her duties included the difficult management of these often demanding and fractious young women and uppity parents through surgery and the ensuing recovery process to final discharge. To make certain there could be no comebacks, it was also her unpleasant responsibility to dispose of the clinical remains of the foetuses.

They met at *Bainholm Castle* to discuss Maureen's proposal. Although they had chatted on *Skype* about Maureen's proposal, it was the first time that Helen Hanlon and Miriam Kellock had met in person. Miriam, who had lost her driver's licence many years earlier, was collected from her rented apartment above a Chinese carry-out in Farnworth on the outskirts of Bolton. The driver of the Toyota people carrier was Declan in his chauffeur's uniform and cap.

Settled in the comfortable apartment which would become Miriam's should she accept the contract on offer, Maureen made her pitch:

"Miriam, this is how it will work. I propose a ten-year deal after which you will be able to move on, suitably rewarded. Have a look at this spreadsheet. You would be employed

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by HCTS at a salary of £33,000 per annum, your legitimate employment cover story, all subject to income tax and National Insurance contributions, which I will organise on your behalf. In addition, free of tax, I will pay you a monthly bonus, subject to performance. On target, this could be as high as £5,000, a potential of £60,000 per year. When did you last earn such a wage? This is a chance to build a nest egg for the future. I have a contact who will help you set up a personal savings plan, allowing you to invest these bonuses in Stocks and Shares ISAs that she will pick on your behalf. Kate Carter-Smythe of Imperial Personal Finance has an amazing track record. I will arrange for her to provide you with a quarterly valuation statement of your account.

"At the conclusion of the contract, I will pay you a terminal bonus, which I will transfer to an account in Guernsey which will drip-feed you an annuity of £5,000 per month in perpetuity.

"Here at Bainholm, you would oversee the medical side from arrival through to birthing, without interference. The girls will be pre-screened to ensure those who come to you are fit, healthy and free of drugs and suchlike addictions. Like you, all will have signed binding contracts. I envisage most girls will be already pregnant but where insemination is required, I shall provide the donor sperm. I will also provide the female dementia patients and you will set up a basic training program to keep the girls busy. I suggest you work them as hard as you can. With young flighty women, I find stern discipline is best. There will be no visits or enquiries from relatives of trainees or patients, I guaranteed this.

"After a successful birthing, I shall call personally and take the child to its new adoptive parents. Please understand, this is a business arrangement, not a charity and certainly not subject to outside control or interference. You and I are in this together and I will make sure you are fully protected. I shall give you whatever additional training and supplies you need to manage the final handover arrangements. We can discuss details later.

"I shall provide support staff for cooking and cleaning and basic nursing. These persons will be supervised by an on-site manager who will report to me, not you. If anyone here should die, he will take charge. There will be no investigations, no further issues for you to face. Bainholm Castle will continue as before.

"Your primary responsibility will be as my figurehead and to control and care for the girls. The care home residents are of secondary importance. There is no shortage of struggling families willing to offload their demented mothers in return for a once-off payment while continuing to draw their parent's pension ad infinitum.

"Now, Miriam, you must accept that everyone here will be living in strict isolation. There will be no fixed telephone line and no internet at Bainholm, and, as you may have already discovered, mobile phone coverage is zero. In any case, I will not allow any mobile phones

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at Bainholm, not for anyone. This must be an enterprise which operates under closed loop control. Our interface will be the manager I mentioned.

"Now, Miriam, consider this location. There are no gambling shops within a twenty-mile radius and so no access to Fixed Odds Betting Terminals, your current Achilles Heel. Assuming the report I have from my private investigator is correct, you are in arrears with your rent, your utilities and you are maxed out on your credit cards. In round numbers, you owe £25,000.

"Read this contract most carefully. If you sign it willingly, I will clear that debt for you and arrange for your relocation. One day, you will be a lacky at the Roosevelt and the next day, as if by magic you will be Matron-in-Charge here, accountable only to me. It is vital that no one learns where you are. Once you become part of my plans for Bainholm, you will be locked-in to the project for ten years after which you will have a bright future.

"I repeat, you will have status and complete authority over the medical side of things. Miriam Kellock, I invite you to take a hard look at yourself. You are forty-two and going downhill. This is your chance to clean up your act once and for all. Ten years from now you will be fifty-two and if you serve me faithfully in this scheme, you should have around a million pounds.

"At that stage, I sternly recommend you go back to your roots, back to Jura and settle to a life of comfort, hopefully fully free of your addiction. If I can do it, so can you. What do you say? Do we have a deal? The question is, are you willing to go for it? If not, I will pay you the agreed fee of £2,000 for your trouble today and find another person for the job. Trust me, there is a ready market in failed medics to choose from."

"Yes, Helen. I know this is probably my last chance to save myself. I will not let you down. Thank you, yes. Where do I sign?"

Two months later, Bainholm Castle opened for business with eight dementia residents, two per room, occupying four of the ten suites. One suite was used by Ms Miriam Kellock leaving five for the trainees, girls already under contract to offer their infants for adoption.

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The on-site manager, an ex-gangmaster from Possilpark, one of Glasgow's most deprived areas, was a fifty-three-year-old Macedonian calling himself Adam Graham (real name Georgi Nikolov). In appearance, Graham was large, well-muscled, with angry eyes and a suspicious nature, not someone most people would wish to challenge face to face. By original training, he had been an electrician and had spent several years at sea below

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decks on cruise ships. His criminal career had begun in Naples, forced to flee after killing a man in a bar fight.

Nikolov who had been in hiding in Govanhill when Maureen found him, was on the run, a 'named man' under a death threat following his botched assassination attempt on a rival in Glasgow's Easterhouse area. The manager and his support squad of eight Bulgarian women in their forties were housed in a series of Portacabins located in a wooded clearing out of sight of the main building.

'Mr' Graham was the only person at *Bainholm* with a vehicle, the only person allowed to communicate in any way with the outside world, dealing personally with monthly supplies of food and consumables and quarterly fuel deliveries. He also dealt with refuse, which he dumped in a shallow mine where he spread it out to check for contraband before spraying it with a layer of liquid plastic to seal it from flies and vermin. The shaft was protected by a padlocked metal door signed, "Hazard Area - Deep Water- Keep Out". The main building and Portacabins were connected to a small, private sewage treatment works which he was trained to operate by studying the DVD provided by the manufacturer. The Macedonian also closely supervised all necessary visits by repair and service personnel, overseeing these 'intruders' with a surly growl.

His battered white Transit van was on a long-term lease from a 'chop shop' called "A Cut Above" located in a rambling scrap yard on a run-down farm a mile from the M74, near Lesmahagow. This was home to an operation which specialised in repairing written off vehicles sold for scrap by insurance companies. Despite its appearance, the Transit was reliable, sound mechanically and electrically, regularly serviced and MOT-ed, its cloned numberplates changed every six months. This business had been bought by Maureen to provide a reliable source of anonymous vehicles for her various enterprises.

Like Kellock, Nikolov was being suitably rewarded with bonuses to be managed by Kate Carter-Smythe of *Imperial Personal Finance* and the promise of a final bonus and a new life with a British passport and driving licence at the end of the ten-year project. Compared to his previous time living in the shadows, the Macedonian's new life at *Bainholm* was relaxed, comfortable and stress free. For the first time ever since skipping into Britain hidden in a container lorry, he was sleeping well, without excessive drinking. Gradually, his fitness was returning and his paunch diminishing.

Graham's main security function was to monitor the operation of a scanner linked to a rotating dish mounted on the roof of his portacabin. His role was non-technical, merely to ensure it was powered up and operating correctly, as indicated by a continuous green light. This scanner 'listened' 24/7 for mobile phone signals over a three-mile radius. It was linked to a sealed computer box which sent a satellite signal alert automatically to the lady he knew as Mrs Hanlon.

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Graham had been given a 'special' phone, modified so that it could only receive texts giving instructions, pre-warning him about service and other visitors she had authorised. He could not use it to call or text her. If he wished to call Mrs Hanlon, either to convey a message from Kellock or explain a problem which had arisen, he must do so from a public call box, always at least ten miles from *Bainholm*. Voice contact was initiated by calling an international number (Nigerian). After a delay, the response defaulted to a standard message saying the number was no longer in service. A few minutes later, the public phone would ring back when he could explain to Mrs Hanlon the reason for his call. Alternatively, he would receive a text on his phone telling him to wait beside a different public phone at a particular time, usually during the hours of darkness.

The Macedonian was under strict instructions to always carry the phone Mrs Hanlon had given him, in case she wished to send him a message. (Graham's phone was also a satellite phone, a lesser version of the models given to Arlene and Declan, also a tracker device, plotting his location, minute by minute.)

Within the first month, Nikolov had confiscated three mobile phones and punished the errant Bulgarian women by beating them on the back of their legs with a small birch cane, the punishment he had received as a naughty child in Macedonia, the land which he hoped to return to, eventually.

In the first weeks, these discarded women, all ex-prostitutes, had tried to influence him with sexual favours but he was disinterested. In his twenties his libido had been destroyed by repeated sexually acquired infections which had left him impotent.

After an initial struggle of wills and a few threats of beatings, the man and his crew settled into a relatively good relationship. The Bulgarian illegals had little alternative as they depended on him to buy items for them on his monthly shopping trips.

Mrs Hanlon had forbidden the Macedonian to shop in Moffat or any of the nearby smaller towns. In any case, he preferred Dumfries or Carlisle where, he reckoned, he would not be spotted by any hit men looking to collect on his head. Like their manager, each Bulgarian had a bank card in their assumed name which had been provided by Mrs Hanlon, cards which Graham held in his personal safe, cards he used to withdraw cash to pay for everyone's personal purchases. At each monthly visit to the ATM, he would also print out account mini statements for mutual information and reassurance.

A keen angler from his youth, Nikolov settled into his new life quickly, initially fly fishing at the nearby lochs for stocked trout. He soon moved on from this, uncomfortable in the company of well-heeled anglers with their fancy rigs and posh cars. He much preferred fishing for small brown trout in local rivers, using tiny hooks concealing fat pink worms, wandering the hills accompanied by his Staffie called Boris.

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Within three months from the arrival of the first of the surrogate mothers, the ones already pregnant, the babies came on stream. These infants were sold by Maureen in a series of one-off auctions which popped up on the Dark Web. Generally, the mothers were allowed to recover sufficiently to allow them to leave, ostensibly to start their new lives free of the burden of caring for a baby.

Difficult girls, those likely to want to keep their child or attempt to re-negotiate terms and stir up trouble among the other surrogates, were classified by Kellock as 'non-compliant'. Soon after the birth, such girls were sedated and when quiescent, were given a lethal slow acting cocktail of barbiturates. The other girls were told the new mother had suffered a massive bleed and been taken to hospital by Mr Graham for emergency treatment.

By contrast, when a compliant new mother was due to move on, the other girls would be encouraged to celebrate with a little party, sharing special food, usually purchased from Marks & Spencer's and washed down with sparkling grape juice, with disco music, party hats and noisy poppers and screamer balloons. Early the following morning, before the others were awake, Kellock would give this victim her final booster jag of vitamins, again a lethal slow acting cocktail.

As for all departing new mothers, the Macedonian provided transport, heading ostensibly to Glasgow or Edinburgh at the girl's choice.

Around thirty minutes into these journeys, when the girl in the passenger seat beside him had finally succumbed, Nikolov moved her corpse to the rear of the Transit and zipped it into a reinforced body bag, sealing the long closer with a run of superglue to prevent the zip from being re-opened. Following the pre-set plan, Nikolov drove to Peebles where he used a particular public phone to initiate the agreed contact procedure and follow instructions from Mrs Hanlon as to where and when he must deposit his passage.

A favourite drop-off location was a derelict, litter strewn business park on the outskirts of Dalkeith, a spot favoured by locals for illegal fly-tipping. This site was held in a land bank by "Future Homes" another SLP company hidden in the shell of Dalgetty Developments.

This routine was a variation on the method used to dispose of any of the dementia ladies who had died. Nikolov thought the whole rigmarole to be a complete waste of time and effort:

Why not dump them in the mine shaft with the refuse?

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The usual drop-off time was 11.45 pm exactly, an activity watched by Declan Bishop through infra-red binoculars. After collection in an equally battered white Transit, Declan drove the corpse to *Golden Slumbers* to complete the transfer of the body bag to a sleepy Jerry Thomas.

Although Maureen was evasive, she had implied each of these corpses were dementia patients who had come to the end of their stay at *Bainholm*. Declan, who was the delivery driver for replacement clients, had kept a rough count and soon realised the number of corpses from Dalkeith was higher than the number of dementia patients he delivered to the care home.

Declan resented these late-night corpse collections and his trips to deliver the smelly dementia patients to *Bainholm*, with his passenger strapped in her delivery wheelchair and drugged to keep her quiet.

In particular, he hated his visits to the bizarre workshop in Lesmahagow, where the lisping, tattooed owner and her equally odd daughter with bright orange hair and multiple facial piercings treated him like dirt. Each time he visited *A Cut Above* to swap his Porsche for the smart Mercedes private ambulance or the scruffy white Transit van, he worried his car might be vandalised or even stolen. Most of all, he resented being jerked around by Maureen, given last minute orders which consigned him to long boring days with unsociable hours.

His trips to Lesmahagow, *Bainholm*, Dalkeith and *Golden Slumbers* always left him feeling 'unclean'.

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In its first full year, the *Bainholm* program yielded nine healthy babies producing an income in Bitcoin equivalent to £1,230,000. The second year this rose for £1,723,500 from the sale of fourteen infants.

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Dream Homes

Ahead of the addition of each son to Maureen's dream family, the Bishops moved home: first from Newlands to Thorntonhall then to Upper Helensburgh and finally, to *Ben View* for the long-awaited arrival of Milloy.

Maureen's ultimate dream home was situated on the southern shore of Loch Lomond, to the east of Balloch with uninterrupted vistas towards the iconic Ben Lomond and Ben Arthur (The Cobbler) and the other Arrochar Alps.

Set on a twenty-acre man-made plateau directly overlooking the shoreline, the designer house was surrounded by a meticulously-landscaped gardens. The entire estate comprised two thousand three hundred acres of pasture and natural forest, her surrounding fields leased to neighbouring farmers as grazing for sheep and cattle.

This horseshoe perimeter was protected by a security fence topped with a small roundel of razor wire. The previous owner, paranoid about security following an attack by a drug-crazed fan, had been a heavy metal rock star who died on stage from a massive heart attack while on a world tour, leaving a trail of debts and six other homes of a similar design dotted around the world.

Viewed by loch users and even from the air, the ugly perimeter galvanised steel fence which had been painted in mottled green, was virtually invisible. However, to make this potential eyesore acceptable to the planning authorities, a two-pronged approach had been adopted. The outer edge of the three-metre-high fence was thickly planted with mixed hedging of prickly gorse and bramble which climbed up and into the fence providing a further ring of natural security.

Inside the fence, an attractive stand of thickly planted Twinberry (Simpson's Stopper) with its distinctive nutmeg aroma, screened the house and grounds while providing a haven for birds, bees, butterflies and insects of all kinds. This ribbon of coppiced woodland was assiduously maintained at five metres high and five metres deep, set back to provide a two-metre-wide track running alongside the inner line of the fence, a facility used by regular security patrols and visiting squads of gardeners.

The living quarters, recessed into the hill behind it, comprised eight self-contained apartments each with a generous lounge, two double bedrooms each with en suite bathrooms. The main meeting and socialising area was a grand dining cum living cum entertaining room. Looking northwards this vast open plan gallery spanned the width of the building with a floor to ceiling glass wall, triple glazed with its outer layer mirrored

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to increase privacy for the occupants while reflecting the adjacent planting, creating a camouflage effect.

Buried in its bowels, inherited from its previous owner, there was a sound-proofed music studio incorporating a 'panic room' and an underground escape tunnel with two exits, one to a concealed door inside the boathouse and another to a hidden exit adjacent to the main gatehouse. The panic room and its tunnels were not detailed on the plans held by the local authority.

Ben View's avant-garde design had been eased through the planning process as an eco-home which it was not, and by quiet gifts to the key figures involved in the approvals process.

To the west side of the main building linked by an underground corridor, there was an indoor games annexe comprising a tennis court, a squash court, a home gym, a vast enclosed tropical R&R area themed as a surfer's beach, with a heated swimming pool, sauna, chilled plunge pool and eight hot tubs arranged in a circle around a barbecue dining arena.

To the east and rear of the main building there was a two-acre exercise paddock and a stable with accommodation for ten horses. At the shore there was a private jetty and boathouse where Declan kept his prized toy, a huge motor cruiser. The spotless underground garage housed a Lamborghini, a Maserati, a Porsche Cayenne, a Bentley Hybrid, a Mercedes S-Class, and a Range Rover, cars shared by Maureen and Declan.

There was also four Toyota people carriers used by Declan and the live-in Slovenian nannies. These women, a mother in her mid-forties and two daughters in their early twenties were fully qualified nurses recruited from *Inverlochy House*. This family had willingly transferred after signing a lucrative three-year rolling 'joint and several' contract with the condition that they must not become pregnant while serving at *Ben View*. Should they wish to resign, they were required to serve out a six-month notice period in full or forfeit their joint terminal bonus. These women were under the direct control of Maureen and lived in the main house sharing two apartments on the lowest level.

Just inside the perimeter, near the gatehouse, screened by a thick hedge of *Leylandii*, there was a high-quality hotel style accommodation unit for twelve permanent live-in staff led by Adrian Dulcet, (real name Gregor Poroshenko), a suave Ukrainian bull of a man who ran his hand-picked staff of Albanian and Bulgarian women with a firm hand. Adrian's second-in-command and long-term lover was an Armenian who called himself John Brown, (real name Aren Mirzoyan). The pair had come with the house as a package and had been pleased to continue under the new and less volatile owner. Both men had served many media celebrities down through the years and now, in their fifties, they

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were easing themselves towards retirement, saving for a new life on Gran Canaria, where they had many friends.

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Missing

Detective Sergeant Julie McRobert was from North Queensferry, born to a Polish mother (Emelia nee Buzek) and a Scottish father, Malcolm McRobert.

Malcolm had previously worked as an engineering foreman at Rosyth Naval Dockyard. He was a giant of a man who, in his heyday had been a professional boxer. On retiring from the ring, he turned to Ju Jitsu, starting a hobby business offering self-awareness and self-defence classes for women of all ages, an enterprise in which he was assisted by Julie and her best friend and Police Scotland colleague, Detective Inspector Tom Graham.

An only child, Julie had spent most of her summers near Gdansk on her maternal grandparents' farm, milking cows, feeding chickens, hunting for their eggs and herding and milking goats, making cheese and preserving fruits and vegetables for the year ahead.

During these long holidays she made friends with Viktoria Kowalski from the neighbouring farm. Over a decade of summers, Viktoria taught Julie how to speak, read and write Polish and Julie taught Viktoria English. During the rest of the year, the girls continued learning by sending each other long letters every week, returning a photocopy of the other's originals, overmarked with corrections and explanations.

After her final high school exams, Viktoria came to North Queensferry to stay with Julie for four months to 'immerse' herself in English ahead of the tough civil service exams. She had applied for an apprenticeship in the elite Passport and Visa Service in Poznan, a position her older brother Jakub had recommended. The plan was that this would be a good starting point from which to make influential contacts who could open doors for higher postings in the future, perhaps even a job with the European Commission in Brussels.

When Viktoria's grandmother Urszula died, her grandfather Oskar sold their small farm and moved to Warsaw to live with Jakub Kowalski, now a senior consultant in a psychiatric hospital. Pooling their money, father and son bought a smallholding with a large family house on which they built a modern cottage for Jakub with a spare bedroom for Viktoria when she visited from Poznan.

Over the ensuing years both girls pursued their careers with energy and ambition, Julie moving to Edinburgh and Viktoria to Brussels. To celebrate her thirtieth birthday, Viktoria visited Julie for the entire month of August, using the spare room in her

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Morningside flat as a base to travel around Scotland. In a frenetic week during the Fringe, the friends ate out and went to dozens of shows.

On their final evening together, they reminisced about old times.

"Julie, I often wonder what happened to Truda, you remember, the girl from the farm on the other side of the hill, the family who interbred domestic pigs bred from wild boars."

"Truda? Did she not want to be a model or a film star, something like that? Is that the girl?"

"Yes, that's her. When she first arrived in Edinburgh, Truda would send me postcards, in her tiny spidery hand full of spelling errors. It was when I still worked in Poznan. At first, she was moving from flat to flat, a new address every few months. After about a year, she settled with a Norwegian boyfriend, Lars, I seem to remember. When she got a mobile phone, she used to ring my office, but the switchboard caught on and blocked the calls. Truda and I lost touch."

"What a pity. I didn't even know she was in Scotland. You didn't tell me, did you?"

"Sorry, anyway, I know she was working in bars and restaurants. Did I say she had no qualifications? Her English was very poor, not an office type. Anyway, when I knew for sure I was coming here to visit you, I rang her parents. Turns out they haven't heard from her for over three years. They think she may have gone off travelling with an Australian called Darren somebody. I know it's a long shot, but maybe Truda is still here? What do you think, Julie? Could you use your contacts and try to find her for me? It would be good to get her to contact her parents, they're worried sick."

"More likely she is in Australia, raising a squad of kids on a sheep farm."

"No, Truda was not really into farming. And you are right, Julie, she always wanted to be a fashion model. Do you remember that night the three of us went to a dance with Jakub, in his old van and how she insisted on sitting in the front? How glamorous she looked with her nails glittery and her special eye makeup. And that outrageous figure-hugging pale blue dress with the slit up to her waist, no bra and her boobs almost falling out. And her gorgeous long blond hair in curls, on the highest heels, gliding along like a cat-walk queen."

"Mmm, yes. The boys were round her like bees after honey, almost drooling over her. Yes, I agree, not a sheep farmer's wife. But maybe Darren is a computer whizz kid earning zillions and she's living on Bondi Beach in a huge mansion?"

"More likely Darren got her pregnant and dumped her. Truda was always hopeless with money. I keep thinking she might still be here, in Edinburgh or maybe in Glasgow. I was through there again yesterday, checking out those fancy shops on Buchanan Street. I

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kept thinking she might be working in one of them. Poor Truda, at school she wasn't very bright. Gullible really, poor thing. Maybe I didn't do her any favours, helping her to get a passport. I think her family blame me for helping her to escape. Did you ever see their farm? Such an awful dirty ramshackle place. The authorities closed it down on them soon after Truda left. They were polluting the river with the waste from their pigsties. They have a council house now. I hear on the *Facebook* grapevine they've become recluses, alcoholics, poor things. Grief, I suppose. It nearly happen to Papa, after Mummia died. That's why Jakub made Papa move to live with him, to get him back on track. Jakub says it's very common when a person loses someone special in their lives, a soulmate. If we could find Truda, it might save them."

"OK, Viktoria, I get it. Give me her details and I'll run her through the system. But no promises. Look, thousands of people go missing every year in Scotland. Most turn up eventually but many just disappear without trace. In Truda's case, who would report her missing? No one, I suspect, so it'll have to be you, Viktoria, to make it official. I'll download a form now and get you to sign it, OK?"

While Julie went online with her iPad to send the form to her printer, Viktoria opened her rucksack and retrieved a sizeable dossier.

Julie skimmed through it before saying, "Well, you have certainly put the work in on this. Truda Zamoiski. Yes, she is certainly a stunner, film star material. And you kept the postcards too. And her mobile number. OK, Viktoria, I'll have a look when I get a chance but my money's on Bondi Beach, not working at a cosmetic counter in Buchanan Street."

"Oh, one other thing you might want to check out with your police hat on, Julie. A very weird place called *Glasgow Nail and Beauty*. It's in a lane off Buchanan Street, in one of those courtyards. From the outside, I thought it might be the sort of place Truda might try for a job, So, I went in and asked the receptionist if she knew her. She said no but when I asked her to check back her records for a few years earlier, she just shrugged, said nothing. However, within seconds the owner appeared and hustled me out, telling me they did not have any free slots for walk-ins and to book online. This was a straight lie, there were quite a few girls free. Anyway, I hate other people touching my hands and feet. To my practised eye, her nail bar girls were mostly illegals. In Brussels we say they are off the grid, working 'grey'. There is *definitely* something odd going on in that place, whatever it is. It was written all over the owner's face, she was scared. Her name badge said 'Arlene', a short and very overweight woman with a painted-on face, fake nails like talons and small brownish teeth. She looked a bit shifty to me. And I think she was probably high on something, slurring her words."

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Legwork

The first phase of Julie McRobert's follow-up on Truda Zamoiski was carried out in her own time, with help from her best friend, Tom Graham, also a fast-track graduate.

Julie had buddied with Tom during their sergeant's training course at Tulliallan where they had been nicknamed 'Little and Large', a moniker which they had heard whispered and chose to ignore. Tom was 5' 4" and delicately built compared to Julie's 6' 1", her wide-shouldered athletic frame inherited with her father's genes.

Both police officers were gay, unattached, not sexually active, happy to remain single, their lives closely intertwined, they had become firm friends, soulmates. Away from work, in addition to their involvement with Malcolm's Ju Jitsu club, when time allowed, they were involved on the periphery of the Edinburgh Am-Dram scene, usually operating in the background, helping mainly with technical issues such as the lighting, special effects, the sound desk, videorecording of rehearsals and performances but also with makeup, wardrobe and so on.

Determined to succeed, both were focussed on their careers and, by dint of hard work, long hours and by actively cooperating - *two minds are better than one* - the pair had forced their way into the Central Belt Serious Crime Group (CB-SCG), commonly shorthanded as Gartcosh SCG. The support hub for this elite group was at the Scottish Crime Campus at Gartcosh, Police Scotland's £82 million facility on the eastern edge of Greater Glasgow, with ready access to the M73 loop which joined the M8 to the M74 motorways.

Under the ethos of 'self-motivated, agile and proactive policing', CB-SCG pooled the best talent for all areas of Scotland. This was a strategy which encouraged Julie and Tom to operate remotely, only occasionally using facilities at police offices in Edinburgh and elsewhere but more often collaborating online from their homes using high-speed broadband to the CB-SCG information hub housed physically at Gartcosh. Their remote access to this resource was monitored by their 'gatekeeper', a senior civilian administrator called Sadie Faifley, a woman they had befriended through her involvement in Ju Jitsu and Malcolm's club. Sadie was also the senior deputy to the PA for Chief Superintendent George Alexander (Sandy) McPhail, a strict disciplinarian often rumoured as a likely future Chief Constable of Police Scotland.

Since becoming insiders at Gartcosh a year earlier, both were now pressing for their next promotion, Julie to Inspector and Tom to Chief Inspector.

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When dialled, the mobile number for Truda as provided by Viktoria was out of service. *Vodafone* refused to release details without due authorisation. Since Truda was not a UK national, and was likely to be working 'grey', Julie reckoned enquiries to the Inland Revenue and NHS would also prove to be dead ends, even if the tax authorities might be persuaded to cooperate, which she thought unlikely without a mandate signed off by Sandy McPhail or their immediate superior, DCI D J MacQueen.

Paired with Tom, over one long holiday weekend they set out on a footslog. Julie visited the addresses noted on Truda's postcards, knocking on doors, posing as a friend, while Tom trudged around Edinburgh restaurants, cafes and fast-food shops with the missing girl's photograph. They drew a blank.

Stepping just over the edge of propriety, working from a 'hot' desk at St Leonard's, Julie logged into her CB-SCG account at Gartcosh. She classified her query as 'non-criminal' which allowed her to continue without setting 'alarm flags'.

Using her personal access code, she entered a missing persons request on the regular Police Scotland system, adding synoptic details of Truda, the Polish girl's last known Edinburgh address, emphasising the Zamoiski family's concern, their location and contact details in Gdansk, as provided by a 'family friend' who had been visiting from Poland during The Fringe.

Julie masked Viktoria's identity by deliberately misspelling her surname as 'Volinsky', inventing contact details for her at an address in Warsaw, not Brussels. It was a small subterfuge but a necessary one to avoid the possibility of triggering a Europol link to Viktoria in her new position at the European Commission. If Truda had become desperate, she might have been lured into nefarious activities such as smuggling drugs as a 'mule' and any official link to her risked tainting Viktoria's career.

Using this database entry 'authority code', McRobert searched the UK Border Control records for the period from January 2010 to discover that while Truda had entered the country in July 2014, there was no subsequent record of her leaving.

Nor was she listed with The Salvation Army or other missing persons agencies.

At this point Julie began to feel more anxious for Truda. How and why would such an attractive girl suddenly drop out of sight? It did not stack up.

Julie turned to social media, creating an account for Edwina (Eddi) Massey, posting a beach photo of a stunning bronzed and golden-haired girl in a bikini, an image scanned from a magazine advert. To add to this fiction, she created a cover story:

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Hi Guys, I've been working in Ibiza as a courier for the last four years and now I'm back! Hey, how great is Edinburgh, eh? Get in touch, go on, go on! Let's have a ball.

In Eddi's blog, Julie also posted the image of Truda Zamoiski she was given by Viktoria, asking Truda or anyone who knew of her whereabouts to make contact. She added the additional fiction that Truda had promised to follow her out to Ibiza where Edwina had lined up a job for her in a nail and beauty salon. To bolster the story, she posted scanned copies of the 'Views of Edinburgh' postcards Truda had sent to Viktoria, adding the addresses where Truda had been staying, giving the dates the cards had been sent, details gleaned from their franking stamps.

Within a few hours, she had fifty-three 'hits'.

Most were guys asking her out for a coffee or a meal, offers she politely but firmly declined while keeping their details on file, as a back-up, knowing that serial killers might well be among them, should that be the direction her investigation might take.

She also had two follow-ups which rang true.

One was from a man called Rick Douglas:

Hi Eddi,

Truda used to work for me when I was running a pub in the Grassmarket. When she got pregnant and split with Darren, she moved to Glasgow, but she kept in touch, sometimes two and three times a day, just for a chat. She had found a great job at a nail bar which meant she was not on her feet all day. Then the calls stopped. I left voice messages, but she never got back to me. My guess was that she got back again with Darren and had gone off to Oz with him. He was from Sydney, I think. Anyway, hope that helps.

And Eddi, if you fancy a coffee, ring me here at the Crieff Hydro, OK?

Rick Douglas,

Duty Manager (Bars and Events)

As a check, Julie phoned the hotel to verify that Rick Douglas did in fact work there. Douglas was also pictured on their website as a member of the senior management team.

The second positive was from a girl who called herself Karen Kennedy.

hiya eddi, you bikini fabooloos an luck hav good lookins / itoo fat nowadays / trooda lucky an good lookins like yoo /trooda nice girl speak nice me /she was in baby at 6 month ithink /ishow trooda howdoo nails an eybwos an peersins at gnb / Arleen sack me cos ihav family shawlands so ia no reel refugi she say ia come spy on gnb/ trooda live govanhill annette

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street uppabov bakin shop / ia go see her till she gone/maybee 3 maybe 4 yeargo/hop you find her say hiya trooda from old name hazeemah

'Eddi' replied to 'Karen' thanking her for her help, saying if she found Truda, she would help her get in touch.

Julie called Tom with her news and he responded in his usual outrageous style:

"Exxxceptionale! Sergeant, I think this calls for a wee visit to *Glasgow Nail and Beauty*. Shall I go as Hank the Yank with my best Transaalannic accent? Why not? I say Hank needs a bit of an outing, don't you agree? Now, where has Hank been recently? How about that river cruise we did in France, the wine tasting one with all those gorgeous Aussie hunks? I don't imagine anyone working at *GNB* would trip me up on that, would they?'

"I'm online now, Hank, shall I book us both for Saturday morning?"

"No, Julie, let me make a solo booking."

"Aw, why can't I come too? You know I love getting my nails done and I fancy a foot spa too."

"**A foot spa!** Ugh! How can those things possibly be hygienic? Anyway, c'mon Julie, let's face it, you are a rather striking woman and, if I may say so, they might rumble you as a policewoman, even in civvies."

"Look, if you are going as Hank, I could go in disguise too. What about that outfit I used for that comedy version of the *Sound of Music* with the Straiton Strollers when I did a walk-on as a pregnant Mother Superior? I still have the outfit you made for me. No one would ever think of a policewoman being pregnant, would they?"

"No, Julie, honestly, let me have a dekko on my own first to test the waters. After what happened to Viktoria, we don't want to spook them, do we? Look, I'm still running that *Facebook* page for 'Hilarious Hank' and he's still popular, even after three years of inventing scenarios, blagging stuff from the internet and recasting it in my inimitable style."

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(Later, with help from Tom, Julie discovered the fuller story of 'Karen Kennedy'. Hazeemah Karim was a Bangladeshi who fled from her family in Halifax aged fifteen on being told by her mother that her father had 'sold' her to an older man in Leeds, a 'brother' from the old country. This important business contact of her father's was in his sixties, a man who owned a small chain of convenience shops. He already had four wives and many children by them and wished to add Hazeemah to his harem and to his unpaid workforce. Helped by her mother, Hazeemah had moved to Glasgow and sanctuary

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provided by her mother's second cousin, the wife of a Glasgow man called Gerald Kennedy, a man who operated a six van Dyno-rod franchise.)

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Reconnoitre

After Tom's visit to *GNB*, the pair reconvened in Princes Court, in an Italian style eatery on the top floor, Tom with his new glued on nails trimmed short, polished and subtly varnished a natural pink colour, a vast improvement from his own nails which he had a bad habit of picking and chewing.

"Okay, super sleuth, shoot! And please, remove those turquoise contact lenses. They make you look like a frog in a tropical jungle."

Tom did as bid, returning his pupils to their natural light brown colour. Hunching his narrow shoulders, he said, 'Grrrrooof!', softly while staring across at her like a baleful spaniel puppy, making her smile at his pretend subservience.

The waitress arrived and took their food and drinks order.

"So, my dear Sherlock, what did you discover?"

"Yes, *GNB* is most definitely weird. And a tad aggressive, especially the manager, "Miss Arlene Bishop", according to her label. She was onto me as soon as I tried to sign in with her nebbly sidekick Jen, the one in the front cubicle as doorkeeper and seating hostess. Miss Bishop is clearly the big boss, but it looks like Jen is the top cat on the treatment floor. Miss Bishop spends her time watching from on high, from behind the smoked glass of her mezzanine office. I think they were upset because the defunct credit card number I had used to book was caught by their system and they had 'de-listed' me."

"How did you get in then?"

"Oh, the usual way. I turned up the flame, flashing my eyes and giving them a full-powered platinum grade smile and offered to pay cash up front, from the wad of Pounds and Euros stuffed inside my faux crocodile skin purse. Cash seemed to be very acceptable."

"So, did you get a chance to ask about Truda?"

"No. Let me give you what I did get, which is a sort of tale from East Enders and Coronation Street combined. My beautician Sasha was chatty. She was upfront telling she is a boy-girl, and that Arlene - Miss Bee for Bishop - is a closet girl-girl, too afraid to come out. Jen however is straight but has a married boyfriend, an older guy she used to work with, Dave Mackie. He's away a lot, drives an artic, running fresh seafood to France and Spain. I digress."

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"Back to Miss Bish. Although Arlene likes to pretend that she owns the place, she is just the manager. *GNB* is owned by Arlene's younger brother Declan, who it turns out is her. I quote, 'sort of step-cousinny thingummy-bob'. Did I say, Sasha is not terribly bright? Anyway, as it turns out, Declan is just the front man, Jen told Sasha. It is his wife Maureen who pulls the strings. Sasha has only seen Maureen a few times: *tall, skinny, completely scary eyes*. According to what Jen told Sasha, Maureen is a lawyer and very, very brainy. But she keeps in the background, gets Declan to do the donkey work like bringing the wage packets for the temps, the other girls who work at *GNB*, the ones Arlene calls the Zombie Brides of Dracula. Jen says Maureen stays well hidden. When she visits *GNB* she does so out of the blue, coming in the back door and up the stairs to Arlene's office to try to catch her drinking. When Maureen comes to *GNB*, it's usually to give Arlene a bollocking because something has gone wrong with their secret agreement, whatever that is. Even Jen has no idea what they are up to. Only Declan and Maureen are allowed in Arlene's office, not even Jen. It might be something to do with Maureen's other businesses all fronted by Declan. Jen had a fling with him, just the once. Seems he was very good in bed, but he never came back for more and ignores her now, like she's just another notch on his pogo stick. According to Sasha, he could probably get anyone he wants, here I quote: "It's true, so it is, he is very dishy, if you like that sort of man.". According to what Declan hinted to Jen, Maureen has dozens and dozens of businesses, not just in Scotland but in Spain, where her mother Teresa lives. The Bishops are, to quote my new best friend Sasha, "totally minted"."

"Aha, so we have a Mrs Spider operating in the background. Did I say that I checked out *GNB* at Companies House? It doesn't exist so I suspect some sort of partnership set up. So, did you ask Sasha about Truda?"

"No point, Sasha's only been at *GNB* for two years. Jen and Arlene have been there from when it opened. Sasha gets on well with Jen but they both hate Arlene. Partly it's about money. Arlene get top wages and bonuses but it's more than that, I think. Jen told Sasha she thinks Maureen is planning to dump Arlene soon and give Jen her job. Sasha hopes she will get Jen's job. Then they'll get a higher salary and might be able to start saving for a house, like Arlene."

"So, Tom, let me get this clear. Maureen Bishop runs Declan on a tight leash. He is her front man. Arlene is Declan's older half-sister, so Jen and Sasha are what?"

"Maureen is an only child. Teresa Bishop her mother is Sasha and Jen's auntie which means Jen Milloy and Sasha Milloy are Maureen's cousins. Teresa's sisters are dead, both of lung cancer. Neither had a husband. In Easterhouse, having a child was a good way of getting your own house and social work support."

"Cousins. Right, got there at last."

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"Apparently, Maureen's mother, is still sex mad, always has been, even at fifty-odds. A few years ago, Maureen and Teresa had a big bust up. Nobody knows what it was about. Then Maureen shipped her mother out to Spain where she runs Declan's holiday apartments complex, an upmarket place near Marbella. Teresa's not allowed to come back to Glasgow but she is happy enough as she has found herself a toy boy. He's called Alessandro, a twenty-eight-year-old hunk with an enormous bulge in his tight swimming trunks. They were both all over Teresa's Facebook blog until Maureen made her mother close her account."

"So, as I said, Maureen Bishop is the spider at the centre of this web? But how does that get us any nearer to finding Truda?"

"No nearer yet, except there is definitely something odd about GNB. There is some scam going on, I feel it in my bones and . . ."

"Yeah, as we know, your bones are never wrong!"

"Ah, I spy two pizza's approaching."

They made a start, sipping a beers by the neck and chewing on their food.

"May I continue, please, Mummy?"

"Please do, DI Graham but do not spray me with half-chewed food bits."

"Maureen is the one we need to target. Definitely. After she sent Teresa to Spain, the Bishops moved into a huge house near Balloch. Jen said this was the fifth time they have moved house in seven years, always to a bigger flashier place, No one in the family is allowed to visit it, just Maureen's business associates, parents and children from the fancy private college in Bridge of Weir where Maureen's three boys are in school and nursery. Because they were banned from visiting, Jen and Sasha hired a speed boat one day and went zooming over Loch Lomond from Balmaha to find it. Jen had binoculars and they saw Maureen and Declan on their huge patio, hosting a children's party. It's a massive place, like a Disney castle. Jen told Sash it was owned by a rock star."

"The one who electrocuted himself on stage in San Francisco, leaving a trail of debts?"

"Yes, shocking, that. Another one bites the dust. Anyway, Maureen Bishop nee Milloy is certainly moving up in the world. Seems she was born in Kirkcaldy, dirt poor. According to Jen, Maureen is super fit, runs half-marathons for a children's charity, the one which has a residential care centre near to their new house. Again, according to Jen, Maureen hates everyone and treats Declan like dirt. Jen thinks she has turned into a pyscho, probably because of her hair. It's supposed to be a family secret, but Maureen is bald, has been from birth, wears special wigs, always blonde, gets them from a place in Copenhagen."

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"Well, DI Graham, now we have a proper starting place for our investigation. Bags I get to go to Copenhagen."

"No, hear me out, there's more. Sasha had just finished my left hand when Jen came storming up, angry. I quote. "Excuse me, Sasha is needed in the office. Arlene wants a word. Eva will finish you up, sir."

"So, did you ask Eva about Truda?"

"Wait. Sasha grabbed her phone and handbag from her drawer and almost ran to the door marked Staff Lockers Only. Jen raced after her. We could hear them shouting. Then the background music was turned up higher. The other girls all looked worried, keeping their heads down."

"So, somehow Arlene had been able to hear what Sasha was telling you?"

"Could be, who knows. Or maybe Sasha is a well-known blabbermouth. But you know how it works, Julie. When someone feels a need to share and they find someone ready to listen, when they get started, they can't stop themselves, right? Just have to get it all out there. It happens all the time. It's like that guy on the train coming through here. Telling the random woman beside him quite openly all about his wife cheating on him with his brother and asking for her advice."

"Did you think he was genuine? I thought he might be using his sob story as a chat up line. That girl seemed quite interested in him and neither of them were wearing any rings."

"No, I think he just needed someone to share with. Don't we all?"

"Well, *did* you ask Eva about Truda?"

"No. I'm sure she had been well warned by Jen to remain shtum. She just kept shaking her head, pretending not to understand my questions so I switched to *Hank the Corny Joker* mode and even though she was wearing a mask, I could tell she was smiling so I'm sure she understood well enough. All I got out of her is she is Latvian and has only been at *GNB* for seven weeks. She hates the place but the money is good and she is desperate. She did my right hand in double quick time. And all the while she kept glancing up towards the office and backwards to check on Jen's desk."

"So, that's it, is it?"

"No, actually, as I left, after I settled with Jen, I asked if Sasha was all right? Now I quote Jen:

"Yes, thanks. I'm afraid my cousin is a bit of a drama queen. Actually, Sasha is a bit of a fantasist. I saw she was spinning you one of her tales and thought I had better rescue

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you. *She's gone home early. I'll make sure we don't allocate you to her again. Sorry about that.*"

I was outside, checking my bearings when Miss Bishop rushed after me and forced a complimentary voucher on me, worth twenty spondoolucks. I rewarded her with a big hug and a peck on her cheek. Oh Gawd! She has hellish bad breath tainted with stale alcohol and a rather pungent body odour which her perfume did not mask, poor dear. Her parting shot was, I quote, let me see if I can get her voice, a deep alto:

"Hank, from now on, cash is good, okay. And if you ever fancy a big night out, just ring me. I've noted my private mobile number on the voucher, reserved for special friends."

I think the poor dear Arlene, maybe a rather sad and lonely lady."

"Anything else?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I got Maureen's bank account details, her passport number, her mobile phone number, all her car registrations and complete details of all her offshore accounts."

"Aye, right!"

"So, DS McRobert, what do you suggest we do with what we have?"

"I suppose we *should* take this information to DCI Donnie MacQueen at Gartcosh, try to see if we can get him to bite?"

"Sounds like a plan but maybe we should do a bit of trawling on the Internet first, see if we can firm up some of this speculation into hard facts?"

"Okay, lets head back to St Leonard's now, shall we?"

"Let's do coffee first. Oh, and it *is* definitely your turn to pay, right?"

"No, DI Graham, I got the train tickets."

"Yeah, but I paid for my manicure. Surely that's chargeable?"

"They made a good job. But I'd say your *Eva* hand looks better than your *Sasha* hand?"

"Yeah. Did I say *Sasha* has very thick glasses?"

"Tell you what, shall we split the bill, fifty-fifty on each card?"

"OK Julie, but you pay the tip in cash, yeah?"

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The Candidate

Arlene flipped open her personal laptop, checked for emails - *none*. Swapping to her Maureen laptop, she checked the *GNB* Facebook site for booking requests. When she had cleared the backlog, she switched on the microphone for the cubicle currently being used by Laryssa Nowak, the new girl, eavesdropping on her chat with the exuberant thirty-something gay man called Hank Dunshaw, a regular who made a living as a holiday courier. Over recent weeks Arlene had noticed that the Polish girl's range of conversation topics was slowly expanding to include TV shows, what shops she liked best for bargains and where to get good value take-away meals.

Still listening to them chatting, she switched from the console speaker to her Bluetooth headphones, restarted her personal laptop, opened the report on the Polish girl, tweaking, using the 'Read Aloud' function to try to get her words and phrases just right before checking the spelling and grammar to ensure it would meet Maureen's high standards.

Leaning back in her captain's chair, she closed her eyes and listened again to the electronic voice, trying to imagine how Maureen would react:

The new Polish girl Laryssa Nowak is settling in after a slow start.

At her job interview she said her boyfriend Sven disappeared overnight, emptying her purse, leaving her destitute. Sven had told her he owned the night food stall in Edinburgh where they worked as a two-person team but when she went there to try to find him, there was a new team in place. The new franchise holder said Sven had not paid his last two monthly instalments and, she soon discovered, he had not paid the rent on his flat for three months. As a result, the girl was kicked out with no money and nowhere to stay.

Nowak thinks Sven has gone to Copenhagen with Clara the Danish girl who had worked with them at weekends, when they opened during the day as well, for the Edinburgh Festival.

It was soon clear Nowak has not been trained as a beautician. With a bit of help from Jen and Sasha, she has picked up the basics quickly. In her favour, Nowak works diligently, gaining a high rating in the online follow-up survey. So far, Nowak has generated 83% respondents with 90% rating making Pole as either 4 or 5 stars. Is this a record?

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At first her English was poor, probably because she was nervous. Now she is more relaxed, she is improving but still has a slight Edinburgh twang. She is tall, blonde pigtails, almost no makeup, light blue eyes, well-built and looks fit and strong all of which stacks up with her story that she was raised on a farm near Gdansk.

One aspect of Laryssa makes her a stand-out candidate: she is around seven months pregnant, she says, and is certainly getting bigger by the day.

She cannot go home because her family are Jehovah's Witnesses and would never let her return with a baby fathered out of wedlock by an unbeliever. They would call her an adulterer, a fallen woman. They have a very narrow and severe attitude to life, she says, which is why she left home three years ago, when she turned eighteen and dared to apply for a passport with the help of her friend Viktoria, who works for the passport authority. It was Viktoria who wired her money, as a loan and suggested she come to Glasgow. Viktoria was here in Glasgow a few years ago for a concert at Celtic Connections and loved it.

I have checked her out very carefully, her story is sound, repeated to her clients with the usual minor variations but no real flaws of any kind. She seems to be a very nice girl.

I think Laryssa Nowak might be very suitable for the program.

As instructed, I have not discussed the notion of adoption.

It had been over four months since Arlene had accepted a nominee from Arlene and her savings plan was stalled. The houses near *Silverburn* were selling like hot cakes and it looked as if she might miss out. Even though the Pole might be deemed too bright to be acceptable to Maureen, it was time to put her up for evaluation.

After a further and final *Read Aloud* check, Arlene transferred a PDF of her report to a memory stick, transferred it to her *GNB* laptop and sent it off to Maureen.

As a reward, she brewed a cafetiere, added three sugars and a splash of Vodka to her thermal flask, plugged her headphones into her personal laptop, clicked on her 'favourites' playlist, and lay back in her chair with her eyes closed.

She sighed under her breath: "*Only an hour to closing time.*"

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Outburst

Declan had been on the periphery of the mysterious Moffat home project from its inception, deliberately excluded from what was happening there, used only as a chauffeur to deliver replacement demented patients or as a courier.

Initially, what had struck him as odd was the absence of signage offering information about its function. He had checked but could find no website nor contact information, not even a telephone number. Everything about the creepy place seemed wrong but Declan had long since learned never to ask his wife more than once for information she did not want to share.

In addition to his visits with the Toyota ambulance, he was occasionally sent to *Bainholm* in a Transit van under the cover story of delivering equipment and emergency medical supplies. The real purpose of these sporadic visits was to deliver a wax-sealed envelope containing instructions to the matron, information Maureen would not commit to the normal postal service, email or even telephone, fearing a security breach might arise.

After the contents had been read, the tight-lipped woman scribbled an acknowledgement which she placed inside the original envelope with Maureen's letter. Then followed a rigmarole during which the envelope was first repaired with excessive strips of Sellotape. This tape was then additionally sealed by several dollops of melted wax imprinted with her mannish signet ring, leaving an odd geometric design which Declan thought might be Arabic.

During these encounters, no conversation or hospitality was offered or expected. Within fifteen minutes from arrival, Declan the courier was back in the Transit heading first to Lesmahagow to swap to his Porsche and then drive directly to *Ben View* to return the envelope to Maureen where he collected the pay envelopes for *GNB*.

Driving back to *Glasgow*, Declan Bishop was not his usual smug and smiley self; he was hungry, tired and grumpy with the start of a headache, probably from too much coffee and driving the grubby Transit with its hard suspension and fierce brakes.

As he often did when he thought about Arlene, he wondered how she put up with the boredom. Her drinking seemed to be getting worse and if she was in a 'mood' his big sister could be lippy. If he could catch her unawares, he might be able to use this to get some answers from her about Moffat. He had been on the verge of broaching this with his sister for months.

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At *GNB*, Declan did his usual trick, arriving at the back door a few minutes after eight o'clock, passing the cleaning crew as they left for the night. He had seen this squad at other businesses he supervised. They were called *Pristine Christine*, another piece of Maureen's jigsaw, run by a Serb based in Pollokshields, a bull of a man called Rodovan Markovic (aka Roddy Marks aka The Blowtorch). Declan had only ever once had dealings with Markovic when he delivered a once off starter payment to the man in the amount US \$75,000 in used notes.

The drop-off had been at an impressive stone villa where Roddy Marks lived 'over the shop'. On arrival at the security gate, Declan was greeted by a huge, scary, shaven-headed ape wearing a puffa jacket. After a short delay while the man consulted with someone on his mobile phone, Declan was told to follow the long driveway to the rear of the mansion where a second, well-spoken older man dressed in a smart business suit directed him to an outbuilding. Here he was invited to park his white Transit van alongside a selection of Porsches and S-Class Mercedes and a single Bentley, all with personalised number plates. A squad of lackies was busy valeting them. It could have been a luxury car show room.

This garage connected directly to the rear entrance via a covered walkway, a perfect set up for a discreet drive-in brothel. Based on tenuous rumours, Declan suspected there was some link between Maureen's *Bainholm Castle* project and Rodovan Markovic, causing him to feel anxious every time he was made to visit Moffat. If *Bainholm* was a brothel, it was a very strange one.

To Declan's supreme relief, after that first interaction with the gangmaster, Maureen's continuing business arrangements with Markovic were conducted online in the same way she dealt with her *AdvantEdge* clients, dozens of wealthy 'new Britons' scattered around the West of Scotland, men who dealt primarily in cash only, trading mainly amongst themselves, shunning links with legitimate businesses.

Months after his cash drop to the Serb, in a rare oversight Maureen had left a print-out on her desk which Declan had studied to discover that the financials relating to her interaction with Markovic were routed through an offshore account in the Cayman Islands. From this summary, it seemed the Serb was running at least twenty cleaning squads alongside a mix of other businesses, probably brothels like the one in Pollokshields.

When the *GNB* cleaners saw Declan, they paid him full respect as 'the big man', standing to one side to let him pass, dipping their heads and smiling coyly, unaware that his wife was the brains behind 'his empire'. Over time he learned these women rented properties in the Govanhill area, low-grade tenement buildings owned by Maureen through her shell company *Dalgetty Developments*.

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When he entered her office, she was reeking of booze, and he could tell she was immediately worried he would tell Maureen; he smirked:

Gotcha, Arlene.

They went through their usual rigmarole, with the safe, the wages, envelopes, the checking, her passing him his cash sales envelopes with his pocket money. Throughout this exercise, Arlene was mute, like an automaton, avoiding his glances.

Could there be a better time to squeeze her for information?

"Arlene, what is it with you and Maureen and these girls of yours who keep on disappearing, the pregnant ones. Look, I think I've already sussed most of it, but it doesn't add up. I think you are my missing link."

Her fear-filled reaction took him by surprise.

Holding her finger to her lips, she had ushered him out of her office, closing the door behind her. Only when she was safe from the possibility of being overheard by Maureen did she let go, throwing herself onto his chest, tearful, agitated, unburdening herself, the first time they had ever 'connected' meaningfully, adult to adult.

"Listen, Declan, you must never tell Maureen you know about any of this. You must promise, please. For your own good, leave it alone, OK?"

"Arlene, don't worry, I know how to keep secrets. Living with Maureen, I am surrounded by them. So, trust me, sis, your secret is safe with me. Look, I already know some of what Maureen is up to, I just don't want you to get wrong footed. Anyway, you have to agree, she should have told me what you two are doing, after all, I'm the one in the frame for whatever goes down here at *GNB*, right?"

"OK. OK. So, what I do for her is to act as her 'spotter'. When what Maureen calls a 'target' applies online for a job at *GNB*, one who presents a suitable profile, I arrange to meet the applicant in a coffee place. I keep it low key but it's a sort of interview if you like, to try to suss her out, see if she might be suitable. I must use my own judgement at this stage. It took me a while to get the hang of it but nowadays even Maureen says I'm good at it. Sometimes the girls are already pregnant, sometimes not. In either case, Maureen is always very careful to make sure they are clean and healthy. It is essential they are what Maureen calls, 'innocents', definitely not prostitutes. Before Maureen will help them, they have to be medically tested. If they are suitable, and want to have what she offers, they have to sign a binding contract. I'm not sure, but I think that's when they get a sort of retainer. Sometimes they come to work here, sometimes I never see the girl again after Maureen meets them. I think those are the rejects, I'm not sure. Anyway, when a girl is under contract, if she is sent here, she is under my wing, so to

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speaking. From then on, I keep a very close eye on her to be sure she is kosher. When it's near their time, Maureen gets in touch with them directly. When a contract girl leaves, I start looking for my next one. I must only have one recruit at a time here at *GNB*, that's the rule."

"Arlene, tell me, do you ever see those girls again?"

"No, never. That's how it works. Maureen says she helps them re-train for a better job, supports them, helps them to release their potential, that sort of thing. Then, when the baby comes, she rewards them and they get a chance to restart their lives without the responsibility of an infant they don't want. Almost always they are young, naïve, in their late teens or early twenties, girls dumped by their boyfriends because they are pregnant, girls who have made a mistake and want to get back on track. That's the sort of girl Maureen wants me to look for."

"Arlene, do you believe her? Do you believe she actually helps these girls?"

"Declan, for FUCK'S SAKE, don't you get it? Leave it be, for your own good. Now, bugger off!"

After this outburst, Arlene had clammed up, shooing him out of the building, leaving her to follow the procedure and then lock up. Heading for *Gentle Hands*, Declan realised that he and Arlene were alike, both living under the stress of constant surveillance.

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In the weeks which followed, Declan had repeatedly picked at his memory of Arlene's outpouring, comparing it with snippets gleaned from other sources. Eventually, tired of trying to make sense of this other jigsaw with so many pieces which did not fit together, he let it go, concluding Arlene's story was only another version of what might be happening at *Bainholm Castle*. As with the many other puzzles he had tried and failed to solve, he did as Arlene had told him to do and let his dark fantasy dim and fade.

What her outburst had proved to him was that, like himself, Arlene was firmly under his wife's thumb, trapped in her web of intrigue, and like him, governed by feelings of guilt and inadequacy, condemned to a lonely life while waiting with dread for the next call to obedience or scolding. On the positive side of the equation, since sharing her views with him, Arlene had been more pleasant, less lippy, more willing to listen to his Thursday tales boasting of girls, real and fictitious, stories of the expensive restaurants and hotels he had visited with them.

For Declan Bishop the man, this rekindling of his childhood memory of their friendship was important. Apart from Maureen, he had very few people he felt any real connection with. As a wee boy his big sister had always been nice to him, giving him cuddles and

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tickles, playing games with him, teaching him nursery rhymes, reading, sounding out letters, how to recognise words. He had missed her badly when she had exited his life to strike out on her own.

Once more the thought crept into the corner of his mind: could he make a break, run for it, try to reclaim his old life, when he had been single?

The question came again, unbidden:

Has Maureen hypnotised me?

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Snared

It was a Tuesday afternoon, breezy, dull but mild with rain threatening.

Whistling the tune of *Blackbird* by the Beatles, not quite in tune and just under his breath, Declan felt free, light-hearted, ready for fun.

Exiting the Subway on Byres Road he quickened his step, heading to a flat in Cresswell Street, an *Airbnb* place he rented from time to time. He was an hour early, just to make sure the heating was turned up full and check that the bedding was fresh. He dodged into a mini-market and bought a bottle of dry white wine and a small box of chocolates. He imagined himself having a long hot shower to get in the mood.

Susie, a freelance photographer's model was something extra special. This would be their fourth meeting. He had picked her up at the bar in *Oran Mor* three weeks earlier. Susie was easy to talk to with a lovely smile and good hands when applying her special blend of massage oils. Best of all, she loved to be on top which he preferred. The tall, slim Spanish girl had been booked for a photo-shoot in Edinburgh when, out of the blue, she had called to say it had been cancelled and she had the rest of the afternoon and evening free.

Luckily, the previous day Maureen had sent a text advising she was in Spain with the three boys for an autumn break and to check up on her mother. Which meant he was off the leash, free to enjoy the exotic pleasures on offer from Susie.

Climbing the stairs he unclipped his Nokia, saw it needed charged, switched it 'OFF' and slipped it into his man bag beside his other two personal phones. Seconds after he entered the second floor flat, he knew he was in trouble. A rough hand smelling of nicotine covered his mouth as the muzzle of a pistol was stabbed into the nape of his neck. The hand slid up his face and a thumb and finger pressed his eyes into their sockets, causing him to squeal with pain. A kidney punch disabled him, bringing him to his knees. A hood was pulled over his head. To hold it in place an elasticated noose tightened around his neck, almost choking him. He was hauled upright and the noose tightened further, cutting off the blood supply, causing his brain to fog.

In that instance, it seemed certain to Declan he would die, and soon. His mind was racing. At least they had not killed him outright. They must want something first. Warm urine wet his boxer shorts and ran down his legs, soaking his socks and filling his shoes. The best he could hope for was that his end would not involve great pain.

Unseen by Declan, a tall, slim, aristocratic man with off-white skin and greying hair appeared in the doorway of the lounge, this door at the far corner of the spacious

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entrance hallway. In the setting of a private hospital, this expensively dressed dapper man in a charcoal grey cashmere suit could easily pass as a senior consultant, one of many Asian doctors operating within the NHS while also harvesting a steady extra income from the growing private sector.

Strong hands twisted Declan's arms behind his back and frog-marched him forwards. The older man stepped backwards as Declan was bundled into the lounge, pushed down onto a kitchen chair. To reinforce his helplessness a hand slapped him hard across his right ear from behind. A loud pop signalled the bursting of his eardrum, causing bright lights to flash then fade slowly inside his head, leaving him disoriented.

Cable ties fixed each wrist to the rear spars of the chair. Further cable ties pinned his ankles to the chair legs. As a final act, his unseen assailant cinched these cable ties viciously.

Declan sobbed. At that point he would have gladly accepted a quick death. Tumbling in his head came the memory of the many corpses from *Bainholm* which he had consigned to the furnace in the crematorium. And others from unknown sources which he had collected from Dalkeith and dropped off at *Golden Slumbers*.

Unlike Maureen and her mumbo jumbo, Declan was not in the least religious but now, faced with oblivion, he began to pray:

Dear father in heaven, please make it quick and painless. Amen. Dear father forgive me for my sins. Please make it quick and painless. Maureen, help me please. Please.

A ray of hope shone into his darkness:

This must be a case of mistaken identity!

Since he had not seen them, he might be able to buy them off.

"Look, whoever you are, you've got the wrong guy. I . . ."

A clenched fist crashed into his solar plexus causing him to spasm. Bile rose, flooding his throat with its bitterness.

A ball of something soft forced the material of the hood into his mouth, this gag held in place with a narrow Velcro band fixed round his head, leaving his nose free, allowing him to breathe.

The Indian moved quietly to the tall sash windows, opened the top and bottom sections, closed the curtains then took a seat on one of the two leather rocker chairs which dominated the room. Apart from his obsession for power, wealth, dominance and control, perhaps his only weakness was his addiction to the aromatic Russian cigarettes which he chain smoked. Sabeesh Patel had never suffered pangs of conscience. If caught in

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Scotland, it was most unlikely that he would ever stand trial. After examination by the legal and medical authorities, he would be consigned to the high security forensic psychiatric unit at the State Hospital, Carstairs.

Flipping open a double-sided silver cigarette case, he carefully selected a hand rolled specimen. Checking once again that it was perfect, he lit it with a Zippo lighter, closed the top lid, turned it over. Opening the second lid, revealed a portable ashtray. Easing himself into a comfortable position, he stretched his long legs in front of him, crossed them at the ankles and settled to his task. Glancing at the man who had prepared his victim, Patel's mouth formed into a semblance of a smile although his dark black-brown eyes remained impassive.

The squat, powerfully built shaven-headed Albanian who provided the muscle for this intrusion shuddered, averting his gaze by dipping his head in obeisance then put his earbuds in place, stabbed at his mobile phone to activate his loud ethnic music playlist then left the room, closing the door quietly behind him before making his way across the hallway to the bathroom where he closed the door, turned on the wall fan heater then eased himself into the (dry) spa bath and tried his best to think of nothing.

Bez (Besnik) Lekaj knew this banishment was for his own good: it was far better to be ignorant and alive than informed and dead. He was desperate to smoke but knew this was forbidden while on a job. After the interrogation, there must be no trace left of their presence at the *Airbnb* flat. When next required, he would receive a *WhatsApp* summons from the technician, the one Patel called Jason, probably not his real name.

Years earlier, before Patel had suddenly disappeared, Lekaj had worked as his driver and bodyguard and had killed for him many times. Now Patel was back, good times might return. Perhaps he might get the house in Newton Mearns his wife wanted so desperately. And it was nice to be back behind the wheel of a luxury Mercedes after the lean years scabbling to make a living driving a Skoda for *Uber*.

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From inside the hood, Declan heard a lilting voice which spoke softly, just above the level of a whisper, as if confiding in a bedside manner, a mode Patel often used when he wished to frighten people.

"Ah, Mister Bishop. Mr Declan Bishop. Man of mystery, the Adulterous Prince, husband and front man for Mrs Maureen Bishop nee Milloy, our Queen of Mystery, the woman who stole my kingdom by dripping clues about me to the authorities. I strongly suggest it is in your own best interests to submit quietly. Let us have no writhing, thumping and other such antics. Let us behave in a gentlemanly manner. And now, to emphasise the utter hopelessness of your position, we shall prepare you properly for the journey ahead."

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Patel nodded to Dhruv Khatri, his nephew, recently returned from India to learn from the head of the Patel clan. Originally from Leicester, after graduating with a degree in nursing, the young man had spent five years in Mumbai studying computer science and working for Patel's organisation running internet scams in the UK, breaking into bank and credit card accounts of high worth individuals, mainly susceptible old ladies. In a second, separate scam Khatri had specialised in planting ransomware in the networks of slovenly and therefore vulnerable corporates and utility bodies, organisations willing to pay quickly and quietly for relief and release from disruption and the shame of exposure.

Deft, latex-sheathed hands undid Declan's soggy trouser zip. This was followed by excruciating pain as crocodile clips were attached to the foreskin of his penis and to the base of his scrotum.

"Of course, Mr Declan Bishop, this is just a light precursor, just to convince you that I mean business. Just a tickle, please, Dhruv."

Power surged and Declan's body became rigid. The pain exploded in his brain causing a rainbow of colours to erupt behind his eyes.

At thirteen seconds into the 'tickle', when the power was removed, their captive had long since passed out, his head slumping forward onto his chest. While Declan remained unconscious, a microphone on a boom stand was moved into position Dhruv connected the mic to the recording App on his laptop and calibrated the assembly.

It took ten minutes for Declan to resurface. His privates were aching. His stomach was aching. He wanted to heave up but forced himself to swallow, afraid he might choke on his vomit.

"Ah, Mr Declan Bishop, you are back with us. Good, shall we begin? Nod to say yes. Shake your head if you would like another tickle."

Declan nodded. The gag was removed then a mouth-sized patch was cut from the hood.

"Now Mr Declan Bishop, you will tell me everything about your wife's nefarious activities. Remember this to guide your thoughts - stray from the path of truth or misremember and you will surely suffer. Be aware, I already know almost everything. What I seek from you is confirmation on details. Willingly provide what I ask, and I shall reward you with a sweet death. Call out for help and you *will* be punished. Claim ignorance and the gag goes back in and we tickle you again and again until you are fully compliant. We are in no hurry. Did I say my colleague will not be coming to pleasure you today? The girl you know as Susie, has already moved back to Madrid, where she runs one of my luxury end brothels. Ah, Spain, it really is so much easier to operate in that wonderful country where the police are much more, how shall we call it? Ah yes, much more *pliable*."

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The session lasted just over three hours and finished as the last of the November sun faded into darkness. The rain which had been threatening began lightly but soon turned into a steady vertical downpour, clearing the streets of everyone but scurrying dogwalkers.

The recordings of key revelations from Declan's testimony were re-run several dozen times and cross-checked with the other information Patel and Khatri already held about Maureen Bishop's empire. The information her husband provided confirmed her ruthless behaviour. After taking him to the edge of death, Patel was forced to conclude Declan did not know the name of her police informant, the man or woman who kept her one step ahead of DCI Donnie MacQueen, head of the Gartcosh Crime Campus which had hounded Patel out of his Glasgow empire a decade earlier, at a time when he had been on the verge of becoming a major international player.

In the years which followed, Patel had often thought perhaps Maureen Bishop had done him a favour. It was clear now that she was following his own trajectory, making moves in Spain, France, Greece and wisely avoiding Italy where the Belarusians were now the major players, acting in concert with Putin and his ex-KGB thugs, displacing the Mafia.

During Declan's outages, Dhruv worked on the captive's possessions.

The primary focus was his three mobile phones. After a frustrating attempt to activate or open the open the ancient *Nokia* he zipped it into the inside pocket of his bomber jacket intending to deal with later and focussed on the two modern smartphones.

Removing their SIM and SD cards, he inserted them in turn into a USB carrier which he plugged into his laptop then connected to special software where he easily copied and decrypted the historical data from Declan's email accounts and social media Apps such as *WhatsApp*, data which he re-encrypted using a much stronger algorithm before uploading the new versions twice, once to a protected private server in Mumbai and a second backup copy to a *Google Drive* account in the name of John SP Smith, one of several such accounts operated by Sabeesh Patel under his many aliases.

Khatri then downloaded the same data to a pristine, untraceable phone which he passed to his uncle. Its reset SIM card was registered to a well-dressed, absent-minded lady from Newton Mearns who had recently misplaced her phone.

Ronnie (Veronica) MacClay had been targeted because she was already known to Patel from her hidden life as one of his employees. In her previous existence as the widow of a Church of Scotland minister, Captain Roddy MacLay (Rtd), a well-liked man who had unexpectedly committed suicide to escape from his secret gambling debts. As a result of his sad and iniquitous departure, Ronnie had been ejected from her grand manse and

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left to eke out her life on a meagre pension while trying to carry on with her various good works by serving on local charities and teaching English to refugees. Patel had rescued her from her dire situation, setting her up in a luxury apartment rent-free in Newton Mearns and providing her with a car and driver, installing her as a courier for a fake charity he had set up to rescue street children from Eastern Europe.

On the arrival of her rescued children in the UK, Ronnie's part of Patel's operation was over. If she suspected something was amiss, she ignored it. Patel had always been careful to make sure she was unaware her children were destined to become brothel fodder and 'child brides' for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in the Midlands and North of England, in locations well outside MacLay's normal travel area.

During Patel's sojourn in Spain, the 'street children to brothels' operation had continued quite profitably. However, the risk of discovery had heightened in recent months with the national publicity surrounding Asian men in procuring sex from teenage girls groomed by feeding them drugs and alcohol. For the last few months, Ronnie's courier activities had been suspended and Patel was considering cutting his losses, eliminating her, perhaps in a hit and run accident. Later, when the current media-driven police investigation had passed, he would start again, perhaps using a different approach, perhaps in Paris or in Berlin or both. Certainly, with the fighting in Syria, there was no shortage of street children or buyers for his product.

From his experiences with Ronnie MacLay, Patel knew she was prone to losing phones and had repeatedly warned her she must never report her loss to the police or even her phone carrier. The device had been lifted from her open handbag while she was peering at a label in the 'free from' shelves in Tesco. When she noticed it was missing, she had bought herself a new one with a larger easier to read display and soon forgot the phone she had misplaced.

Sabeesh Patel now had a full record of all Declan's personal and private telephone calls, going back several years including his *WhatsApps*, texts and emails to and from his wife.

As a secondary matter, almost out of habit, Dhruv copied Declan's credit and debit card details to his former colleagues in Mumbai. Around thirty minutes later, a stream of PDFs arrived at Khatri's laptop revealing Declan's spending patterns over the previous two years. The covering email confirmed 'intrusion raids' on these accounts were in place, awaiting the signal to divert his credit funds to an offshore account in Guernsey and auction his credit card details for untraceable Bitcoin on the Dark Web. Later that day, the credit and debit cards would be sent by secure post to Mumbai, courtesy of Royal Mail.

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During his questioning of Declan Bishop, Sabeesh Patel learned everything about his life, about his odd relationship between Declan's half-sister Arlene and the woman's role as a 'spotter' at *Glasgow Nails and Beauty*. Under pressure of additional 'tickles', Declan stuck to his conviction that Arlene was unaware that the girls she passed on to Maureen were not allowed to go free after the birth of their infants. Nor was Arlene aware of his role in organising the disposal of corpses at the crematorium, an unspoken secret shared only between Declan and Maureen.

Declan's role as the front man for the *Gentle Hands Sports Therapy* massage parlour as a front for drug smuggling came easily, the drugs retail distribution handled by the same Govanhill based Romanian cabal which had once served Sabeesh Patel. Under further pressure, Declan revealed the special laptop which Arlene kept in her office at *GNB*. Then came the explanation of where to locate, hidden in his phone contacts, the three different sixteen-digit codes which gave access to the *GNB* building alarm, Arlene's office alarm and her digital safe where the business laptop was stored when the premises were closed.

Throughout this part of the proceedings, Patel was manipulating the doctored version of Ronnie McLay's phone to check what Declan was telling him. The *Nokia* was forgotten. Although Declan had never been inside Arlene's flat in Parnie Street, he knew it was protected by a specialised Swiss made security door with a complicated locking mechanism, paid for by Maureen.

Since Patel now knew Maureen Bishop's precise location in Spain where she was visiting her mother with her three sons in tow, the Indian decided that Arlene and the front of house operation at *GNB* were both now irrelevant.

Interspersed with Declan's other outpourings, most of which Patel judged as self-congratulatory nonsense, Patel also learned where Cathy Bishop lived in Bearsden, her estrangement from both her children and that his mother detested Maureen. Despite extreme pressure, Patel eventually concluded Declan could not explain this situation although it was clear he was very bitter that he had been abandoned by his mother.

Crucially, as Declan was unaware of the details of Cathy Bishop's romantic involvement with DCI Donnie MacQueen, Patel was also unaware of this link.

Accordingly, Declan's inquisitor dismissed this section of information as typical family feuding.

Patel then entered the final phase of his cross-examination, this part unrecorded.

Questioned closely about his marriage to Maureen Milloy, Declan became morose, weepy, truculent, silent. However, after a lengthy tickle, Bishop's mind cracked and his self-justification poured out in a flood of indignation:

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"When I first met Maureen, I thought she was just another easy lay. So many women have hit on me, I can tell almost at once if they are up for it. When she is being bitchy, Maureen says it's my only gift. Maybe that's true. It started when she was buying a car from me. It was a top of the range Porsche, so I knew she had money. Although she was a bit roughly spoken, I could tell at once she was smart. Actually, I quite like that, the uber posh ones are always so full of themselves. I invited her to my flat and from that first night, we made love time after time. I've never enjoyed such amazing orgasms. I lost count. She seemed to be able to read my mind, riding high on me, like a jockey. Actually, it was more like dressage, really, until the final gallop. She was insatiable. Later, I thought she might have been on drugs, maybe steroids or Viagra. But she has always been clean. It's power and control she craves. Money is just the means to it. She wants to be the best at everything.

"Look, she is not a beautiful woman. Far from it. In fact, she is tall, skinny, small breasts, with a long thin face and a nose that is too big and beaky. And of course, she is bald, from birth. So not a beauty. But it doesn't matter, see? When she turns on the internal power, she becomes amazing. Like a sex goddess. Even now, after all that has gone wrong between us, I still think about her almost all the time. I don't know what she did to me. Sex, right, it's my thing. I'm good at it. But Maureen is special, very special. I think I must be addicted to her. Sometimes I think she might have hypnotised me.

"You see, to her circle, Maureen portrays herself as perfect, invincible. But nowadays, after the miscarriages and the hysterectomy she is no longer interested in sex, especially now she has my three boys, surrogates, all to my sperm. Hey, but that's a secret too, okay? To see her with them, she is like the perfect mother, although sometimes I wonder if they are just trophies, like the houses and cars and paintings. To be honest? I have no idea what Maureen wants. Just that she doesn't want me anymore.

"Look, do what you want to me. I don't really care. But I'll give you some advice. Gratis. Don't even begin to think you will win if you take her on in a fight. No, you will lose. My advice to you, whoever you are, is to back off. Look, I know you must kill me now. If you let me go, she will kill me anyway. She'll get someone else to do my job. I've never been clever enough to be good at anything. Even Arlene is brighter than me although she is good enough at hiding it. I am a nonentity, really. So, go ahead and do it. After all, I've kept my side of the deal, right? And you promised, right?"

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The naked corpse of Declan Bishop was gift-wrapped with industrial-strength cling film with a small window left for the corpse's face. The corpse and his shredded clothes were placed in a sturdy cardboard shipping box. Dhruv, who had monitored Declan's vital functions during the interrogation to ensure he did not kill him by misadventure, had also

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administered the killer morphine overdose. As a result, Declan's face looked relaxed, with just a hint of his trademark ironic smirking smile which many women had found alluring. On his chest, just under the film wrap, Declan's two phones were visible. The SIM and SD cards removed by Dhruv, scissored into confetti, wrapped in toilet tissue then flushed down the WC. The innards of the phones had been destroyed by a ten second blast in the kitchen microwave. Artificial flower petals were scattered over the surface of the cling film.

The lid was sealed in place with duct tape and a label added:

To Mrs Maureen Bishop, from an Admirer.

Khatri made a phone call. A few minutes later, a white Transit van arrived and double parked on the steep hill outside the entryway to the tenement flat. Khatri and Lekaj carried the box to the van, opened the rear door and slid the shipping box into a raised floor compartment then closed and sealed the end lid, rotated its combination padlock, closed the rear doors and thumped the side of the van which moved off down the hill and disappeared into the rain.

Lekaj then walked smartly through a narrow roadway towards a public car park behind Ashton Lane where the S-Class was parked. When out of sight of the bay windows of the flat, he stopped in a doorway, lit a cigarette and drew on it deeply. Judging Patel and 'Jason' would be fully occupied, he lingered in the doorway to light a second cigarette before continuing to the Merc where he topped up with a replacement second parking ticket. With his phone linked to his earbuds, he walked smartly to Byres Road and bought take-away coffee and a filled roll which he consumed in a different doorway while smoking a further two cigarettes before returning to the Mercedes to await the summons from Patel.

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The floor void of the Transit van was chilled to slow the decaying process. The driver was under orders to wait inside a particular lockup behind a derelict shopping precinct on the outskirts of a town called Dumbarton where he must await further instructions.

The Transit van, which was his personal property, had cloned numberplates to protect him from being tracked or traced by ANPR and the DVLA database. He had dozens of these cloned plates. Most were copies of those on exactly similar white Transit vans, part of a fleet operated by a legitimate agency located on the outskirts of Exeter, Devon, a business run by another ex-SAS buddy, no names, no pack drill.

For the delivery phase, the courier would apply *DHL* decals to the sides and rear doors of his Transit van then change the numberplates. Wearing a *DHL* uniform, a false goatee

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beard and reflective sunglasses, he would deliver the package to the address to be provided, exactly at the time specified. These missing details would be sent to the 'burner' phone he had been told to purchase, its number then posted to the client using a one-time web address.

During his return to his own patch on the outskirts of Liverpool, he would remove the decals and replace the numberplates. As per his standard arrangement, he would then expect the balance to be paid to his Dark Web Bitcoin account.

No duration had been given for his waiting time. This made him nervous. Never before had he been asked to delay a dead drop on an open-ended basis. Aware he might be used as a patsy, drawn into some sort of gangland struggle he had insisted on a 90% down payment rather than the usual 50%. Having served a full term as a soldier from joining as a cadet, he was used to waiting and knew from experience events often did not unfold as planned.

Certain the client could not possibly trace him, the Liverpoolian had devised a contingency plan. If he was not activated within twelve hours, he would fix his highly inflammable packages of petroleum gel to the shipping box, wire them to a timer controlled by a signal from his personal phone, incinerating the undelivered package to a fine ash when he was well clear, No corpse, no crime.

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Back in the Cresswell Street flat, Khatri used his laptop-based sound desk to delete his uncle's voice entirely. By doctoring Declan's responses to reduce stress levels in his voice and inserting pre-recorded phrases from the woman who had called herself Susie, Khatri created what might seem like a pillow talk revelation of his sordid life, aimed at impressing his lover. The Leicester guru then washed out all background sounds which might identify Cresswell Street as the location and overlaid a recording he had made in a hotel room near Glasgow Airport. As an addendum, he added mutterings from a telephone conversation between Lekaj and Susie, the text scripted by Patel and designed to create the impression that Declan had been caught in a sting operation and prewarning Maureen Bishop she must assemble \$5M USD in Bitcoin equivalent to obtain the original copy of the tape and secure the return of her husband unharmed.

Under Patel's close supervising direction, the editing work was painstaking and precise, taking almost four hours.

Patel now had the sting file on the mobile phone registered to Ronnie McLay with the original master copy uploaded to his 'M. Bishop Project' folder on Google Drive account.

When he had all his ducks lined up, Patel planned to send his ransom file to Maureen's emergency email address, as revealed by her husband. If he could kidnap her sons, he

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might be able to lure her out into the open where, unprotected, he would snatch her and repeat the interrogation process to gain necessary control of her computer system and bank accounts. Depending on how much resistance she offered, he might use the threat of sending a lesser, teaser version of the file to DCI MacQueen to add extra pressure, force her into an error.

Patel made his call to Lekaj and left Khatri to deep clean the flat before returning to his base in Leicester to await further instructions.

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Dhruv missed the last inter-city train to Birmingham. After a search on the Internet, he booked himself a room in a multi-storey near Buchanan Street. With a curry from a late-night takeaway and a four pack of Bud Lite he devoured his first proper food in twenty-four hours.

Showered, naked, recumbent and fired up with a 'buzzer' (Ecstasy) and two Viagra, he balanced his laptop on a pillow beside him on the bed. Wearing his Bluetooth headphones, he pressed 'Play' for his current favourite porn video, an explicit Bollywood style boy-on-boy romance. Masturbating with his lesser left hand, he used his dominant right to stop, rewind and replay his favourite scenes while holding himself back until the pressure was too great when he changed hands and closed his eyes to enjoy the orgasm.

Back in the shower, he remembered the ancient *Nokia*.

Sitting naked on his bed, taking a small box from his holdall, he selected a flat-bladed pry-tool and pushed hard at the under edge of keypad, hoping to discover what was blocking the phone's operation.

The satellite phone which had been paired to Declan, reacted as it had been designed to do by releasing a cloud of odourless and highly toxic nerve agent and sending a distress signal to its cloud server. Then, in a final protective action, inside the *Nokia*, three phials released their destructive contents comprising a mix of acids, alkalis and solvents. These chemicals acted in concert to destroy the phone's electronics while causing the body to shrivel and shrink into a golf-ball-sized sphere of grey-black plastic which dropped to the floor before rolling across the room to come to rest out of sight where it remained for several weeks before discovery by the housekeeper.

Based on the Pathologist's findings, the Coroner would eventually conclude the freelance sound engineer from Leicester had suffered a massive stroke, an unfortunate death by natural causes in an otherwise healthy young man.

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In Cresswell Street, on the first occasion Khatri attempted to access Declan's satellite phone without following the strict regime required to access it securely, guardian software its operating system sent a text alert directly to Maureen Bishop's phone. Unusually however, it was a message which she would not read until the following day.

In the Premier Inn, due to a glitch in the software of the *Nokia*, the intended final distress signal was never transmitted.

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Side Step

Maureen's life had been gradually disintegrating, becoming a trial, a burden, requiring her to push herself hard to keep on top of everything.

She was dumbstruck when she discovered her Slovenian nannies were filching money in small amounts from the numerous caches hidden around her home, Maureen's ready access money in the event of an emergency. Had she been in good health, she might have punished them financially then kept a closer watch on them, but since the return of her cancer she had felt threatened, nervy.

While questioning the mother and her daughters, she detected a brazen cockiness, a reaction which she found sinister. A clandestine search of their accommodation turned up a further larger bundle of cash in Euros and US Dollars and a an A4 sized page-a-day diary with copious notes in neat Slovenian, recognisable as the mother's handwriting.

Using the camera scanning function in the *Google Translate App*, she rendered this script to English and was shocked at what they knew, particularly about Declan's visits to '*kraj, imenovan grad Bainholm v bližini vasi Moffat*' (a place called *Bainholm Castle* near a village called *Moffat*). There was also speculation about his involvement with '*mesto, imenovano Golden Slumbers*', *krematorij*' (a place called *Golden Slumbers*', a crematorium).

Had Declan been sleeping with one or other of the daughters, possibly even the mother? Had he let his guard down? Was he being blackmailed? Were they police informants? Or placed by a rival, the Belarusians?

Although the women had been good nannies, they had to be dealt with, especially as Maureen was now on a tight schedule.

Turning on her charm, she feigned forgiveness for the theft of the cash by saying she had placed it for them as 'little extra bonuses'. Promising them a special treat, she had lured them down the tunnel to the boathouse where she shot them with a silenced pistol. Over the next hour, on the point of exhaustion, she struggled up and down the tunnel relocating their clothing and possessions to the boathouse before incinerating the mother's diary on a barbecue. While it was burning on the gas flames, she accessed their phones and copied all contacts and data to a quarantine site on her cloud server, to study later when she had time and energy before adding the devices to the barbecue.

Back at her office, she visited *Eder RTS* on the Dark Web and when she checked the next morning their bodies and possessions were gone. However, now she had the problem of caring for her boys alone, forcing her to take them with her.

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Passing through Spain en route to Geneva, Maureen had stopped only briefly at the gated estate of *La Reserva de Madronal*, a venture fronted by Declan which she owned through *Dalgetty Developments*.

The impending procedure to remove an aggressive cancerous growth in her womb was urgent but she had been putting it off, afraid she might not escape alive from the operating theatre. On two previous occasions she had deferred this further treatment, using these months to prepare contingency plans and negotiate the vital online supervisory and verification role which Lois Delany had finally agreed to take on, albeit for a hefty fee. Only then had Maureen taken the final step and set up the sequence necessary to set her grand plan into motion, should the outcome of her surgery be as expected.

After considering dozens of alternatives for the immediate period ahead, she had decided placing her children within the secure confines of *Madronal* was the better of the only two viable options. Using her mother as a caretaker childminder was Maureen's second choice but the alternative would involve serious disruption of her business operation at *GNB* and, if she was under attack from Police Scotland or a business rival, it would draw attention to her weakness.

As on every previous visit, they had fought bitterly over her drug-taking lifestyle. Although Teresa Bishop professed vehemently that she was clean, Maureen could read the tell-tale signs and saw her mother was unreformed. Teresa, who had been fed a cover story about Maureen's ongoing business dealings in Madrid regarding a proposed extension to the *Madronal* complex, had promised Maureen faithfully she would sober up and take good care of the boys. It was a familiar promise, one she had never been able to keep.

At dawn on the following morning, a Tuesday, the same day Declan would be later snared by Patel, Maureen flew in a rented private jet from Madrid to Geneva.

This was her third visit in the current year. Her most recent MRI scans, taken at a private clinic in Edinburgh, showed the original cancer was spreading. Her Swiss oncologist's *FaceTime* consultation had suggested she had around six months to live, a year at the outset, most of this confined to a hospital bed, supported by chemicals and machines. It was not a future Maureen Bishop could accept as her fate.

Early the next morning, Wednesday, having completed the pre-surgery investigatory checks and preparatory treatments, Maureen was sitting up in bed, sipping orange juice and nibbling on a croissant. Her surgery was scheduled for noon.

She reached for her business phone and turned it on.

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"Code X"

This text message had arrived while she had been sedated, routed to her by an untraceable automated relay service, timed at 13.54 GMT on the previous day, Tuesday, while she had been sedated, undergoing scans and invasive physical checks.

In the quietness of her hospital room, she heard her voice squeak:

"Oh Declan, what have you done? Have you been arrested or has someone taken you hostage?"

Maureen had drilled Declan and Arlene repeatedly, insisting they always use the required sequence to activate their Nokia lookalikes. After hundreds of repetitions, eventually their activations were perfect.

The siblings knew only enough about the operation of these devices to understand that they must be treated with great care, used only to communicate with her and for no other purpose. She had insisted they must always carry their personal Nokias with them, keeping them powered up, always well charged, with a battery reserve of at least 50%. She knew they resented this imposition but had steadfastly ignored their questions and complaints. Over the first few months there had been a few "Code Y"s, (phone not in close proximity to the paired individual) and some "Code W"s (battery undercharged), but eventually the siblings had become perfect, like automatons.

It was 11.15 am in Glasgow. A second check on her tracker app confirmed that Arlene's Nokia was at Parnie Street. This was not in itself proof that Arlene was actually there.

Perhaps the person who had attempted to compromise Declan's phone had proved more successful with Arlene's? Had Arlene been arrested or was she also being held hostage? Who was behind this attack? Could they be using either Declan's or Arlene's Nokia or both to trace her whereabouts?

Maureen immediately powered down her own Nokia.

Checking on her own personal dual SIM phone, she switched to the special encrypted SIM card she used only for business matters.

Using WhatsApp, Maureen made a voice call to Arlene's personal mobile phone. After a long delay, Arlene answered, already wary:

"Yes?"

"Arlene, it's me. Where are you, honey?"

'Maureen, is that really you? Your voice sounds different, weird.'

"Arlene, where exactly are you?"

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Arlene checked the time and realised she should already be at *GNB* conducting her security sweep but she knew better than to try to fool Maureen.

"Look, Maureen, I'm running a wee bit late but I'll get there soon as."

"Arlene, for the last time, where the *fuck* are you?"

"I'm still at home, in Parnie Street."

"Is the laptop in the safe at *GNB*?"

"Yes, of course."

"That new girl, Laryssa, has she been at work every day during the last week?"

"Yes, no problems. Are you going to take her on the program?"

"I doubt it."

"Maureen, you saw from my report, she is perfect, fit as a fiddle, no local ties, doesn't want the kid for herself. I promise you, everything about her fits your profile."

"Aye, maybe just too perfect. Look, Arlene, forget Laryssa. When did you last see my Declan?"

"Eh, last week, last Thursday, when he brought the money to pay the girls."

"Right, OK. Now, Arlene, first up. Power down your *Nokia*. We'll use *this* phone of yours for a while, OK?"

"Why?"

"No why's or wherefores, Arlene, do it **NOW** and confirm back, OK?"

Arlene stabbed the mute button and there followed a short silence which unnerved Maureen.

"Arlene, answer me at once, I don't have very much time, OK"

"Yeah, OK. I've done it, its powered down. Just to confirm, I've had it on charge overnight and it is at one hundred percent."

"OK. Good. Now, Arlene, I need you to stay quiet but listen hard. I want you to forget *GNB* for a while. I'll call Jen on *WhatsApp*, send her the codes, get her to open the shop. I'll try to keep everything as if it's all normal. She can take over until I'm ready to decide what to do with *GNB*. **You**, Arlene Bishop, are being promoted, as of now. I need you for other duties. You are now on my Plan B, OK? Get in your car and drive to my house at Loch Lomond. I'll phone the gatehouse to tell them to let you in. Your passport is in my bedroom, in a *Valentino Garavani* shoebox on the top shelf of my wardrobe. In the box,

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you'll get ready cash, 5K in Euros, 5K in US Dollars and 5K in Sterling, fresh notes, Bank of England. Inside your passport there is a platinum card in your name issued by *Credit Suisse*. I'll release it for use after this call. It's a debit card, not a credit card so it is welcome anywhere. The limit on the card is 50K US Dollars equivalent but the account monitors your spending patterns and if more is needed, it will be topped up automatically, OK? I'll send you the special passcode and pin number by a *WhatsApp* message with the address for my house in Marbella to feed into *Google Maps*. And listen up, Arlene, from now on if you need to contact me, forget the *Nokia* phone for now and use only this phone and only by *WhatsApp*. I've set us up as a two-person group, just us, OK? Everything is encrypted so we'll have to trust it for now. OK? If you have any other personal phones, put them in your microwave and give them a minute at full blast, OK? Ditto that iPad of yours, the one you say you don't have. From now on you must only use *this* phone we are talking on. I have an App which tracks *WhatsApp* numbers so I'll know where you are, more or less. It's not perfect but it will have to suffice, OK? And, Arlene, for **fuck's sake**, do **NOT** let that phone of yours out of your possession for a second, OK? Oh, and that laptop of yours, the one you spend hours on every day, put it in your oven and cook it at two-fifty Celsius for fifteen minutes. No iPad, no laptop, no extra phones, OK? Keep the *Nokia* switched off unless I tell you to switch it on, OK? And listen, Arlene, anytime you contact me, always, always, always use *WhatsApp*. I know it's perfect but it's the best we can do for the present."

"But Maureen, all my data all my. . . ."

"**NO!** Look, don't worry, I keep all your stuff backed up on my cloud server. I'll send you a hyperlink later but only when this is all behind us. When we are through this, you can use your new *Credit Suisse* card to buy what you want, top-of-the-range everything, OK? Arlene Bishop, I need to hear you say 'Yes, Maureen' to confirm our deal, OK?"

"Yes, Maureen."

"Good. Now, as soon as you get to my house, use the *Credit Suisse* card and my bedroom house phone to book the first available flight to Malaga. The house phone is secure, traceable to a dummy location, OK? Fly out from Edinburgh, OK? Leave your car in long-term parking at Edinburgh, pre-pay for three months, OK? And don't worry about it, if it gets impounded, I'll pay you for it. Anyway, I'll provide a new car when you get to your final destination. Trust me, it's all arranged. *Plan B*, remember? Again, I need you to say 'Yes, Maureen, Plan B', OK?"

"Yes, Maureen, Plan B."

"So, forget *GNB* and Parnie Street, just get to my place in Spain as fast as you can. I need you there to look after the three boys. They're at my mother's villa. As I said, I'll send you the details by *WhatsApp*. When you have my boys safe and sound, send me a

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WhatsApp message and I'll get back to you, OK? If my mother gets stroppy, let me know and I'll book you and the boys into a resort hotel. They love swimming. I'll find a nice place, one with good security. Don't take your eyes off them for a minute, OK? Not one single minute."

"Arlene, hold, I have to mute you for a few seconds, OK?"

During the silence, Arlene reached for the strip of paracetamol tabs and pressed out another two and washed them down with black coffee.

In the Swiss clinic, Maureen said: "Yes, nurse I do know I should try to keep calm, OK? Look, I am nearly finished this call and then I'm all yours. Two minutes maximum, please."

The door closed and Maureen unmuted:

"Arlene, are you there?"

"Maureen, is there something wrong? It's Declan, isn't it? Is he OK?"

"Arlene, honest honey, it's better you don't know, OK? So, just do as I've asked. No questions, **just do it, OK? Please.**"

Maureen ended the call.

Arlene stared at her personal phone wondering if she had imagined the words 'honey' and 'please'. She thought of calling Maureen back to try to find out what was really happening then decided against it.

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Being only an occasional driver who used familiar routes to the small list of places she liked to visit, Arlene was nervous about the long and unfamiliar journey to Maureen's house. She also worried whether she was sober enough to drive but the thought of splashing out on a taxi was beyond her nature. In any case, Maureen had told her to use her own car. It took her over half an hour to shower, drink a strong black coffee with three heaped sugars and get her makeup presentable. Staring at her travel case, she became nervous about what to pack for the trip to Spain.

It's November. What will the weather be like?

In the end, she solved her dilemma by bundling in a random selection of clothes, pressed down hard on the case, then locked it.

Perhaps I'll buy something nice at the airport with my new credit card.

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Despite Maureen's instruction, Arlene had not destroyed her iPad and laptop; she had them with her, in her faux *Gucci* carry-on rucksack with the photo albums Maureen had sent after the baptisms.

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A few minutes before one o'clock, Arlene Bishop emptied her entire fridge contents into a black bin bag, added her empties and the other rubbish then switched off her boiler. Setting her alarm, she triple locked her door and dropped off the black bag in the rear bin store area then made her way to her car feeling strangely excited about her new role as auntie to three small boys she hardly knew.

Before starting the Mini, Arlene flicked through the albums to remind herself what the boys looked like, albeit Morran had been only an infant at his Baptism. Checking back the dates, she estimated Milloy must be newly six which meant Madden was four, nearly five. At their joint Baptismal service, Maureen's mother Teresa had called these nearly identical golden-haired infants "my wee Irish twins". This sacrament had been conducted by an odd, very ancient fading shadow of a man called Monsignor Alfonso Feeney, originally from Cork in Ireland who spoke with an almost incomprehensibly thick brogue. He was accompanied, attended and assisted by an equally small but rotund and vigorous black skinned nun called Sister Agata Augustina who had brought her charge to Scotland from his retirement at a retreat house near Seville. The photographer was a stunning Spanish girl wearing a green trouser suit which matched her smiling green eyes.

This first Baptismal Service for the Irish twins had been a grand affair, but it had not been repeated for Morran the youngest child who was Baptised with somewhat less pomp in a tiny chapel in Cardross. This second sacrament had been celebrated on Easter Monday, Arlene's birthday, again by Monsignor Feeney and his attendant nun, once again recorded by the photographer with the green eyes.

For Arlene, the odd contrast between these formal occasions was compounded when, for Morran's baptism, she had been pre-programmed and pressurised by Maureen to sign a thick document in numerous places, in full view of the much smaller family-only group. Maureen had called it an affidavit whose purpose was to appoint her Godmother and Guardian to her boys. For Arlene, who had no desire to be in the company of her scary sister-in-law on a regular basis, it was a dubious honour and potential responsibility she had not sought and intended to resist if she could.

Of course, the £20,000 reward she received at each of the baptisms had been very welcome. It had seemed like money for nothing but later, as the years passed, she had wondered about the strangeness of both occasions, so different yet with common characteristics.

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In the months which followed, many, many times she wondered why for the Cardross baptism, she had been placed centre stage, prepped by her sister-in-law with a full spa treatment and make-over, deep skin cleansing, professional light golden spray tan, hair, brows, nails. During the three weeks ahead of Cardross, Maureen had closed *GNB* for a complete refurbishment while Arlene had been confined to an exclusive luxury spa hotel on an alcohol free, healthy eating and intensive exercise regime. For Madden's baptism, every item of clothing, including her undergarments and shoes had been fashioned by a London designer who had been brought with her small team of seamstresses to the *House of Fraser* for the initial measuring, first and final fitting stages, every garment ultra-pure white. Despite complaining that it made her look 'ancient', she had been compelled to wear a fascinator. Teetering on seven-inch heels, Arlene had felt as if she was a celebrity bride from the front page of *Vogue*, the key moments again captured by the green-eyed photographer.

Thinking of that afternoon at Cardross always spurred the memory of Teresa Milloy muttering under her breath, "*wid ye take a gander at that wee git Arlene Bishop, feckin' Bride o' Christ if ever Ah saw wan*", a phrase which brought back the sordid incident which had turned her away from God.

Arlene had at one time been attracted to the church and had vaguely considered applying to become a nun. The thirteen-year-old's religious inclination had evaporated following an episode in which she alleged she had been 'touched painfully in her private place between her thighs' by an attractive and vivacious trainee nun called Angelica Porteous, originally from Aberdeen.

During the investigation conducted by the head teacher and the local priest, Angelica had produced a Valentine card in Arlene's hand enclosing a gushing love letter suggesting they meet in secret to enjoy kisses and cuddles in the darkness of the local cinema, the alleged locus of the touching allegation.

The noviciate had denied attending the proposed meeting and her version had been accepted. Arlene had been chastised and the postulant sternly warned to report at once any such advances in future. However, at the end of the summer term, following similar complaints from others in Arlene's class, the eighteen-year-old had been posted to Manchester to complete her discipleship and training.

Arlene had always puzzled why the second album from Cardross featured only herself with the three boys, the priest and the nun. Absent were Maureen and Declan. There were no photographs of the small group of close Milloy family members who had been present, not even of Jen and Sasha, who had boasted Maureen had given each of them a thousand pounds to spend on clothing, hairdos, and accessories.

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Perhaps the oddest, almost haunting aspect of both Baptisms was the presence of around a dozen strangers, all men, sombrely dressed as if for a funeral, men who did not speak nor mingle afterwards, an eerie, creepy 'presence', a silent crowd which had melted away immediately the signing ceremony had been completed. In the end, tired of trying to make sense of it all, Arlene had settled the matter by concluding it was yet another bizarre notion among many which Maureen Bishop seemed to need to make sense of her own, weird life.

Starting the Mini, she tapped Maureen's *Ben View* address into her personal mobile phone, fixed it to the dashboard holder and set off, following the voice of *Google Assistant*. To her surprise, the App took her to the south of the river before joining the M8 heading for Greenock. Eventually it would take her to the Erskine Bridge where it would swing her across to the north side of the River Clyde and on towards Loch Lomond. The journey was predicted to last 54 minutes with an estimated time of arrival of 14:16. In fact, due to her cautious and inexpert driving, she would not arrive until 14:59.

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On the Move

As Arlene pulled away from her resident's parking space, her car showed as a blip on DI Tom Graham's iPad. The unofficial tracker device, (purchased at his own cost), had been in place for weeks. He thought at first that she was heading along her usual route to *Silverburn Shopping Centre* then remembered on Wednesday mornings she would normally be at *GNB* to carry out her checking duty before opening the nail bar at noon.

He reached for his personal iPhone and made a *WhatsApp* call.

"Julie, I think we have something going on, out of the pattern. Arlene is on the move, or at least her car is. Where are you?"

"Heading for *GNB*, almost there. I can see Jen is at the rear door, fiddling with the alarm pad. Sasha is with her. I'll ask them about Arlene and ring you back."

As she approached the two girls, Julie set her persona to 'Laryssa'.

"Hi Guys, I go get to myself a cappo, do you wantin one?"

"Sure, thanks. Baith double-shots wi' three sugars for me an' wan fur Jen,' said Sasha.

"I get a one for Arlene too?"

"Naw, she's no comin' in the day, Jen's stepping up."

"Oh, Arlene, she sick, maybees?"

"No, personal stuff," said Jen.

"Oh, I hope she get to sort soon. I go *Costa Coffee*, OK? Back ten minutes I is hopings, if to queue is short."

When she was out of sight and hearing, Julie rang Tom and updated him.

"Well, let's assume she is driving her car. If so, she is on the *M8*, heading for *Greenock*, crawling along, doing about forty so I bet she's not popular."

"Where are you, Tom?"

"*Airdrie*, working from Mum's front room. Dad's asthma is acting up and she is on a day out to *Glasgow* with Auntie Alice, early Christmas shopping."

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"OK, looks like it's down to me to trail her. I'm heading for the Subway at St Enoch's. I'm parked at West Street which should put me on the M8 in about twenty or twenty-five minutes. I'll ring you back when I'm in the car and you can update me on her location."

"Excellent work DS McRobert. Go follow our bunny to her burrow."

"Tom, this might be the break we've been hoping for so I suppose we should call Grumpy MacQueen at Gartcosh and put him in the picture, get his backing, yes?"

"Yeah, I suppose but hey, let's leave it for now, just in case it's a false alarm."

"Yeah, OK."

Above ground at Shields Road Subway, out of sight behind her *Audi S3*, Julie shrugged out of her bodysuit, slipped into a tailored blouse and a business trouser suit and low heels, transforming herself from an eight-month pregnant woman. Stowing her disguise in the boot, she donned a long, black, loose, quilted pregnancy coat then eased down into the driving seat. Heading towards the M8 three minutes away, she rang Tom hands-free to get an update on Arlene.

"Hi, Fox Trotter. Your Bunny girl is just over the Erskine Bridge. Took the Dumbarton turnoff. I think she might be heading for Maureen's place. Just a hunch."

"Ah, so, Arlene has been summoned to see the scary Witch of the West."

"No, I spoke to Sadie at Gartcosh and according to her contact at Border Control, Maureen flew out to Spain on Monday, taking the three boys with her."

"Maybe Arlene is meeting Declan at *Ben View*? Do we know where he is?"

"No, he seems to have gone to ground. The last time I saw him was yesterday early afternoon, heading for the Subway at Buchanan Street. I assumed he was heading for the Western Baths off Byres Road as he usually does on Tuesday afternoons, so I left him to it. I had some catching up to do and headed out here to Airdrie. Apart from his occasional flings, Declan Bishop is a very boring, routine-oriented guy. I have a deal with the receptionist at his fancy gym near the SECC and when I checked a few minutes ago, I learned our man has not been there since Monday evening when he was in a spin class."

"Tom, I think this calls for a blue light dash, don't you?"

"Go for it!"

"And Tom, don't you think we should give Grumpy a call on this?"

"Nah, not yet."

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"Tom, could Declan be in Spain with Maureen. A have they done a runner on us. Is this not a job for Europol?"

"Leave it with me, I'll have a looksee. Now, light up blue and chase that Bunny. GO! GO! GO!"

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By visiting the Dark Web, he went to two rival sites and asked for the current whereabouts of Declan Bishop and Maureen Bishop.

Sadly, there were no 'offers'. He would try again later.

(Tom Graham had a particular secret which he kept from Julie McRobert, knowing it would upset her.

Gleaning information from Dark Web sources required payment, made from what the policeman thought of as his 'slush fund'. The money held in this Bitcoin account was earned by running his own Dark Web site, accepting commissions to undertake research on behalf of anonymous clients, often overseas based online traders wishing to check the veracity of information they had been offered by customers of clients they were unsure of. For someone with his background and training, this work was mostly mundane, information easily found in the public domain if one knew where to look, where and what to ask. Although these customers liked to think they were anonymous, from the formatting of their requests, Tom could see many were 'regulars'. However, for more difficult cases, provided the risk was low and the reward high enough, had bent the rules by accessing the databases of the police and other agencies, salving his conscience with the knowledge that this Bitcoin income would be used to fight crime.)

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Ben View

DS Julie McRobert's red Audi S3 caught up with Arlene Bishop's pale blue Mini as it approached the large roundabout beyond Dumbarton. With Tom keeping her posted by mobile phone, Julie held off then followed her through Balloch and onto the side road which led over the hill to Maureen's *Ben View* estate.

When Tom Graham and Julie McRobert had first started watching *GNB*, they had believed Declan Bishop was its owner. By following him to Balloch by train and then on by taxi to *Ben View* they changed their focus to Maureen, teasing out her past, creating a patchy profile by tracking back through her previous houses and eventually unearthing her tenuous links with gangmasters in Govanhill and their overlords in Pollokshields. This had pointed the way to a more extensive operation the exact nature of which they had yet to fathom.

Early one Sunday morning, launching a high-flying camera drone from a quite spot in nearby Balloch Park, they had made an air tour of the grounds, discovering the high perimeter fence enclosed with a tangle of prickly gorse and bramble. The main house and its outbuildings were covered by an extensive CCTV camera system. The gatehouse set-up was impressive, with a double gate and air lock system as used at military establishments worldwide. From a talkative lady taxi driver based at Balloch railway station, Tom learned many locals held the view the perimeter fence was electrified and that under the previous owner there had been day and night dog patrols along the inside of the fence to stop groupies gaining entry.

Slowly, mainly from Dark Web sources, Tom Graham had teased out links between *GNB*, *Gentle Hands Sports Therapy* and a handful of other businesses controlled by a Scottish Limited Partnership called *Dalgety Developments*. However, evidence good enough for MacQueen had yet to be uncovered.

At this stage they were not surprised that the trail seemed to become impenetrable.

As a result, Graham and McRobert had no knowledge of Maureen's Golden Slumbers crematorium, the Moffat baby farm cum care home or the Aberdeen fertility clinic. Nor did they learn anything of Maureen's property empire in Spain, or her 'at far hand' arrangements with the Beijing-based Ukrainian woman who supplied her hard drugs, or the Belarus-based Russian Mafia capo who controlled the overland route to the European entry point at Trieste. This busy Mediterranean container shipping port was where her drugs moved onwards by sea to Perth Harbour. At Perth her half-size containers of 'oriental spices' were unloaded and moved by road to her distribution centre on the

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Motherwell Food Park at Bellshill, almost within sight of the Scottish Crime Campus at Gartcosh. Nor were Graham and McRobert aware of Maureen Bishop's relationships with a cabal of Amsterdam-based flower trade exporters who supplied her cannabis and other party-popper pharmaceuticals cloned in nearby Luxembourg.

Although they were certain she was not as pure and clean as she seemed, Tom and Julie had discovered very little of Maureen Bishop's empire. However, from experience they understood they must keep digging, nudging, probing, ever hopeful of finding a crack in her armour.

They judged what they had on Maureen and Declan Bishop to be insufficient to take to their line manager, DCI Donnie MacQueen. There was a second factor, unspoken. As relative newbies at Gartcosh and being from Edinburgh in a Glasgow dominated setup, they had not yet earned their spurs with their boss, a man from the pre-digital era who they felt would be unlikely to countenance what he would almost certainly call their 'flights of fancy'.

As might be expected, early into their investigation the pair discovered the apparently suspicious link between DCI Donnie MacQueen and Cathy Bishop. This had made them both wary, Tom in particular. When they checked out Cathy Bishop and found she appeared to be squeaky clean, at least financially if not morally, this made them even more suspicious.

The second enigma was Arlene who appeared to live a closeted life, seldom leaving her flat, with no close friends or intimates. Nor was it clear to them what Arlene's role was in her sister-in-law's empire, apart from being the manager of *GNB* which operated using casual labour, much like many similar businesses but without any evidence of serious wrongdoing.

Convinced that somehow Cathy Bishop must be a key player, for well over a month, Maureen's mother-in-law became a major distraction. Setting up a shared and encrypted online file on her, working in their own time, delving into her past, trailing her, logging her meetings and outings with MacQueen, they eventually concluded Cathy Bishop was not physically meeting up with Maureen which meant that she was somehow working in tandem with her online. Why she was estranged from both Arlene and Declan was another anomaly. Their only confusing clue was that the schism seemed to stem from around the time Declan had married Maureen but surely this must have been when Maureen and Cathy had forged their agreement, with Cathy as a silent partner.

Only one theory seemed to make sense:

Cathy Bishop was deliberately courting MacQueen as a way of monitoring his behaviour, as Maureen's mole into Gartcosh.

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After weeks of anguished debate, they decided to keep what little they had on Maureen from MacQueen and as a result, their undercover operation at *GNB* had remained unofficial.

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Bullfinch

The spur road was signed as 'Strictly Private'. Julie drove on down the hill, past the entry for the gatehouse onto the snaking unmade track to the loch side, executed a many-point turn, reversed out of sight, parked facing uphill, ready for a quick escape. Pulling on waterproof trousers, she shrugged into a knee-length camouflage anorak and changed into walking boots. With her walking pole, binoculars draped around her neck and resting on a small, scruffy front rucksack which contained her RSPB recognition book and membership card, she hoped to pass herself off as a birdwatcher, if challenged.

As a security measure she put a Bluetooth earbud in place out of sight under her woolie bunnet and dialled Tom.

"Right, Tom, I'm parked up, heading back up the track on foot to find a spot in the woods with a clear view of the gatehouse road. My cover story is I'm looking for migratory Bullfinches, allegedly. Let's keep this line open as much as possible. Do we have any further information on Maureen Bishop? She hasn't flown back home, has she?"

"No, just that according to the records at Border Force, she landed at Marbella on Monday early with the three boys. My guess is she is visiting her mother."

"Any idea why we were not told earlier? I mean, like on Monday when it happened?"

"Sadie's Border Force contact was not on duty. Anyway, we must look to the future. One bit of news, though, intriguing, really. Can you guess?"

"Tom, stop messing about. It's Baltic. I'm stuck here in the woods, with rain dripping off the trees in the breeze. And I need a pee. So, tell all."

"Fresh from Sadie. Seems that Grumpy is just off on a hill-walking holiday week with Cathy, staying in a cottage in the wilds of Wester Ross. The place doesn't have Wi-Fi and phone reception is poor. Anyway, the idea was to get away from it all. His PA is Rodney Martin, remember him from Tulliallan days? Mr Teflon? Well, I rang him just to ask if I could arrange a meet with the great man, saying his phone is out of range. He said I should put my request in writing and warned me off phoning Grumpy who left the instruction, and here I quote second hand: *"does not want to be disturbed by anyone, not even if hell is about to freeze over"*. I badgered Rodders, insisting I needed to speak to Grumpy person-to-person, urgently, and eventually Mr Teflon said he will log my call with a red flag and post it to Grumpy's priority folder."

"Should we believe that?"

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"Who knows? Actually, who cares? We were always on our own with this one, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose. So, Tom, why is Arlene here at *Ben View* when Maureen is away? I thought Maureen was very particular about who is allowed in? Is Arlene here to meet Declan?"

"Ah, yes, our peripatetic gigolo. Well, with Grumpy out of the loop, I've managed to persuade Sadie to get her techie pal Siobhan at GCHQ to do a sweep check and, very interestingly, it seems both of Declan's mobiles have been offline since mid-afternoon yesterday, final location, just off Byres Road, probably at the Western Baths, like I said."

"Which means?"

"Sadie says checking back over the records for last year, neither of Declan's phones have ever been offline for more than an hour at a time. Which, in my humble opinion means Declan is AWOL, prattling about while Maureen's away, shackled up with one of his many willing ladies."

"In the alternative, Tom, maybe it's way more serious. Maybe Declan and Arlene are taking this chance to clear out the goodies from *Ben View* and do a runner. Escape the Spider Queen, raid her safe and head off into the blue yonder, together or separately?"

"OK, I'll ask Sadie to check out flight bookings from Glasgow and Edinburgh, see what she finds. I've got my passport with me. How about you?"

"Yes, of course. Never leave home without it, as per our pact, O Lord and Master. So, Tom, you think they may be in this together, Declan and Arlene. Don't forget though, my turn to quote, "*Arlene hates Declan's guts*", so says the erudite Sasha."

'Yes, but that could be an act. Anyway, let's gear up for a possible trip in pursuit. We should work on the assumption something big is going down and it might give us the ammo we need to get on the inside of whatever the real scams are that Maureen is running. Clearly from the set up at *GNB* and that sleazy massage parlour, there must be something more, something worth the effort. We did the sums, remember, and we reckoned it must cost around a few hundred grand a year to run a place like *Ben View*, even allowing from the rents from the leased fields. I'll ring Mum and Auntie and ask them to grab a taxi back here for Dad. Sadie is watching the flight bookings for me and if anything shows for Arlene or Declan, she let me know. HEY! Hold on, hold on. Bingo, the iPad speaketh."

"From Sadie?"

"Yes! YES! **YEH-ESS!** Miss Arlene Bishop has just booked a flight from Edinburgh Airport to Malaga, leaving tonight, mid-evening. Her ticket is one-way. She's following Maureen."

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Is she carrying something important that Maureen forgot and needs? Looks like her car is on the move again."

"Hold on, Tom. It could be a ruse. It could be someone else driving her car. The ticket purchase might be a scam to send us off on a wild goose chase. I doubt she could have clocked me tailing her but maybe they spotted me on CCTV. We've got to track her in case she is trying to give us the slip, agreed? Maybe she's ordered a taxi or she'll get one of the staff to drive wherever her real destination is. I'm heading back to the car, to get up to the end of the road and hide somewhere up there, OK?"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha. Sadie, Sadie, well done my dear friend. Guess what, Julie? Sadie has checked the card used to purchase the airline ticket and suddenly Arlene Bishop is the owner of a Platinum *debit* card, a card issued by a bank in Zurich with a 50K USD limit. Remember, Julie, this is a woman who lives in a rented one-bedroom flat in a scruffy tenement in central Glasgow and drives a rather tired, dented and scratched *Mini* she bought out at the end of its lease. Surely this card must have been funded by Maureen. Or, it could have been from Declan, although I doubt that possibility. Oh, there's more, Sadie has just confirmed, there is no corresponding booking for Declan, at either Edinburgh or Glasgow, so it looks as if Arlene is on the move alone."

"Good work Tom. Surely now we have this new info, we must try to ring Grumpy. I mean, the platinum credit card is the give-away, yes?"

"And how did we discover this card info? On what authority? We can't expose Sadie, can we? Remember Julie, we are on our own on this one. It worked before on the McCallum case and on the Ritchie scam so we know it will work again, right?"

"But Tom, if we track Arlene to Spain without authority, we could . . ."

"No, Julie, I'll go to Spain, not you. All you have to do is tail her for me, make sure she actually goes to Edinburgh, OK?"

"Tom, we are getting into deep water here. I think we must get Grumpy involved, really, we simply must."

"OK, Julie, tell you what. I'll ring Rodney now and give him a version of what we have found and tell him to ask Grumpy to ring us, for the full story. Chances are MacQueen will continue to stay in the hills until the end of the week, which, given the likely Cathy Bishop link, it might be best all round if he doesn't respond, right?"

"Well, at least we will have recorded our concern."

"Yeah, and remember our motto is?"

"Yeah Tom, I know - *self-motivated, agile and proactive policing.*"

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"Exactimo! Think about it, the big picture. Cathy Bishop has taken Grumpy out of the loop deliberately because she knows what is going down. Even though her son and daughter seem to have cut her out of their lives and vice versa, I think Mummy still wants to look out for them. It's what parents do, right?"

'Yes, agreed. You are right, Tom. I think we've struck lucky. So long as Grumpy stays out of range, we should be able to get on with the job without his interference."

"Right, DS Julie McRobert, action stations. Thunderbirds are go! Talking of birds, seen any feathered friends of interest yet?"

"No, and it's raining again. Quite heavily, actually."

"Oh, I thought that was you peeing!"

"Very ,very funny. Hilarious. You should try stand up again."

"Sorry. Look, Julie, think about it, it has to me tracking her on the plane, right? She would spot you a mile off, right? And, according to my weather App, Marbella is at 19 Celsius, dry and sunny with a light breeze. Assuming I can get on her flight, I'm heading for delightful weather. Yippee!"

"Hey, in for a penny, in for a pound. We always work better as buddies, yes? No way I'm missing out on a chance of some sun. After we do the handover at Edinburgh. I'll try for a flight from Glasgow. I want to be in Spain before Grumpy cottons on. Location is nine tenths of the law, right?"

"Too true!"

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Tom was waiting by the main entrance when Arlene appeared just after five o'clock, too early to check-in. He was wearing Harry Potter specs and a Hogwarts' skip cap and a long Gryffindor cape and trailing a trolley carry-on case emblazoned with dozens of Harry Potter stickers, all items raided from his mother's attic. He saw Arlene glance in his direction, smirk her Geisha smile without recognising him as she moved towards the shopping area.

Tom rang, Julie.

"The Penguin has just waddled past me heading for the shops to splash the cash with the Platinum card, I guess."

"Good. She is all yours. I'm leaving the car park now. I have just under two hours to get to Glasgow from my flight. If it is on time, I should be in Malaga before you, just. Any update on Declan?"

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"No, not yet. Sadie has checked all UK airports with flights since Tuesday, but he does not show up on them. The King of Condoms seems to have gone to ground."

"Any feedback from Grumpy or his PA?"

"No. So far so good. See you in on the *Costa del Sol!*"

"Yippee! Time for another blue light dash."

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Night Flight

With thirty minutes to spare, DS Julie McRobert made her way through the departures' hall at Glasgow Airport, with just enough time to negotiate her way through the enhanced security procedures after check-in. As a backstop, she could use her warrant card to circumvent problems but hoped this would not be necessary. It would be best not to attract the attention of the small team of airport-based police officers who worked in tandem with the Border Force service. Officially, she was on duty and if they checked her status, they would almost certainly log her departure details into the system, an act which might alert Gartcosh.

Earlier, in the medium term stay car park, conscious of the minutes ticking down, she had forced herself to rummage carefully through her boot, packing and repacking her cabin luggage roll-on trolley bag, eventually reluctantly dumping two disguise ensembles in favour of her binoculars, a compact camera with a powerful telephoto lens, a tiny camera drone and a selection of other electronic gadgets, items she might need to track Arlene. No doubt Tom would also be bringing his more exotic gizmos including his long-range directional microphones used for listening to birds and other 'species of special interest'.

The tall young woman in the smart trouser suit looked like a business traveller. At the Malaga ticket check-in, an elderly couple were struggling to lift their heavy cases onto the weighing station at the counter. At the behest of a tall sallow skinned man, his shorter companion stepped forward and hoisted each case in turn into the baggage aperture.

Julie froze. Caught in profile, the aristocratic Asian was almost certainly Sabeesh Patel. His shaven-headed companion was unknown to her but fitted the bill as a gangster type, possibly Russian Mafia.

Her thumbs flying over the tiny phone keys, she sent a *WhatsApp* to Tom.

The queue shuffled forward. Like herself, the tall, slim man and his burly companion had only hand luggage.

After a short delay, Tom's reply pinged:

"Sadie says Patel is not registered on this flight but suggests he may be travelling as a Mr John SP Smith, probably in the company of a Mr Gary Lennon booked by the same ticket agent based in Leicester. They have aisle seats 5C and 5D, two rows in front of you at 7E. We have a half hour technical delay here, should arrive in Malaga around

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quarter to one in the morning, Spanish time. My flight App says you are scheduled to arrive ten-thirty-five local time."

"Yes Tom, we are bang on time here. Hey, Sadie really has great contacts but what is the status on Patel? Do we still have authority to arrest him on suspicion of money laundering?"

"To my recollection, the authority to detain expired last summer. Remember that review? Grumpy was not a happy bunny. I'll ask Sadie to try a rummage through the digital trash bin and get back to us. Problem is, she is about to go off duty and accessing the Gartcosh systems remotely through their antediluvian Firewalls can be problematic, as we know."

"Tom, does this mean Patel is active on our patch again? Do you think he is tracking Maureen Bishop? Are they partners? Did Grumpy miss her link to him?"

"Think about it, Julie, Maureen and Patel must be rivals, right? Even though it looks like Grumpy is deliberately refusing to see it, it looks like Maureen Bishop has effectively filled the void Patel left when he disappeared. I bet she has been using the same people, if only we could prove it. As you say, why was Patel in Glasgow anyway? He must know we would clock him, sooner or later. Is this just a flying visit, no pun, or is it the start of a turf war? And why go from here to Malaga just as Arlene suddenly breaks the mould and is also heading to Malaga. And Declan is missing. Has Patel taken him as a hostage? What's his next move? Is he after the kids?"

"Could be, Tom. Yes, I think you're right. Maybe Declan flew to Malaga on a false passport and is waiting there to greet them and take them to Maureen? Or maybe he is waiting for Arlene. Are the three of them in it together, Declan, Arlene and Patel? Is Arlene under his control in some way? Maybe because of the threat to Declan?"

"Julie, calm down. Don't get all the plates in the air at once. One step at a time, remember?"

"Yeah, but it does all seems so up in the air. Oops, sorry, not even punny!"

"Look, Julie, here's what I think. Why did Arlene book to fly from Edinburgh and not Glasgow? Is she trying to avoid Patel? If so, how does she know anything about him? After all, he was long gone before she took over at GNB. Remember, before that she worked at a fancy shoe place at the House of Fraser."

"Yeah, and under Patel, the GNB premises used to be an amusement arcade, a slot machine casino used as a cover for drug retailing, according to Grumpy's notes. Then, as we know, it was a laptop club before it became GNB."

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"Well, Julie, just as well you forced the issue about travelling to Spain with me or we might not have hit on Patel. So, here's how it pans out. I'll stick with Arlene while you try to stick with Patel and his sidekick, OK?"

"OK Tom. Hey, looks like Patel aka Smith and Baldy Lennon are heading out to the smoking area for a last puff before going through security. I'm just about to check-in."

"OK. More later. Out."

McRobert was the last in a queue of seven passengers shuffling down towards the embarkation ticket check. Her mind was buzzing.

There must be a link between Sabeesh Patel and Declan Bishop.

Surely Declan must be on board, travelling on a forged passport that Sadie has missed?

If we were authorised, I could ask Border Force to run a check.

There must be something big about to happen.

Without Tom available to discuss her options, she felt exposed, jittery.

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At Edinburgh airport, keeping Arlene in view as she wandered from shop to shop, Tom Graham received a re-mailed message from his Dark Web site. It was from an anonymous but familiar source:

"Whereabouts and schedule for DCI Donald MacQueen, Police Scotland. Reward £20,000 in Bitcoin. Urgent."

Tom took a deep breath. The term 'whereabouts' was a giveaway.

Why not? What harm can it do?

He logged onto his site and sent his reply.

Two minutes later a confirmation pinged from his offshore account:

"Bitcoin deposit received, £20,000 equivalent."

A few minutes later, a second anonymous re-mailed message arrived from his Dark Web site:

"Whereabouts and schedule for Sabeesh Patel, businessman, Glasgow and Leicester. See passport image attached. Reward £50,000 in Bitcoin. Urgent."

Tom Graham hesitated:

Could this be you, Maureen Bishop?

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He moved to another location, to get a better view of Arlene as she sat in a shoe outlet, with the shop assistant returning with a further selection of shoes.

His iPad pinged again. A further message from his Dark Web site:

"RE below:

"Whereabouts and schedule for Sabeesh Patel, businessman, Glasgow and Leicester. See passport image attached. Reward £50,000 in Bitcoin. Urgent."

Reward now £150,000 in Bitcoin.

Now or never. Other sources are available."

Tom Graham weighed the odds and decided to take the offer:

Sabeesh Patel and Mr Muscle travelling on Glasgow-Malaga flight due to land 2235 local time tonight. Patel travelling under passport of Mr John SP Smith with a Mr Gary Lennon booked by the same ticket agent based in Leicester. They have aisle seats 5C and 5D.

Two minutes later he received a further message from his offshore account.

"Bitcoin deposit received, £150,000 equivalent."

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Side-lined

Their rented holiday cottage overlooked the beach at Score Bay at the northernmost tip of Skye, with stunning views across the Minch to the Western Isles. As Cathy had hoped, Donnie was beginning to slow down. Part of her 'therapy' was to help him catch up on years of lost sleep which she rightly diagnosed was the source of his grouchiness. As he began to relax, she had persuaded him to flesh out their plans for their future life together.

To celebrate their forthcoming engagement, Donnie MacQueen had taken the hint and pre-booked a special seafood meal at the Stein Inn at Waternish on Skye. With an overnight stay they would be free to celebrate with a few glasses of wine. In their plan, on the following morning, they would scramble over the rocky path across the peninsula to Gillen beach where they would exchange rings and seal their deal.

During their return to Glasgow, they planned to stay two nights in Oban to visit Donnie's sister and her husband then take a bus tour to Iona, a nostalgic trip for MacQueen who had spent a few summers there as a teenager, in the capacity of a waiter cum dogsbody in a small family hotel. After that, they had a second week booked on Mull, part of their research to find the ideal spot to settle after their marriage.

As a pre-condition to accepting his marriage proposal, Donnie confirmed to her that he had submitted his resignation to take effect as soon as a replacement could be found to take over his workload and run his small team. At fifty-five with over thirty years' service, he was eligible for a full pension. There was also the accumulation of untaken holidays totalling seven weeks which he must work out of the system as they could not be traded for cash under the new rules.

At the point of deciding, Donnie had found it easier than he had thought, concluding he was too long in the tooth to fight the new waves of cyber-crime which he found increasingly overwhelming. Far better to get out and leave it to the whizz-kid graduates before he got caught napping over some new scam on his patch. Letting Patel escape had been only one of several projects where he had been wrong-footed.

Reviewing the numbers with Cathy, she had finally persuaded him to take the deal on offer and start afresh with a life free of the pressures which had wrecked his first marriage fifteen years earlier.

For her part, Cathy would resign from her voluntary work at the *Citizens' Advice Bureau* and *Maryhill Credit Union*, the main organisations she supported by giving her time and expertise to set up and manage their databases and computer networks. As she well knew,

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no one is indispensable; she would help them find replacements and make the handovers go smoothly.

Donnie's compact flat was in a converted church building in Milngavie. It had been bought on a new mortgage using funds salvaged from his divorce. With his retirement lump sum, he would settle the mortgage and give the flat an upgrade. In their current plan, they would rent it out on an *Airbnb* basis, providing them with a convenient bolt hole if they wished to visit *Glasgow* for the *Celtic Connections* festival in January or the *Edinburgh Fringe* in August. The flat was less than five minutes on foot from Milngavie Station giving easy access to *Glasgow Queen Street* and beyond on the new through service to *Edinburgh Waverley Station*, avoiding the hassle of traffic and parking.

They would fully consolidate their funds with a no secrets joint bank account and joint savings.

Cathy would sell her home in Bearsden and relinquish her garden, which would be a miss. When they had fully cashed up, reinvested and could see their way ahead, they would look for a small, cosy place somewhere remote, perhaps on the coast of *Wester Ross* near *Ullapool*. They would also check out locations on *North Uist* where *MacQueen* had a small tribe of distant cousins, fisher-crofter families on his mother's *Ferguson* side, people of his own generation he had met only occasionally when they had stayed with him on their visits to *Glasgow* for shopping or shows or as an in-transit stopover when flying out on holidays.

Their current notion was that this remote home would be a summer base where they could run, bike and birdwatch. In winter they planned to travel, simply, as backpackers, perhaps to *Australia* and most definitely to *New Zealand* to visit his daughter *Sally* and her *Kiwi* sheep farmer husband. At last, they would meet Donnie's three *FaceTime* grandchildren 'live' for the first time. Donnie had suggested that on their return journey, they might visit *India* or *South Africa* or both although *Cathy* was in favour of deferring those add-on visits to make them part of separate trips.

At this stage, their plans were deliciously vague, mere scribbles on the back section of *Cathy's* thick, five-year diary, her place of dreams, as she called it. Underlying this life in retirement was their newly discovered joint interest in still and video photography, capturing landscapes on their new drone, images which they hoped might have commercial value for film makers and tourist agencies.

As part of their pact, Donnie had turned off his mobile phone at the start of their romantic break to begin the process of weaning himself away from his online addiction to checking constantly for updates. As a result, he was unaware of the developments in *Glasgow*.

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At the Stein Inn reception desk, Donnie MacQueen was obliged to open his phone to display his online booking voucher. Unable to resist, he checked his priority inbox then made the call to Rodney Martin at Gartcosh.

"Good afternoon, sir. I hope you are OK with me asking you to ring. I did tell DI Graham you are on a break and must not be disturbed but he was very insistent, rather aggressive, *actually*, but very vague on details. Apparently, sir, there has been an important development which they need to discuss with you."

"I assume 'they' means McRobert and Graham? What are they working on, do you know?"

"I am terribly sorry, sir, but I have simply no idea. Am I supposed to oversee them? As you may recall, they are senior to me after all, by several years, *actually*."

"OK, Rodney, leave it with me. I'll ring him now."

"Right, sir, there was just one other matter. I was hoping you might agree to a week's holiday. . . ." Then Rodney realised he was disconnected.

Cathy, who had been listening to one side of this conversation said, "Donnie, was that Gartcosh?"

"Yes. Just a wee blip on the radar. You go on up to the room and give me five minutes, I should make a few calls. It's Julie and Tom, I think they might be onto something. It's urgent, Rodney says. I should check it out."

"No. Donnie, *no!* A promise is a promise. Or is this the way it will always be? If so, I'm out."

"Ah, yes. Sorry. Absolutely. OK, OK. Look, that's it shut down again."

"And do you confirm that you will keep that phone switched off until a week on Monday when you go back to Gartcosh and start to disentangle yourself from your old life, as per your agreement with ACC McPhail?"

"Yes, of course."

"And do you also confirm you will do your best to retire by the end of this year, at the very latest?"

"Absolutely!"

"Then, in that case, will you also agree to let me remove that SIM card and allow me to keep it in my purse, just to remove temptation?"

"Absolutely! Here, take the phone and do as you wish, please."

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"Donnie MacQueen, you are a very lovely man. I love you to bits. Let's go upstairs now and have cocktails and cuddles before we get ready to eat."

"Sounds good to me!"

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Late Check-In

At Malaga's *Pablo Picasso* Airport, McRobert was first on her feet when the aircraft engines were switched off. She skipped past the two men, down the stepway, crossing the tarmac quickly and into the terminal building.

Waiting on the far side of the frontier desks, pretending to check her phone, she saw her primary targets pass through the passport check without difficulty, before heading through the baggage reclaim hall to the gents' toilets. Being taller, she checked the others milling around the carousels. There was no sign of Declan Bishop.

Baldy and Patel moved from the toilets, exiting immediately using the *Green Lane*. Counting under her breath, McRobert also took the *Green Lane* and exited to the arrivals' concourse on the count of one hundred. Scanning nervously, she spotted her targets just outside, at the area designated for smokers.

Checking the information display, the flight from Edinburgh was scheduled to arrive at 23.53 which meant Tom would not be reachable by voice. She sent him a *WhatsApp* giving him a brief update.

The shorter man returned to the concourse to join a long queue at the *Enterprise* car hire desk while Patel remained outside. From just inside the concourse, Julie watched the Asian as he wandered towards the car hire pick-up area. Being late in the day, the *Enterprise* desk was manned by a single operator. Baldy Lennon had seven others ahead of him. There was no queue at the *Hertz* outlet. Within a few minutes McRobert had the keys to a VW Polo equipped with Satnav, hired for a week at what she thought was an exorbitant rate. No doubt this would cause friction when she submitted her expenses to Grumpy for approval. Glancing across, she saw the bald man was now fourth in the queue.

From many years of family holidays to Torremolinos and, more recently from 'winter sun' cycling and snorkelling breaks in Marbella with Tom, she had a fair grasp of the airport and its surrounds.

When she picked up the Polo, she was disappointed it was low on fuel. Ten minutes later she was near the exit to a filling station from which she could see both the arrivals' doors and car hire vehicle parking area. Whatever route Patel might take, he must pass this spot.

Standing by the Polo, she watched the bald man exit the terminal building clutching keys and documentation. His first act was to light up and drag fiercely on a cigarette. Looking towards the *Enterprise* pick-up area, Baldy Lennon dropped the half-smoked cigarette

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and stamped it out then waved to Patel who stood motionless, holding out his hand into which the shorter man eventually placed a car key, keeping the other for himself.

Together they found a white Mercedes people carrier which McRobert recognised as a V-Class model. She smiled: if they had hired a dark coloured vehicle or a saloon car, it would have been more difficult to follow.

Julie had not seen the buff-coloured people carrier taxi trailing her rented Polo from the airport filling station. Concentrating hard, she had been mildly irritated when the vehicle overtook her then slowed, allowing the V-Class to increase the gap, making her lose direct visual contact.

Janina had originally been pre-booked to collect a fare called 'Arlene Bishop', Maureen's sister-in-law due in on the Edinburgh flight. This booking had been overridden by a second text message which had re-programmed her to follow the Indian and his sidekick from the Glasgow flight.

When the Polo overtook her for the third time, Janina clocked what was happening and settled to trail both vehicles during the remainder of the journey. The taxi driver was intrigued by the Polo, wondering what part it was playing. She knew there would be a reason, just one which Maureen Bishop had not shared with her. With Maureen, there was always more than one strand to any puzzle.

Baldy Lennon drove aggressively and thirty-five minutes later Julie watched as the V-Class parked at the *Amare Marbella Beach Hotel*, an adult only resort she knew well from her previous visits with Tom. Now on familiar territory, McRobert felt more confident. In the shadows behind the Polo, she did a quick change into her *Miss Nike* outfit, comprising a pink tennis shirt, three-quarter length sports pants, a lightweight black bomber jacket, sports sneakers and a *Nike* skip cap, hiding her eyes behind large, pink-framed, mirrored sunglasses.

Julie followed as the two men made their way through the dimly lit car park, ducking down to attach a magnetic tracker device high under the wheel arch of the V-Class, checking on her phone App that it was transmitting.

Entering the revolving door, she made her way past the two men and took a seat at the bar where she ordered a fresh orange spritzer. From a bar stool, she watched them in the mirrored wall behind the optics as they completed their check-in formalities, noting it was Carlos on night duty, in sole charge as one of two assistant managers.

Parked in the street near to the hotel, Janina watched and waited. When the two men and the tall girl were inside the hotel, she shrugged into a long black overcoat. Approaching from a different direction, she made her way near to the hotel entrance where she hid in the garden beside the fishpond and settled to wait for the information she needed.

Julie grinned widely. This small, wiry, fifty-something man at reception was corruptible. She had known him on an off for years. Their first encounter with him had been in Edinburgh, at the *A-List Balmoral Hotel*. Carlos was a keen marathon cycling events

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competitor, training at the hotel's gym where she and Tom took spin classes. The Spaniard believed they were freelance investigative journalists gathering stories on celebrities to sell to tabloids and magazines.

When Patel and his sidekick headed towards her at the bar, she lifted her glass and moved casually to take a seat in a shady corner where she watched them order drinks and snacks on their room tabs before carrying them outside to the smoking area, where they immediately lit up then settled to check their phones.

McRobert approached reception.

"Hi Carlos, how are you tonight?"

"Hello, Julie, is Tom with you?"

"Not yet, we had to grab separate flights. He hopes to get here soon."

"Ah, but I see you are not expected? There is an error on my system?"

"No, Carlos, we are not booked. You know how it is in our business, reacting at the last minute, chasing our tails. Any chance we could have a ground floor garden suite, at mates' rates?"

This was a shorthand code she and Tom used with Carlos to indicate their willingness to settle in cash.

"Let me check. But why you have not ring to me ahead? It is rain heavy on you in Edinburgh?"

"Yes, teeming down, as usual. So, how are tricks, anyone of interest?"

"No, there is not one famous enough for you, sorry. This not *Balmoral Hotel*, only holidaymakers. So sorry, Julie, but we not have no garden rooms tonight. You miss my last one to the check-in before. They insistent to have garden room so I charge to them an upgrade. Anyways, you not like it, Julie, dull an shady, in corner. You want sun all day, yes?"

"Yeah, that pair who just checked in. Holidaymakers? You think so, really? Come on Carlos, spill the beans. The tall one looks like an actor I saw in a film once. The name 'Smith' rings a bell, as in Will Smith. And the bald one, is he Lennon, as in John Lennon? Come on, what's the story?"

She held out her passport with the edge of a 50 Euro note just visible.

"OK, OK. You know something more than me. I make to you photocopies of their passports. And I give to you the two-bedroom suite they were to have on first floor, directly on top

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to them, OK? Nice big veranda but is no sunny. I give to you at standard double room rate. It is deal?"

"Deal. How long are they booked for?"

"Three nights, room only, no meals, prepaid by a travel agency. They have settled the cost of upgrade in advance, by Smith's credit card."

From her wallet, she slipped a second 50 Euro into her passport, raising her eyebrows.

"OK. OK. I print to you card details. No worries, eh?"

"Espléndido! Muchas gracias. Book us in for the same period, please, same deal, no food. I wish to pay in advance by cash, of course, as usual, OK?"

Nodding, Carlos smirked, rounding the amount due down to an even number then printed an apparently legitimate receipt in return for the cash. From the subsequent rapid flight of his fingers over the keyboard, she thought it unlikely her occupation would register on the system, guessing he would void the suite as 'under maintenance' for the duration of their stay.

Accepting the envelope containing the promised photocopies she said, "Great, thanks, Carlos, you are a star! I'll give Tom a call and tell him just to come directly up, shall I?"

"No worries."

"Great, I'll just grab a few bits and pieces from the car and then crash out. It's been a long day."

"Buenas noches. Duerme bien."

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Veranda

Watching the men from beside the Polo, Julie sent a *WhatsApp* to Tom updating him, giving her room number, attaching camera shots of the photocopied information she had received from Carlos, suggesting Tom ask Sadie to check everything. She knew there would be a feedback delay because they would have to wait until Sadie returned to Gartcosh in the morning. She also knew that Sadie was a bit flaky and sometimes refused to bend the rules and might balk at such a request. Again, the thought nagged:

If we had Grumpy's approval, we could make this all work like clockwork and call on back-up from the local police if required.

Julie saw the men saunter from the smoking area and disappear through the door which led to the garden suites.

Immediately on entering her room, she closed the blackout curtains and changed into the figure-hugging elasticated dark green jogging suit she used for 'night operations' and slipped into her glove-like 'five-fingers' Vibram-soled climbing shoes. Two years earlier she and Tom had attended a weekend course at the *Edinburgh International Climbing Arena* at Ratho, in preparation for a 50 K charity challenge transit of the *Via Ferrata*, the iron mountain pathways of the Italian Dolomites range, raising money for the *Edinburgh Children's Hospital* appeal.

Although she would have preferred to be on the ground floor, she judged she would easily negotiate the four metres from the top of her veranda wall to the garden, if required. Regrettably, she did not have her lightweight rope ladder in her kit. Perhaps Tom might have one in his.

With the room lights out, she slipped behind the curtains. Sliding open the door to her veranda, she was immediately aware of the smoke from the men below, a pungent mix, aromatic and bitter. Their voices were low, hard to discern. Slipping on a black balaclava to hide her bright auburn hair, she took a quick peak. The men were out of sight, directly below her, under the overhang of her veranda. To amplify the sound, she transferred her smartphone from its case, placed it on an extending selfie stick. Moving to the end of the veranda, she started the special App which Tom had provided. This App recorded video while also transmitting to a Bluetooth earpiece and viewing goggles. Moving the selfie stick inch by inch she lowered the camera lens over the sidewall of the veranda until its lens was just below the overhang, bringing the men into view.

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The two men were sitting at a large patio table, drinking miniatures and small cans of beer from the room fridge, smoking, eating peanuts, talking about the chances of Leicester going all the way to win the Premier League title.

Patel was certain, "It seemed worth a punt. I got a fixed odds bet on a month ago, ten grand on at six to one."

Reaching forward to refill their glasses, Baldy Lennon grunted, "Great odds, boss. You couldn't get evens now. I think you are onto a winner, there."

The woman in the black coat retreated to her taxi where she used a burner mobile phone to send a text message to the number she had been given. She then drove back to Malaga Airport but was too late to catch the passengers leaving the delayed Edinburgh flight. At this point, she refuelled at the all-night service station, grabbed a coffee and a muffin then drove back to her office to await developments.

Sipping from his drink first, Sabeesh Patel went through his routine of selecting and lighting up then picked up his phone and stared at it.

"Reuben. Ten minutes."

"At last! I'll go and meet him at the Merc and stow the gear, shall I?"

"No, Bez, bring him here. Before I pay the balance due, I want you to check these weapons out first while I watch him react. At the price he's asking, his gear had better be top drawer or I'll have his balls off."

While the stocky man was away, Patel worked on his phone, smoking and sipping.

Julie raised the smartphone, edited the video to an essential clip which she sent to Tom by *WhatsApp*, with the message:

"Should we send this to Grumpy? Or punt it higher up, maybe even to ACC McPhail? I'm not getting into a firearms situation unarmed. McPhail was at the Europol seminar a month ago. He **must** have a contact in the south of Spain. The place is crawling with thugs, right? Any ideas? Are you on the ground yet? How are you going to follow Arlene?"

The reply came back at once.

"Can we talk live?"

"No, I'm still trying to get video of the meeting with Rueben. We need the actual evidence of the weapons handover to nail them. I'll ring you back as soon as. Have a think, please. Scared!"

Julie reset the phone and lowered it slowly back into place just as the man Patel had called Bez returned. With him was a tall broad-shouldered man with a short blonded ponytail clad in a grubby track suit and carrying a heavy sports kit bag over his shoulder.

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From his upright stance and swagger, Julie thought he might be ex-military or had possibly been a professional sportsman, maybe a goalkeeper, tennis player or perhaps a light-heavyweight boxer gone to seed.

"Are you Reuben?", asked Patel.

"No, I'm just the bag man. Rueben is in Malaga. He never comes to meetings with clients."

The voice sounded slightly Irish, faintly Belfast.

"Your name?"

"Call me Calvin as in Calvin Phillips the footballer."

"So, you are Calvin. Calvin what?"

"Just Calvin to you, buddy. Need to know and all that."

From behind, Bez stepped forward and in one swift coordinated action, reached up and covered Calvin's face with a thick cloth while punching him hard in the small of his back, crunching into a kidney.

As the huge man slumped forwards, Bez eased him into a patio chair. Julie caught a waft of chloroform. Bez completed the assault by strapping his captor's wrists and ankles to the chair. He then stuffed the cloth into Calvin's mouth and completed the process by covering the man's head with a thick drawstring plastic bag, tightening the cord fiercely. The whole sequence was over quickly. The man slumped forwards, his chin resting on his chest.

Bez hefted the kit bag onto another patio chair, unzipped it and started to unload the contents onto the patio table, before re-arranging the display for Patel.

While they were still uniformed constables, primarily to gain merit points, Julie McRobert and Tom Graham had taken the police firearms course. Both had easily passed the theoretical elements involving the recognition of a range of weapons in common use by UK police forces, learning how to service and maintain them. It also covered recognition only for weapons used by criminals and terrorists.

Tom and Julie had also passed the practical static shooting elements of the course with pistols and rifles aiming at bullseyes, both gaining high scores. However, Julie had failed the rapid response element which involved shooting at pop-up, pop-out and drop-down figures, some bad guys, others depicted as innocents, including children, pets and livestock.

In counselling, it was revealed she had once witnessed a shooting in Northern Ireland while on holiday with her parents, visiting a cousin of her father's who was a serving

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member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. In this shooting, a teenage girl had died when she innocently rode her bicycle into what had been a police snare operation to capture a terrorist parking a stolen vehicle loaded with explosives. This buried trauma had rendered Julie unsuitable for the sought-after firearms qualification. Tom had gone onto gain a full merit pass.

When the weapons had been set out and checked to the stocky man's complete satisfaction, he said, "It's good gear, boss. No worries."

The items set out for inspection comprised:

2 no. Mossad Berretta 70 or 71 pistols 0.22 calibre pocket pistols as favoured by Israeli Mossad for self-protection.

2 no. suppressors for same.

2 no. hand-held direct contact Tasers

2 no. Taser pistols with remote strike probes and conductive wires

6 no. Glock 17 pistols as favoured by British forces

6 no. suppressors for same.

6 no. short barrel machine pistols of unknown make, possibly Russian.

6 no. Raysun X-1 multifunctional stun gun

20 no. boxes of colour coded cartridges for same.

4 no. yellow (barbed probes and conductive wire pack)

4 no. pink (pepper spray, mist, close range)

4 no. red (pepper spray, fog, wide area)

4 no. black (explosive rubber bullet, stun effect, close range)

4 no. blue (explosive stun cartridge, far field up to 80 metres range)

There were also cable ties, hanks of cord, hoods and dozens of Velcro straps which might be used as alternatives to secure wrists and ankles and, intriguingly, three child-sized sleeping bags.

"Right Bez, check him."

Bez felt for a pulse at the captive's neck and wrist then shook his head, "Boss, this one's dead."

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"So be it. Check him for identification. He must have something. Look in his car. Dump him in the boot while you're at it. Pack this gear and put it in the Merc, make sure it's out of sight."

"Boss, his is a Porsche Boxster, with a front boot. He might not fit. I'll check."

"OK, however you do it, get rid of him and the car. Torch it. I'll check that De Sooden and his team are on schedule then I'm going to take a pill and get some sleep. Make sure you come in quietly."

"Sure, Boss."

While Bez tidied up, Patel took a seat, lit another aromatic cigarette then turned his attention to his phone.

In her earbud Julie heard him say quietly, "Good, nine o'clock at the latest." Then more loudly to Bez, "RV at the staff car park of the Water Park at nine. I've confirmed we have the gear. They have a white Ford Ranger pick-up with *AquaFirst* decals wearing blue boiler suits. He could only get three sidekicks but they are good, ex SAS who've been together for twenty-odd years. Don't wake me before quarter to eight and get me the usual for breakfast."

"Sure, Boss."

From a foil pack, Patel then palmed two small pills into his hand, downed them with the remains of his beer then went indoors.

Julie waited until Bez had moved off with the corpse of 'Call me Calvin' over one shoulder and the kit bag of weapons slung over the other. When he had gone, she raised her selfie stick, retrieved her mobile phone and retreated to her bathroom to try to reach Tom on a *WhatsApp* voice call.

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Spree

At Malaga, Tom waited his turn to disembark. He was among the last dozen or so to reach the tarmac. Skipping past the others, he raced across the tarmac to get through frontier control. The checks were cursory, the two bored officers chatting to each other about football as they processed the late arrivals. The baggage reclaim zone at *Pablo Picasso Airport* was nearly deserted, the carousels idle. Skirting the perimeter of the huge space, he made a quick visit to the toilet then checked for his target.

Standing in a quiet spot well away from the bustle of the milling, chattering crowd, Arlene Bishop had her head down, staring at her phone, oblivious to her surroundings. The Edinburgh carousel was empty but running awaiting the baggage handlers. The next late-night flight due was from Stockholm. He guessed she would have a long wait to collect her huge new suitcase filled with her spending spree clothes, shoes and accessories purchased at Edinburgh airport during her wait for the delayed flight.

Taking a chance, he made his way to the Hertz desk and hired a white Renault Espace people carrier, a vehicle commonly used as an executive transfer taxi to take well-heeled holidaymakers to and from their 5-star hotels and apartments. Turning on his full power smile, he explained he was to pick up a colleague he had never met before who was due on the Stockholm flight, he asked to borrow a clipboard and a sheet of blank A4 paper, promising he would return the clipboard with the vehicle at the end of the hire.

Trotting across to the pick-up zone, he then removed all the obvious signs that it was a hired vehicle, changed into a garish Hawaiian shirt and shorts outfit he used for his Edinburgh Café Habana disco nights then re-positioned the Espace into the nearly empty public parking area near the main exit from Arrivals.

Inside, next to the carousel, Arlene was on the edge of panic. There was a *WhatsApp* from Maureen reminding Arlene of the address for the gated community where the kids were with Maureen's mother.

There was also a second message, a typical Maureen 'command'."

"Ring me on WhatsApp as soon as you land at Malaga. I need to alert the gatehouse of your ETA. Voice only! We must talk. Essential!"

Arlene dialled but Maureen did not answer the call which dropped out after the time limit with no invitation to leave a message.

Perhaps Maureen was asleep.

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Declan had hinted she used sleeping pills but also revealed she often worked through the night, connecting to different time zones, checking on her other businesses.

Arlene checked the WhatsApp message again. It had been posted while she was in the air.

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What Arlene could not know was that Maureen was back in the operating theatre for a second time as the surgical team fought to stem a severe haemorrhage at the site of the earlier procedure. The sad reality was that they were losing her. Many in the team were already thinking ahead, mentally writing up their logs, choosing their words carefully, preparing their defences in case the patient's relatives might call for an independent medical review of how and why the patient had died. It was the major downside of working with high worth individuals.

Dr Hans Stocker, glanced up at the theatre clock and noted the time as 04.43 and grimaced at the looming symmetry: he had started this second procedure at 03.33.

He looked across his anaesthetist Annamarie Favre who shook her head, almost imperceptibly.

The theatre clock moved to 04.44 as the blood pressure alarm sounded, pinging loudly, swiftly joined by the dreaded insistent cheeping as the heartbeat monitor red lined.

The cardiac crash team had already re-started Maureen Bishop's heart three times over the past hour, risking brain damage in the process.

All eyes looked to Stocker. Enough was enough.

A humble and deeply religious man, he was inordinately proud of his team, assembled with care, the best in the world, lured by good wages and working conditions and by his reputation as the foremost oncologist in Europe specialising in female cancers of the reproductive organs.

Speaking in careful English he said, "We did our best. Now we must let her go to meet Our Father. God be praised. Thank you everyone."

Turning to his assistant surgeon, a small, wiry Hindu man, he said, "Avirat, will you please finish up here. I must now go and open the envelope she left with me and complete my promise to her. Thank you."

At the exit, he turned, "Please complete your logs and post them to me within the hour, thank you. And then, everyone, get some rest and try to put this loss behind you. We have a full list for the day ahead. We shall make a start here in theatre at ten o'clock. God Bless you all."

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When Arlene left the baggage hall and entered the nearly deserted concourse, she wondered if she would be able to find a taxi. Tom had been counting on this.

His welcome notice displayed "Miss Arlene Bishop" which he held up, under his chin with one hand, while waving gaily to her from the barrier, hamming up, going over the top.

"Hiya Arlene! I just *knew* it must be you. I've got a wee extra late-night job here with a guy I know who does exec transfers. Emre is Turkish, actually. He used to work in a car plant in Stuttgart, which means he's amazingly good with Germans but totally crap at English. So, when he rang me and told me he had a shout for me and it was from Edinburgh, well, I just jumped at it, even though it is ruining my beauty sleep. But *Hey*, when I saw it was for Arlene Bishop, I just said to myself, "Could it possibly be my *gorgeous* friend from *GNB*?" Hey, guess what, it is, it's *you*. Here, dear one, give me a hug and let me take that suitcase for you. Hey, Arlene, is this real Gucci? It's brand new, yeah? Did you win the Lottery? C'mon, I'm parked right outside."

"Hank! *My God* am I glad to see you! I was so worried I would not get a taxi."

"My Princess, your worries are over, Prince Hank is here to rescue you. How can I help."

"What do you mean? Are you not booked to take me to Maureen's place?"

"Yes, of course but just one little detail is missing. Where is it?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Eh, here, check this address, it's on my phone."

Pretending to be short-sighted, Tom took the phone and squinted at it.

"Right, yes. I gotcha. To be honest my darling girl, I've got no idea where that is but hey, that's what *Google* maps are for, eh?" He glanced up and over her shoulder and whispered conspiratorially, "Hey, Arlene, that guy over there, he's watching us with binoculars."

She turned to look. Tom started the snoopier App on his phone then placed it back-to-back with hers to activate the Near Field Communications link, his fingers dancing across her onscreen keyboard. As she began to turn back, he hissed, "No, honey, over there, beyond the Departures entrance, just behind the stack of trolleys?" To keep her facing away, he added, "the guy in the black puffa jacket, the one who looks like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Keep watching the trolleys Arlene, I saw him duck down but he'll pop his head up again for sure."

As an added distraction, he leaned closer into her personal space, bumping her slightly, copying the actions of professional pickpockets he had seen on training videos.

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This rouse kept Arlene checking while Tom kept his own eyes on the tiny screen, concentrating, tapping and swiping furiously, creating a Bluetooth link from his phone to Arlene's operating system which would enable him to relay all incoming and outgoing traffic as a ghost clone of her device.

When she turned back to him, he said. "I think he must have crawled along to that next door. Or maybe he's still crouched behind the trolleys." He saw the raw fear on her face and added, "Arlene, do you think someone's stalking you?"

As he returned her phone, Arlene felt herself tremble.

"Maybe, I'm not sure."

She stared hard at the phone screen.

Why is Maureen not responding? Is the man with the binoculars here to follow me. Or is he here as a sort of bodyguard? God, I should have used the loo!

Arlene decided to disobey and sent a *WhatsApp* message to Maureen.

"Here at Malaga airport. Flight was late. Thanks for the taxi. On my way now to check on the kids."

Arlene's face filled with fear and tears formed in her eyes. Searching for a small pack of tissues, her hands trembled as she jerked at the zip on the front pouch pocket of her new *Gucci* carry-on rucksack, bought with her new suitcase as a discounted matching pair. She tugged again and both her iPad and her Maureen phone flew out, skidding across the pavement onto the roadway and into the path of a slow-moving airport service vehicle towing a long line of empty luggage wagons.

Tom leapt forward and scooped them up.

"Ah, let me check. Yeah, the iPad screen is slightly cracked but it's working OK, I think. So, its Wi-Fi only then, no micro-SIM? Quite right, the cost of mobile data is criminal. But looks as if your antique *Nokia* is dead. Kaput. Sorry."

"Thanks Hank. You're a star, you really are. I was planning to upgrade the iPad anyway."

"What about the *Nokia*?"

"I keep it for sentimental reasons. It probably needs charging."

"Just as well you have that other phone, eh? No worries, Princess, I'm sure we will be able to get them both repaired or at worst salvage the data and get it onto new devices for you, eh?"

"Thanks."

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She powered down the iPad and placed both devices in an internal zipped pocket. Blowing her nose, she could feel her stomach churn again.

Picking up her suitcase, Tom made a show of looking all around to check again for the phantom Schwarzenegger wearing the black puffa jacket.

Tugging at his arm, Arlene said, "Hank, let's get out of here, please!"

"OK, honey, chin up. I'll keep you safe, promise. Time to trot! C'mon!"

Offering her his arm, they fled to the Espace which he blipped open with his remote.

"Now my Princess, hop into the back and buckle up. No guests in the front in case of distractions, company protocol, OK?"

Using the clone App on his iPhone, Tom checked the message Arlene had sent to Maureen then tapped the destination address details into his phone's Satnav. Set for the journey, he gunned the Renault out of the carpark onto the loop road and down onto the near empty highway.

Seated and buckled, Arlene peered backwards at the receding airport, searching for any sign of her phantom pursuer.

As they sped along just below the speed limit, Tom studied her anxious face in the rear-view mirror, decided to take a direct approach and go fishing for information; but first he silenced *Google Assistant's* droned instructions.

"Arlene, what's going on, my Princess? You know I'll help in anyway I can. Should we go to the police?"

"No, Hank, no. Maureen would not want that."

"Who is Maureen?"

"My sister-in-law. I'm heading to her place to look after her three boys. She's away on business just now and her mother Teresa is not keeping too well."

"Hey, Arlene, surely it's you these people are chasing, not Maureen, right?"

"Oh Hank, I really don't know. The whole thing's a mess. Maureen told me to call her on *WhatsApp* as soon as I landed, told me she must speak to me on voice, yet she won't pick up."

"Is she starting a new nail bar here, is that why you're here?"

"No. I'm not sure. No, it's about the kids, her three boys. You see Declan is missing."

"Is Declan one of her sons, have they taken him hostage?"

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"No, Hank. Declan's her husband, my stepbrother. He's missing. Maureen is very worried about him. She was on a trip to see her mother, Teresa, at the address we are heading for. I think Maureen has gone looking for Declan. She thinks he's got himself into trouble, but I think he's swanned off with some floozie. He's always chasing women. If I were Maureen, I dump him. But really, Hank, I'm just guessing. Maureen is very secretive. And she is very, very clever. You never know what she is really thinking. Anyway, can we just leave it? Please?"

"Right, I got you. Maybe Teresa will know what Maureen's doing, eh?"

"No, Hank. Look, I really shouldn't be telling you this, but Teresa is spooky, maybe even psychotic. Really, she is not a nice person. But this is not about her, it's about Declan, I think. You see, Teresa Milloy, even though she is in her fifties is still a good-looking woman. If you were to meet her, when she's sober and dolled up, you might think she was about my age. Teresa's just like Declan, obsessed with sex. Maureen told me one time that she chases men, always has done. Teresa even tried to steal Declan from her, she said, even though she could be his mother. Why Maureen doesn't just cut her out of her life I don't know. She certainly dumped my mother and will not let her near her boys. I don't know what Maureen said to her but whatever it was, it has turned Mum against Declan and me. As I said, it's a mess. I really don't know what to make of it. Anyway, Hank, it really is none of your business, is it?"

"Arlene, honey, please don't worry about unloading on me, I won't tell a living soul. Let's just get you to Maureen's place so you can check the boys are safe? OK? I'm sure from what you have told me Declan will turn up soon, right?"

Watching her in the mirror, he saw her hunch her shoulders and dab tears from her eyes. Then she took an extra deep breath and let it out slowly, nodding her head. From interviewing suspects, he recognised the moment.

Here it comes, the big release.

"Hank, look, I know I shouldn't tell you this, but Declan told me a few weeks ago that Maureen needs him to help her run her business empire. He's her front man. He thought he was telling me his 'big secret' but I had already sussed that. And I can tell you he's good at it, he really is. He can be very charming when he wants to be. When we were kids, we used to be close but not so much now. He's changed a lot. So have I, I suppose."

"Her business *empire*? You mean she is like that guy Tom Hunter, the entrepreneur?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. I only know about *GNB* but from what I've picked up from Declan I think she has dozens of businesses. He has said lots of times she might be the smartest woman in the world. Actually, she can be creepy and scary. I just hate it when she suddenly appears at my flat or in the office at *GNB* to check up on me. She has the

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scariest eyes and can tell at once if you try to hide anything from her. But Hank, the oddest thing ever is that she phoned me this morning, just as I was getting ready to go to the nail bar. Actually, it was yesterday morning, right? Anyway, she caught me off guard. Then, for the very first time ever, she actually said 'please' to me when she asked me to come here to look after her boys. Weird! Maureen does not *do* 'please' and 'thank you'. She just gives orders, commands, if you like, instructions which must be obeyed to the letter. She's a control freak, paranoid about security. When all the alarms are set at GNB it's like Fort Knox."

"Really? What is so special about GNB that she needs to make it ultra-secure?"

He saw her head go down, a sure sign she was not about to answer his question.

"Listen Hank, I'm beginning to think these guys who are chasing me might have her as a hostage or maybe she is on the run or in hiding, leading them away from the boys. I just can't figure it all out. Honest to God, Hank, I'm scared to go to Maureen's place in case they follow me and grab the boys. Did I say I'm their godmother? But the truth is, I don't really know them. Maureen keeps them to herself. So why she left them with Teresa doesn't make sense to me. Look, Hank, sorry to give you all my grief but I'm worried what will happen next. My head has been spinning all day, right from the moment she phoned. And Hank, I am really desperate for the toilet. Can we stop soon?"

Tom could feel his phone vibrating in his pocket and when he spotted a filling station in the distance high above them, its lights out, closed for the night, he swung off onto the slip road and parked under the canopy out of the intermittent rain.

"Arlene, my Princess, calm down. While we've been on the move, I've been watching the following traffic and we are most definitely in the clear so far. I promise you. So, here's a plan. Let's take a break for fifteen minutes, watch the traffic, see if we can spot anyone trying to follow us. If we see something suspicious, we might need to ask the police for some help, some sort of protection. Anyway, I'll need to check my messages and let Emre know what's happening here."

"No, please, Hank, don't involve the police and don't tell anyone else what I told you. Anyway, I've just remembered. Teresa's place is in a gated community with a gatehouse and guards. If Maureen found out I had asked the police for help, she would sack me or maybe worse. I could lose my pension plan and investments. She can be vicious if anyone disobeys her."

"Arlene, look, I don't want to upset you but really, I think this worry about being followed might be all in your mind. Maybe that guy we saw at the airport was some sort of security warden or just a guy heading home after a long hard day, eh? I mean it was pretty dark over in that corner, eh? And let's face it, Princess, you've had a long hard day. You must

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be exhausted, your nerves must be jangling. Do you have any paracetamol you could take? I'm sure once we get you to Teresa's place, you'll be fine. But I promise you, if you need help, I'll be there for you, whatever it takes, OK?"

'OK, Hank. And thanks. Will the toilets be open?"

"Maybees aye, maybees naw. You might have to do the squat round the back. Just watch you don't get caught on CCTV, eh?"

"What? Oh yeah, I get it."

"Here, Princess, take this pack of wet wiped, eh> No pun intended."

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The Promise

Professor Hans Stocker re-read the hand-written letter then carefully typed the web address into his personal laptop, as per the instructions from Mrs Maureen Bishop and in accordance with the promise he had solemnly given during their pre-op chat. He was not a proficient typist but, as in everything he did he was meticulous, checking and re-checking the complicated alphanumeric string four times to be sure he had copied it correctly.

He already had a bad feeling about the promise he had made. The Scottish woman had always been difficult, demanding, headstrong, snappy, often discourteous. Over thirty months and four procedures he had endure many encounters with her and had formed the view she might be in need of psychiatric help, but he had chosen to say nothing of this to her or colleagues as it had been obvious from the outset she would not survive. The only surprise was that she had lasted so long.

In her final hours, however, she had become calmer, friendlier, more amenable, using 'please' and 'thank you', words which had been absent from her vocabulary previously.

Steeling himself, he pressed the return key:

Bagpipe music played softly. He recognised the lilt of 'The Bonnie, Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond'.

The screen showed three beautiful young boys standing in front of a tall good-looking man who was obviously their father, all four smiling at the camera.

The screen morphed into a view of a large lake dotted with islands with snow covered mountains in the distance.

The view of Loch Lomond faded and with it the music ended.

He waited but no prompts appeared.

The page refreshed.

A clear blue sky appeared. Words scrolled from below, disappearing at the top of the screen:

Thank you, Doctor Stocker. You have fulfilled the first part of your promise. I know that you did your best for me. There will be no recriminations.

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For reasons which do not concern you, you must ensure that your records show I was treated successfully for a minor procedure of your choosing, cured, rehabilitated and discharged from this clinic this evening fit and fully well.

Dispose of my remains by cremation and scatter my ashes on Lake Geneva.

It is essential for business and personal reasons that I live on for the duration of our agreement. Do not fail me in this or you will suffer greatly.

At the first opportunity, check your personal bank account. If you keep my secret for the next ten years, an equal amount will be deposited monthly which should provide you with a good retirement.

This is the carrot.

Provided you do not break faith with me, you may continue as before and the child pornography which you have on your home computer will remain secret. Cross me and a full record of your visits to the Dark Web sites where you purchased these images and video clips will be sent to all the major news outlets in Switzerland.

This is the stick.

Please complete the second part of your task by destroying all trace of the access code. Do this NOW, please, by flushing the letter and envelope down your WC. The paper has been treated to make it dissolve instantly. Thank you.

In a few seconds, this website will be shut down forever and wiped from the server.

The screen faded and a system message appeared:

"Server error: connection to this web address has been lost."

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Peek-a-boo

Tom stood at the far side of the filling station, behind a set of fuel pumps, viewing the *WhatsApp* video clip Julie had sent showing Patel, his muscle and the man who wished to be called Calvin playing out their macabre episode. From the wording of Julie's message, he sensed she was on the edge of panic.

Noting this information had been posted twenty-three minutes earlier, he replied: "Julie, can we chat live?"

His phone shuddered signalling a voice call. He glanced over at Arlene who was slumped in the *Espace*, her head against the window, clearly zonked, out of it. He stepped forwards, to be certain he was out of earshot.

Her voice was a whisper.

"Tom, I'm in the loo with the door locked. This is too scary for me. I hate guns, as you well know. I'm out. First thing I'm heading home, back to Edinburgh, back to sanity. You're on your own, sorry."

"Calm down, my lovely, lovely girl. Clearly they did not spot you. Trust me, you're completely safe. Fantastic work with the tracking and video shots. Now we have some firm proof of the involvement of nasty gangsters. Grumpy cannot ignore this one, proof that Patel is still as devious and ruthless as ever. But don't forget, Maureen Bishop and Arlene are our main targets, right? Those sleeping bags, they must be for Maureen's three boys, right? It's a hostage kidnapping attack Patel and his SAS squad are planning, to extort something from Maureen, right? Arlene has just told me they are with Maureen's mother Teresa safe and sound inside a gated community with guards. I reckon Patel knows exactly where it is. I reckon they have tortured Declan to get all the background they need. Maureen told Arlene Declan is missing. I think he is probably dead, given what they did to 'Call me Calvin.'"

"So Tom, why not go to the local police right now and explain ourselves, get them to ring Grumpy and McPhail and let the locals do the dirty work for us while we stay in the background?"

"No, Julie, definitely not! We will of course use the locals to take out Patel and the Madrid crowd and leave the path clear for us to track Arlene, use her to flush out Maureen, she is the real prize, *our* prize, not MacQueen's, ours. After all, it's what we have been chasing hard over these last few months, right? But great work so far and all down to you, DS McRobert. Promotion beckons! We even have an exact time and location

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for Patel and Baldy's rendezvous with the baddies from Madrid. All we have to do now is figure who we should send this video clip to, so they get lifted before they cause any harm. The only downside is that without Call me Calvin's corpse, this video clip could be shrugged off as some sort of play acting, a sort of rehearsal for a dark movie, the sort of thing people sell to weirdos on the Dark Web."

'You think Grumpy MacQueen and McPhail would kick this can down the road?'

'Julie, does Grumpy even know what we are onto here? Does he even care? Remember, he blanked my request for a person-to-person chat. D'you know something? I still think Cathy Bishop is involved somehow. It will all come out in the end.'

"Maybe Rodney decided to ignore your request. After all, Grumpy is on leave and had left orders not to be disturbed. Tom, I think it's time to go directly to McPhail and tell him what we have, get his backing."

"**Ah!** So, DS Julie McRobert, would **you** like to be the one to try to convince McPhail on this? You know, press the red panic button and get whoever is riding point on the night shift duty desk at Gartcosh to put you through to McPhail's bedside phone? After all, it's your video, all your very own brilliant work."

"Well, Tom, thanks a million on that one. But just so you get the message, no way Jose! So, what do we do? Nothing?"

"No, Julie, **nothing** is not an option. Do you have a tracker on their vehicle?"

"Of course. But anyway, we know they will be at the Water Park at nine o'clock for the meet with the Madrid team."

"Patel's muscle man, what's his name again?"

"Bez. He does the dirty work, the heavy lifting, pun intended. From what I've seen Patel is not a hands-on guy. It's as if physical input is beneath him. He seems to just sit and chain-smoke and give orders. Regal comes to mind."

"And he said he was taking a pill to get a good sleep?"

"As per the video, yes."

"And we know from MacQueen's archive files Patel is a control freak? So, I bet he has a second key for the Mercedes. They'll give you a standby key for any rental if you pay extra."

"Tom, you are so right. Are you psychic? I saw Bez give him a key before they got into the V Class."

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"And that bag of nasty goodies is locked up in the Merc, right? And you have the expertise to disable them, right?"

"No!"

"Julie, Julie, Julie. Come on, you can do it. That's the safest way to ensure no one gets hurt, right? I mean. An ambush in a public car park? Someone must get hurt, right?"

"Tom, I'm too scared. No!"

"Julie, Julie, let's think it through. One step at a time. Get the key from Patel, move the weapons to the Polo then ring me again, OK? Go for it!"

"No, Tom. He might wake up or Bez might come back. No!"

"Julie, do you think Patel is weaponised?"

"No."

'Julie, are you a world class exponent of Ju Jitsu?'

"Yes."

"So, go do it."

"Hey, why do I always get the shitty end of the stick?"

"Because you are a wonderful human being?"

"Very true, but first and quickly, how goes it with Arlene."

"Yip, good. I had to put the wind up her a bit and it worked. She spilled some of her beans. And it is very clear she is not a fan of Spider Woman Maureen Bishop. Arlene's been 'commanded' to come here to 'protect' the three kids because Declan is missing and she, Maureen, has a big deal going down. Suffice to say, as Hank the Yank, I'm her very best new friend who also just happens to be her transfer taxi driver taking her to Teresa's place. I'll send you the address in a mo. We're at a filling station for a comfort break and to try to evade a phantom man I invented who might be trailing us to our destination. Actually, I think I might have spooked her too much but hey, it's all down to my superlative acting, yeah?"

"OK, I think I've got the gist. More of your wonderful tale later."

"So, Julie, you'll disable the weapons?"

"OK, I'll try. If I can get the kit bag with the weapons into the boot of my Polo then at least their planned assault or whatever they are aiming at will be delayed and we could

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use the kit bag and weapons to get prints and DNA. With the weapons and the video we might be able to get the locals involved. What do you think?"

"Very much second best. Why not do it in two stages? First move the weapons to the Polo then, when Bez is back in their suite and zizzing, you go back out to the Polo, disable their gear and then pop the bag back into the Merc. Let me know when this has been achieved, right? Leave it with me to figure out who to send your video clip to and we will let the locals nab them in complete safety? That puts us back on plan A, right?"

"OK, I'll have a go. Time is of the essence. Must tog up then take a dreep. Out."

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Sequence

Returning to the Espace, Tom smiled at his sleeping passenger. Her lipstick was patchy and her eye makeup was needing attention. Relaxed, she looked less garish. He thought the innocence of sleep improved her. A recurring thought chimed:

Perhaps if she gave up trying to look like a superstar, she would do herself a favour. It seems clear she is being used and has no real idea what Maureen and Declan's businesses are about. I very much doubt if she knows anything about Dalgetty Developments.

Arlene's phone began to trill insistently. His own phone began to shudder as the ghost clone software signalled an incoming message on Arlene's phone.

He stepped closer to be sure he was in Bluetooth range, ducked out of sight and checked his screen.

"Arlene,

just after Morran was born, I developed ovarian cancer. Do you remember how dreadful I looked at his Baptism at Cardross? That was when I first realised I was so ill. I thought I could fight it but sadly, it has beaten me.

*"This message is the first of a set of a sequence of pre-planned instructions which I ask you to follow faithfully, **please**.*

*"I suspect Declan has been taken down. This was probably by a man called Sabeesh Patel or someone he paid to do it for him. My sources have confirmed Patel was booked to fly from Glasgow to Malaga arriving just ahead of you. Thankfully, the delay in your departure from Edinburgh means it is unlikely he spotted you. I hope not. I suspect he is planning to snatch my children to use them to get me to cede control of my businesses. Be warned, Arlene, if he discovers you are part of this rescue, he would have you eliminated without a second thought. So, Arlene, **you must act at once and get the children away**. It has to be you. I cannot trust my precious boys to anyone else.*

"I have a place in Morocco which is secret, secluded and ideal as a first safe haven. Once you get there, I'll move you again, when things have died down. The first priority is to get the boys away from my mother. I expect Patel knows about her. She has a bad reputation on the Costa del Sol. I should never have left the boys with her. Never. Only because I was desperate. That was a mistake. I should have involved you sooner. Tell her I have told you to take them home to Ben View. Lay it on thick. Hopefully she will be too bombed to put up any resistance.

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"There is a package of documents in a red and blue Disney travel rucksack, with a Mickey and Minnie logo. Milloy knows where I hid it. He thinks it's a game. He will show you where we hid it together if you say the codeword "Abracadabra." Inside there is a full set of documents authorising you as their guardian. There is also a full set of pre-authorised adoption papers which I hope you will sign in the presence of a Notary Public but that is for later. Instructions will follow when the time is right.

"When you reach Morocco, send a WhatsApp message to me from your phone - as if I am still alive. We must keep up the pretence that I am still alive so that Patel and the others chase me and not you.

"Do not worry about the next few weeks and months, I have thought everything through, very carefully. Do not worry about money. I have sufficient funds squirreled away which will be paid into an online account I have set up in your name, details to be provided later.

"There are other messages waiting for you on this server, which will be released in a pre-set sequence. Trust me, I have planned this escape in complete detail. All you must do for me is obey.

"Arlene, it is essential that you forget about your old life in Glasgow and never, ever return there and do not contact them, not by phone or email. NO CONTACT, please. Those people, every one of them, are your past. If you care for my boys, you will have a good future, I promise you.

"Arlene, you are a good steady person. You must learn to trust yourself more and stop punishing yourself for your past mistakes. Live a good, clean life and love my boys for me. Remember you took very public vows when you agreed to be their Godmother.

"Do not let Patel get my boys and do not let anyone know I am dead. It is safer for you if they think I'm still alive.

"Arlene, go, NOW, please. You can do it. Thanks. Hug them for me, lots and lots, every day of their lives.

This one-shot automated message is being transmitted from a remote server. You have a few seconds to re-read it after which access will be denied and the message will be deleted.

Before Tom could copy and paste the content from his screen to a Word document, his screen blacked out.

His phone juddered - a WhatsApp message from Julie:

"The weapons bag is in the boot of my Polo. I dropped Patel's car key on the ground at the passenger side of the V Class. Hopefully he will think it fell from his pocket as he was climbing out. The locator bug is in place. Baldy Bez is just getting out of a taxi so presumably Calvin and his vehicle have been dumped and torched? How goes it with

Under Contract

Arlene? Ring me in say, ten minutes after I have a shower and get into my baby dolls and prepare a pot of Red Bush tea."

Tom turned to check on Arlene who was climbing out of the Espace. She staggered towards him and crumpled to her knees before throwing up at his feet.

Under Contract

Dash

Tom stood behind Arlene, hauled her to her feet, eased her backwards and helped her into the front passenger seat of the Espace, rummaged in her rucksack, found his travel pack of wipes and cleaned her mouth. Her eyes were unfocused, her lips trembling.

"So, Arlene, what is it? Bad news? Speak to me, honey. Whatever it is, let me help. Just ask and I'll fix it for you, if I can."

Arlene's eyes swung down to her phone, staring at it trying to process what she had just read. Her mind moved into overload; she slipped away from reality.

A vision of a beautiful villa set in a landscaped garden with a swimming pool and tennis court filled her mind:

The boys were jumping into the pool, laughing and giggling, squirting water from plastic water rifles.

Milloy shouted to her, "Come on Mummy Arlene, you jump in too."

From the edge of the pool, Madden squirted water at her, soaking her bikini. She looked down at herself and saw she was slimmed down, fit and tanned. Running towards her Morran gave her a full blast of water and she sprang up from her lounge and grabbed him, swinging him up into her arms and running forward to leap from the edge. Together they tumbled into the water, laughing.

Seeing her smile, Tom said, "There, so it was good news, after all?"

"Hank, can I trust you with a very important secret?"

"Try me. As I said, just ask, I'll do whatever I can to help you."

"OK. I can't tell you everything, just that the boys are in deadly danger. Please will you get me to them as soon as possible. I want to get them home to Scotland to safety. Maureen sent me a *WhatsApp* instructing me to take them away from Spain before some bad people come to kidnap them and hold them as hostage, to use them to steal her business empire from her."

"Oh, why can't she do it herself, why can't she come and get them from wherever she is?"

"Eh, yes. Because she is in hospital, getting treatment and I have to do it as Declan's missing."

Under Contract

"Where could Declan be, do you know?"

"No, but he is a bit of a womaniser. Remember I told you before? Maybe he has taken the chance of Maureen being away to gad about. It's in his nature. Declan's always been obsessed with sex."

"OK. So, we need to collect the boys and get you to an airport so you can fly to Glasgow. Let's go do it."

"Hank, I owe you one, big time."

"Hey, what are friends for. Buckle up."

Hank reactivated *Google* maps and again silenced its voice. The screen showed a countdown of 38 minutes to their destination.

He accelerated back onto the motorway and followed the voice commands. The road was deserted: he took a chance, pressing the accelerator pedal flat to the floor, enjoying the surge of power, ignoring the slick of water on the road surface. He had always enjoyed driving fast, on the edge, aggressively.

Twenty-three minutes later he saw the *Google* icon show his destination on the top right-hand edge of the map six minutes away. He almost missed the turn-off and had to brake hard. The slip road led him onto a local feeder road alongside the main carriageway. A second right hand turn took him onto a sloping track which ran alongside a high fence topped with razor wire. Every few hundred metres there was a mast with double CCTV cameras pointing both ways along the fence. After a long steep climb, without warning the track swung round to a dead end at closed double gates. Behind the gates there was a dimly lit Portacabin type building and behind that a scatter of further industrial style buildings, all unlit. As they arrived, floodlights illuminated the entire area both inside and outside the gates. A CCTV camera on a mast was pointed directly at them.

After a delay, more lights came on in the Portacabin and after another delay and heavy-set elderly guard in a rumpled uniform opened the door of the Portacabin and stood looking at them. He was wearing a holstered pistol on a lanyard. He waddled to the gate but did not open it.

Arlene left the Espace and moved forwards to explain her presence. Tom blipped down his window to listen in. The guard spoke reasonable English. Arlene explained herself and showed him her passport. He produced a mobile phone and took a photograph of her head and shoulders and another of her passport, nodded, and asked her to wait while he called the Control Centre. A few minutes later he came back to explain unauthorised vehicles and taxis were not allowed into the complex for security reasons. Transport had been arranged by the Control Centre to take her to Mrs Bishop's villa.

Under Contract

"Hank, will you wait for us, please. We need to get back to the airport as soon as I can book a flight, OK?"

"Sure, no worries."

A few minutes later, a long wheel-based three-row golf buggy arrived, driven by a tall slim man wearing a tan coloured uniform. From his bearing, Tom gained the impression he was in charge. The driver parked well short of the gate. Two younger guards stepped down from the buggy. They were wearing smart, well-pressed versions of the same dark green uniform worn by the Portacabin guard. They fanned out, their hands resting on holstered pistols attached to their belts with white lanyards. The driver dismounted and accosted the Portacabin guard. In a short monologue in harsh Spanish, he seemed to be scolding the older man. He then sent him forwards to open a pedestrian pass gate. Arlene was beckoned forward. The more senior guard saluted her, then invited her to take a rear seat. Before boarding she returned to the Espace.

From their whispered mutterings, Tom deduced that her action clearly annoyed the buggy guards.

"Hank, you won't desert me, will you?"

"No, of course not. But really, Arlene, seriously, don't you think the boys would be safer if you stayed here with them, surely. I mean this security set up here seems mighty impressive."

"Yeah, Tom, it does look safe but Maureen was very definite. She wants the boys taken home to Scotland. *Ben View* has pretty good security too."

Pretending ignorance, Tom queried, "*Ben View*?"

"Her house at Loch Lomond, near Balloch. It's absolutely massive."

"OK, my Princess, you know best. I'll be here and get you back to Malaga Airport soon as."

"Hank, I was thinking, maybe we should use a different airport. Could you take us to Madrid?"

"Yeah, I get it. These bad guys are based here, in the *Costa del Sol* aka *Costa del Crime*, right?"

"I'll pay you top rate with a big tip, honest."

"OK. While you get the boys, I'll ring Emre and tell him the good news."

"Hank, please, *no!* Don't let anyone else into the loop, just us two, OK?"

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"OK. Sure. Yeah, I get it now, 'need to know' and all that. Hey, it's like we're in a movie, yes?"

"Hank, please don't make fun of me. If you knew everything you would know this threat is deadly serious."

"Right, sorry."

"Good. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Just one thing, Arlene."

"What?"

"Before you wake the boys, I think you should wash off your makeup. As a friend, that Geisha look, well, it doesn't really work for you. Sorry."

"Right. Yeah. Yeah, I was thinking of a change anyway."

When the buggy disappeared over the hill, Tom swung the Espace round to face back down the track and take his face out of the line of sight of the CCTV camera. The elderly guard returned to his gatehouse. The floodlights were switched off.

Far below, the sinuous ribbon of the MA-20 glittered like a snake.

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Tom dialled Julie on *WhatsApp*.

"Ah, hello stranger, I was about to give up on you. I'll put you on speakerphone while I finish my beauty routine. Oh, guess what? I've just had a hot bath, my first in weeks so I'm feeling all woozy, ready to slip into the Land of Nod. OK, shoot."

"I speak, you listen, eh?"

"Ah, here we go, Tom Graham in podcast mode. I'll try to stay awake. Now caller, at the tone, *bee-gin*."

Tom ran through the entire raft of events finishing with, "Still sleepy?"

"Wow! Spider Queen Maureen Bishop is dead? Or is she just scamming us?"

"No Julie, I'm putting my money on this being true. Which means that it is even more important we keep close to Arlene. I'm hoping that Maureen will slip up and give us a link into her byzantine world operating behind the cloak of *Dalgetty Developments*."

"Do you realise you phrased that as if you think Maureen is still alive?"

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"Yeah, reading that *WhatsApp* on the clone software was spooky. It was like the dead can speak. No wonder Arlene threw up."

"She is playing her hand quite well, is our Arlene. Do you think she will head for Morocco as instructed?"

"Definitely. Whatever transpires, we absolutely must stick close to Arlene. The key issue will be to keep my phone in Bluetooth range so the App can relay any further messages from Maureen, so we can second guess Arlene's moves. So, my dearest Julie, I need you to log onto my website where you can download a copy of the clone App so you can track her in Morocco."

"Hoy, no! I'm not flying to Morocco. Go yourself."

"No way! Arlene might spot me, even if I drop 'Hank the Fake Yank' taxi driver guise."

"Well, you could try the absent-minded Professor Grouch role. Everyone in the cast rated you as a natural. With your head shaved, a wee goatee beard and Harry Potter specs, you could get away with it."

"No, Julie, set your mind to it, it has to be you on point duty in Morocco. Hopefully she will be too busy coping with the boys to spot you but you will need to stay close enough to be in Bluetooth range, right?"

"No Tom, it just won't work, will it? Look, at my height it would not matter what I pretend to be, she would spot me at close range. After all, she's been watching me on and off for weeks while I was undercover at *GNB*. No, Tom, it has to be you."

"How about we go as a tag team? I could be a wee old lady in a wheelchair, and you could be my French grand-daughter, *Greta the Goth*? Even your Mum and Dad didn't recognise you when you played that role."

"OK, DI Thomas Graham, I'll do it but only because I am a truly wonderful human being. At least Patel and his team are no longer an immediate threat without those weapons."

"Ah, You have disabled them and put them back in the Merc, have you?"

"No Tom. Listen up. Lazing in my bath, I had a thought. I was worried about Bez doing a final check of the weapons before the meet with the Madrid crew. It seemed to me from the video I took, he is a real gun nerd."

"Yeah, Julie, I know what you mean. Guys like Bez have a fascination for weapons. So, what's your plan?"

"First thing, before it gets light, I'll hide the kit bag in the vicinity of the Water Park staff car park then use my voice translator app from a public phone box to alert National

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Police on 091 about a terrorist arms pick-up going down at nine o'clock at the Water Park. I'll tell them where to find Patel and Bez here at the hotel and give them the registration number of the Merc and their fake passport numbers. I'll tell them they need to set a trap for the Madrid team, warn them to be discreet and deploy their SWAT squad or whatever they call it. I'll tell them exactly where to find the kit bag and pre-warn them the weapons will be a rich source of fingerprints and DNA. That might help them nail Baldy Bez and perhaps identify him as the killer of "Call me Calvin". Forensics should have a field day. What-da-ya think?"

"Yes, good plan. Very smart. Well done. But only if you completely disable every weapon first?"

"Hey, Tom, credit me, *please!* That was the very first thing I did. Every item is now kaput, the whizz bang capsules too. The ammo is in sludge at the bottom the ornamental pool being guarded by the hotel's goldfish."

"Well done."

"Thanks. So, Tom, back to Arlene. Where is she now?"

"Still out of range, fetching the boys from the clutches of their wicked Granny. Look, I'll sign off now and try to persuade Sadie to go into Gartcosh and work her magic with her contacts at UK Border Force to see if she can get us the flight details for Arlene and her nephews. Must fly, pun intended. *Out!*"

Julie set her phone alarm for 5.10 am, started the music player to run an hour long mp3 file of nightingale song at low volume, dowsed the bedside light, lay back at full length, stretched her toes forward, rotated her ankles, rolled her neck and shoulders, commenced her 'breathe yourself to sleep routine' focussing her mind entirely on the two birds singing in competition.

Within a few minutes she was sound asleep.

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Villa del Mare

When Arlene entered *Villa de Mare*, the first sound she heard was excited football commentary coming from a room at the end of a long wide corridor. The door was ajar. With her back to the wall, stepping down from her new Gucci high-heeled sandals, she edged bare-footed towards the flickering glow. The bright LED screen was enormous, the largest TV Arlene had ever seen. There was a football match in progress, the commentators chatting excitedly, describing the action and the players, exclaiming in dramatic and rapid Spanish.

Teresa was stretched naked on a double lounger, her eyelids close, mouth sagging, comatose. Her hair was cut in a short sailor-boy style, dyed strawberry blonde. To Arlene's practiced eye, Teresa's face makeup looked just too perfect.

Permanently tattooed by a professional.

Permanent makeup was an option which Maureen had prohibited at *GNB*, saying it was not in her business plan as it reduced the potential pool of return clients and risked comebacks from irate parents. Teresa's breasts seemed hugely overlarge for her slim, gym-fit body; they were much larger than Arlene remembered from their meetings at the two Baptisms.

A boob job? If so, a very good one.

Her front was tattooed with sinuous double roses, their intertwining stems rising to her breasts from her bush, (dyed to match her recent hair colouring), each rose culminating with an ornate separate flower, white at her left, the other blood red, each dark areola centred with nipples stained an unnatural lemon yellow.

Yellow! Why yellow?

By her side was a slim but well-muscled twenty-something Adonis, also comatose. This swarthy man with dark curly hair was also naked, his left arm stretched across her body, a red strap loosely tied around his biceps, his right hand cupping his flaccid but still impressive penis sheathed in a purple condom.

There were matching half-moon coffee tables on each side of the lounger.

On Teresa's table there was a nearly empty litre bottle of *Smirnoff Vodka* and a scattering of small sized *Diet Coke* tins, empty, crushed and a clear plastic pill bottle, unlabelled, containing yellow tablets which Arlene recognised as diazepam.

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Beside a packet of *Marlboro Superkings* there was a disposable lighter and a shallow glass ashtray overflowing with dog ends and the darkly stained remains of roll-your-own spliffs.

From the TV there was a sudden eruption of sound; a goal had been scored. Fearful this might wake the couple, Arlene pulled back into the corridor. When the noise abated, she peeked around the door again.

The man was now on his side, curled into a foetal position. The strap on his arm had come adrift. Arlene saw now that it was a bikini thong. Checking on Teresa, who had turned away from her lover, Arlene was shocked to see the woman was bald. The wig she had been wearing was no longer visible, probably on the floor.

On the man's table were three large tins of Corona beer, crushed, empty. Marshalled on a small, shallow silver dish was the paraphernalia for cooking and injecting heroin, a packet of *Davidoff* cigarettes a *Bic* lighter and a matching ashtray also overflowing with dog ends and the remains of spliffs.

Pulling slowly, she closed the door quietly and tiptoed away.

Upstairs, in the bedroom at the far end of the corridor, she found the boys, fast asleep, entwined in each other, wearing long sleeping gowns, with the name of each child emblazoned across the front. Taking Hank's advice, she retreated to a bathroom on the other side of the corridor and washed her face clean, rinsing repeatedly until all traces of make-up and eyeliner were removed. Staring at her reflection, she smiled.

Not too shabby!

No longer infants or toddlers, the boys were very alike, tall, slim with fine long blonde hair, like peas in a pod, reminding her of Declan when he was a wee boy. She moved closer and whispered in Milloy's ear to rouse him.

He sat up at once, staring at her fearfully at first and then he smiled, melting her heart.

"You're Auntie Arlene. Mummy showed photographs of you at our Baptisms. Your face is nicer, and you have smiley eyes too. I know you've come to rescue us which means Mamma must be in Heaven, with Jesus and Mary. Poor Mamma, she was crying so much from the pain. Are you going to be our new Mummy? I know it's unkind to say bad things about people but we don't like Granny Terri. She smokes and smells funny. And she swears at us, horrible words we don't understand. And Carlos spits all the time. He is a bad man. He drinks and uses drugs. Please, Auntie Arlene, tell me you have come to take us away."

Big tears rolled down the child's face. Arlene reached out and lifted him into her arms, shooshing him, pressing him into her bosom.

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Whatever it takes, Maureen. Whatever it takes.

"Milloy, I promised your Mamma I would look after you boys forever and ever. But you must help me wake Madden and Morran quietly and help me get them dressed. We are going away on an aeroplane, to a nice place, far away from your Gran. Is that OK?"

"Auntie Arlene, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes, Milloy, ask away."

"Is *your* hair real?"

"Yes. I've coloured it but yes, my hair is real."

"Gran Terri is bald, like Mamma which means they have to wear wigs and can't go swimming. Will Mamma get real hair in Heaven?"

"Yes, I'm sure she will get new hair in Heaven. Now, shall we get ready to go away? And please, Milloy, we need to do everything very quietly."

"Yes, I know. In those drawers Mamma has put all our travel clothes to wear for the journey. We have other clothes to take, but we can only take one toy each. Come on, I'll show you where Mamma and I hid the rucksacks. Oh, wait, you have to tell me the magic word first."

"Abracadabra!"

"Auntie Arlene, there's even a special rucksack for you too! Come on, I'll show you."

Arlene soon learned Milloy was very smart, very capable and very well trained. He took her to the locked closet in the adjoining bedroom, found the hidden key, opened the door, switched on the light with a pull cord.

"Mamma told me I have to get Madden and Morran ready while you stay here and read everything. I have been rehearsing them. Mamma gave me a new Mickey watch, look. I can tell the time, easy-peasy. It should take us about five minutes. We have been waiting for you for ages. We couldn't get to sleep. It was sort of like Christmas. I was beginning to think you wouldn't come but Madden was certain you would. Morran is too wee to understand. Oh, Auntie Arlene, Mamma said to tell you the new magic word you need. It's 'open sesame' and you must send it to her in Heaven on your phone but to be sure to use CAPITALS, BOLD and UNDERLINING. I'll get Madden and Morran ready. See you in five minutes."

Under Contract

Roulette

Arlene moved to a dressing table, sat down, opened the Disney rucksack, laid out the various envelopes then spotted a postcard depicting a classic view of Loch Lomond.

On the reverse it said:

A,

you made it! Thanks.

Use this code below.

Milloy has a message for you.

You are in a race against time.

Act now, please.

M.

Arlene keyed in the long alphanumeric string and checked it twice before pressing RETURN.

At the prompt, she entered:

OPEN SESAME

The message started to scroll upwards.

Arlene,

You made it to my boys! Thank you.

You are doing very well. Keep going.

Use the gloves and face mask provided to avoid leaving fingerprints or vapour droplets with your DNA on the surfaces of the envelopes or their contents. I agree this is perhaps an unnecessary precaution but if anyone mentions the gloves, say you have a medical condition which makes your hands allergic to dust, grease and so on and that you suffer from a respiratory condition, hence the mask. Make it up to suit the situation.

Check the documents.

In the RED envelope you will find three sets of counterfeit passports for you and the boys, each with matching 'letters of authorisation' from their fake mother stating that

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you are their Nanny travelling to meet me. In every case, I am an American citizen, a diplomat who travels the world on behalf of the US government. If questioned about me, be coy, say my role is 'secret'.

The boys have been coached to think what you are doing is a travel game. Milloy knows their 'game names', names which match the passports. I have rehearsed them thoroughly. They will not let you down. I have found most people do not listen to children and in any case, they will chatter away to each other in a Fife dialect I taught them in preparation for this eventuality.

For each set of fake documents, there is a matching fully loaded CAXTON card with a Euro 20,000 limit available. Each card is linked to its fake passport name and can be accessed by a four-digit PIN based on your mother's birthday, entering these digits backwards.

Do not go anywhere near Malaga Airport as you are already in their records system and facial recognition software is commonplace everywhere nowadays. Go to Madrid airport, which is the fifth busiest in Europe, served by more than sixty airlines from four terminals. The international hub at T4 is best for your purpose.

The Main Gatehouse will book you a luxury taxi and charge it to my account, including tip. The driver will be a special friend of mine and she will look after you. The boys know to keep quiet. As a treat, let them play games and watch videos on their tablets. If you have not already spotted it, you will find Milloy is particularly bright. He will 'boss' them for you as he is well trained as their leader when I am not around.

At T4, choose any set of fake documents and book the first available flight to another busy airport (not London, see why below). Try Paris, Amsterdam, Frankfurt or Istanbul' it does not matter which. Do this as soon as you can after arrival, choosing the first available flight.

When you have this booking confirmed, move to another ticket desk and use another set of fake documents with a different carrier to book seats to any Scandinavian destination such as Helsinki, Copenhagen, Oslo or Stockholm.

Use the third set of fake documents and matching card to book a flight to Beijing or Shanghai by whatever is the shortest route.

*In all cases book business class seats if available. This will give your access to Business Class Lounges, making it less likely you can be tailed. Do **not** book first class.*

Having completed these three bookings, you have set the first part of your smoke screen.

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In the *GREEN* envelope, you will find two more sets of documents, one real set for the boys to be used with your own passport. Use the Credit Suisse card you used to travel from Edinburgh.

Use these real documents to book a British Airways flight to London with a connecting flight to Glasgow. This is to make it seem as if you are returning with them to Ben View. Make this for a flight later in the day, perhaps the last flight of the day which would allow you to reach Glasgow by late evening. This is a second smoke screen and your cover story if you need one.

Then, using a Spanish carrier, **use these real documents also** to book seats on the first available flight to New York. Again, pay with the card I left for you at Ben View. The source of these funds can never be found, I guarantee this. My hope is that anyone trailing you will believe that is where you are truly heading as I am in the system booked to fly there tonight from Geneva. If only this were possible.

Again, book business class to gain access to Business Class Lounges.

You will now be in possession of FIVE sets of tickets for decoy flights which you will NOT BOARD.

Now use the final set of **Green documents**. These are also fakes but 'gold-plated' fakes, guaranteed as untraceable, provided by the woman who supplies similar documents to the MI6, the CIA and to Mossad. Use the matching CAXTON card to book seats to any airport in Morocco. Choose the earliest flight you can get.

This is the flight I mentioned earlier, the first step on your road to your new life.

When you arrive in Morocco and are clear of customs, immediately loop back on yourself and **use your real documents** and the Ben View credit card to book the first available flight to Tenerife. Travel tourist class and mingle with the holiday crowd on arrival.

When you are clear of customs, use the final Tenerife code below and Milloy's magic words to receive further instructions from this website.

Trust me Arlene, what I have asked you to do is entirely necessary. Hopefully, you and my boys will soon be safe and ready to start your new life together very soon.

When you have memorised these instructions, re-enter Milloy's access password to erase this message from the server but keep a record of the access string before you destroy the postcard as you may need to visit this website again, if things do not work out as I hope.

Thanks,

Maureen.

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Arlene re-read the message several times then copied the Tenerife code to her Notepad App before erasing the screen. She felt shivery, a mixture of fear and excitement at her new role taking sole responsibility for the boys while helping her sister-in-law to create the fiction that she was still alive.

Forcing herself to concentrate, Arlene tried to picture T4 at Madrid, busy with flights arriving and departing, the perfect place to set up diversionary trails to mislead her pursuers. From the complex arrangements Maureen had obviously made well in advance, it seemed to Arlene there must be more than just one person chasing her.

Had Maureen also set other false trails, booking herself on other fake flights online, leading her pursuers on a merry dance, determined they would never gain access to her business empire?

As always, Maureen would have thought everything through, going well beyond the obvious. Arlene resolved to stick rigidly to the plan Maureen had made. She must obey Maureen's instructions to the letter, even though it would mean dumping the lovely Hank.

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Waiting in the Espace, Tom sent a quick *WhatsApp* to Julie, aware that she would probably not read it until later:

"Hi, sleeping princess, still waiting for Arlene. As I said, I've agreed to take her on to Madrid airport where I'll stick close to her. I've sent another request to Sadie but I'm not sure she will be able to help. Any ideas? I'll check in again when I get to Madrid."

He settled to wait for Arlene's return, checking constantly for a message of acknowledgement from Sadie, aware that she too would be asleep.

The long wheel-based buggy returned with one of the younger security guards driving.

At the entry gates, the security lights came on as before. The elderly guard stood at the doorway of the Portacabin, his gun in his hand. The younger guard moved through the pedestrian pass door, his gun in one hand as he approached the Espace. In the wing mirror, Tom could see the man was nervous, glancing all around as if expecting to be bushwhacked. He proffered an envelope. Tom blipped down the window to accept it and the guard trotted back to the pass gate, retreating to safety behind the fence, then drove off back up the track. The security lights were turned off.

Tom scanned the handwritten message:

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"Hank, Teresa has arranged a taxi to take us to Madrid. It's a firm she uses frequently. Seems the place here has an account with them. Please accept this money with my grateful thanks. Honestly, I could not have made it here without you, you've been a star."

The envelope contained three 50 Euro notes.

Under Contract

Clinical Finish

It was just after midnight. Ex-SAS Sergeant Bryn Phillips was closing his sports bar when the special alert sounder pinged on his mobile phone.

He checked his *WhatsApp* messages then, sticking to his routine, checked the toilets and other nooks and crannies to make sure all his staff and customers were gone before he switched off the lights and set the alarms.

Moving to his cubby hole office, he locked the door, opened his safe, sat at his desk, switched on his laptop, concentrated then tapped in a long verse of a poem in Welsh which took him directly to his Dark Web site where the recent *WhatsApp* message had originated.

He studied both digital photographs, their names, passport details and hotel location carefully. Using his mobile phone, he entered the details of the hotel and checked the drive time. To earn the bonus on offer, he would need to move quickly.

He pressed "ACCEPT", filled a thermal flask with black coffee for the journey, then checked his Isle of Man offshore account and smiled. The down payment of 50,000 USD had already been deposited.

Ninety-three minutes later, he drove passed the hotel, parked in a quiet street, hefted his small sports rucksack over his shoulder and made his way on foot through the steady downpour.

Outside the room, under the veranda, standing to the side, he slipped on his balaclava and black neoprene gloves and shrugged into his lightweight coverall, a black version of the white boilersuits used by Police *SOCOs* to prevent contamination by fibres. The room was in darkness, the curtains undrawn. Holding a lockpick, he stepped forward. To his surprise, the patio doors were not locked. He slipped inside, closed the door and stood listening, allowing his eyes to adjust.

Loud snoring led him to the secondary target. Using a syringe filled with a lethal cocktail designed to kill instantly, he injected its contents into the carotid artery. The man's face sagged. To be certain, Philips checked - no pulse.

He moved to the main target, the man called Sabeesh Patel, a man who had been building a reputation over the last few years in high-end prostitution and drugs from a string of nightclubs with adjoining brothels. For a second time the Welshman administered the killer drug. Closing the bedroom door he drew the curtains, checking they were fully

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overlapped before switching on the lights. Using his mobile phone he took a first snap of the 'sleeping' corpse. Using a silenced pistol, he put a neat bullet hole through the centre of the Asian's forehead. Now he took a second photo. Moving back to the stocky man, he repeated the process.

Back in his car, he attached the four images to a *WhatsApp* message and sent it to his anonymous client's one-shot contact number.

Bryn Phillips's message was relayed to Maureen's website where it was analysed by a software bot which then approved the payment to complete the deal.

Back in his sports bar, Phillips checked his Guernsey account, noting that a further 100,000 USD had been added.

Chuckling to himself, he said, "Not bad for just under five hours work, boyo!"

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Trail Hound

Tom drove away reluctantly, his mind processing his dilemma, considering options. When he was sure he was out of view from the gatehouse, he reversed the Espace up the steep slope of a narrow sidetrack and switched off the ignition.

The moon had disappeared behind scudding clouds. The temperature had been falling steadily and the wind was rising with spits of rain and sleet in the air. He switched the ignition to auxiliary to use the wipers to keep the screen clear. The vehicle began to cool rapidly. From his limited wardrobe in the carry-on suitcase hidden behind the rear row of seats, he changed into warmer clothing, layering up and settling to wait for the expected taxi to pass on its way to collect Arlene and the boys.

He stared at Arlene's new Gucci suitcase.

Will she call me to get it back?

How? I've not shared my personal number with her.

Now he was established as a walk-in cash customer at GNB, the details he had used to make his original booking were long gone, flushed into hyperspace.

If I trail her taxi to Madrid, maybe, somehow, I could use the suitcase to re-establish contact. A longshot.

Keeping one eye on the access road to the complex, he checked the local time in Scotland - 02:33, one hour behind Spanish time. Risking an angry response, he tried calling Sadie on WhatsApp voice, but it rang out to her message service. He left a short message apologising, asking her to call him back ASAP, already discounting this as another longshot.

At as half past four approached, with ice from his breath forming on the inside of the widescreen and the wipers sticking on the accumulated globules frozen on the outside, he was forced to start the engine.

There must be something amiss.

In desperation, he rang Julie on WhatsApp to ask for suggestions. This call also rang out and he left a message.

A thought occurred. He went to *Goggle Maps* to check the roads network for his area. After a few minutes, he realised the gatehouse he had arrived at was the service

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entrance. The official entrance to the vast complex was at the far side of the perimeter, about three kilometres distant.

Bugger, bugger, bugger! Arlene and the boys must have left from there.

Why had he not checked earlier instead of waiting, twiddling his thumbs?

Another blunder. He yawned and said aloud, "I need a strong black coffee."

Reluctantly, he rang Sadie again, this time on her home phone. He let it ring out to her answering service then hung up and redialled. This time Sadie picked up and barked:

"No, I do **not** need a new kitchen! Get real, look at the time!"

She hung up.

Seconds later his *WhatsApp* inbox vibrated. He read her message.

"First up, Tom, the answer to your *WhatsApp* request is NO! I cannot access the Madrid flight bookings. UK Border Force monitors airports, ferry ports and other entry and departure points for the UK only. That's why it's called **UK** Border Force.

"Second up, perhaps you might try Ralph. Don't tell him I suggested it. I'll dig out the mobile number I have for him and send it to you, soon as.

"Third, *FGS* do NOT ever ring my home phone again. EVER! Only *WhatsApp*. OK?"

Tom reeled at her brevity and manner then it dawned on him why she had not allowed him to speak on her home phone. He groaned at his further blunder.

I'm hypothermic. My brain is seizing up!

To ring her on her *traceable* home phone had been a mistake. On Caller ID she had recognised his number, taking the initiative by answering as she did, covering them both by not allowing him to speak. Even his earlier unanswered call would remain in her telephone service provider's digital archive for years, capable of being accessed by many agencies to obtain data on call time, duration, the source number of the caller with the location from which his call had been made.

At least he had escaped a more serious outcome. Had he left a voice message at her electronic mailbox, its content would also have been stored. Even if he had not used his name, his voiceprint would be readily identified against *GCHQ*'s records for all serving and retired senior police officers, particularly those involved in serious crime areas. Such was the nature of modern technology and surveillance. Basic stuff and the primary reason he, Julie and Sadie communicated by *WhatsApp*. At least he would be able to deny making the call. If necessary, he could say he lost his mobile phone. Although he had never actually told Sadie that he and Julie were operating without full authority in their pursuit

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of Arlene Bishop to try to snag her sister-in-law, as the senior deputy to the PA to ACC McPhail, Sadie must be aware all three of them were walking a tightrope.

Then there was Ralph.

Sadie Faifley and Ralph Maitland had been an item for three years before their engagement, the wedding planned with Ralph's sister Morag and Julie as bridesmaids. With a wedding only a week away, Sadie had pulled out. Ralph, who had always had a reputation as a womaniser, had been having an affair with a student at Edinburgh University, a Spanish girl ten years his junior. The rumour was the girl was pregnant. In the fallout, Ralph was ostracised by the team at Gartcosh and his promotion to DS put on hold.

Maitland resigned and moved to Madrid. The news filtered back on the grapevine, piece by piece. The girl's family ran a small chain of high-end restaurants and tapas bars. Later it emerged that Ralph had applied to join the Spanish Police but had been refused because of a poor reference. However, with the help of his father-in-law, Maitland had obtained a position with the Spanish equivalent of the UK Border Force, based at Madrid airport, where his proficiency in English and his background training in anti-terrorism was seen as valuable.

Driving on the edge through the sleety rain, Tom's phone vibrated. A *WhatsApp* from Sadie gave a mobile number with a Spanish prefix. Tom made the call using *WhatsApp*. Ralph answered in passable Spanish.

"Ralph, Tom Graham here. Are you alone, free to speak?"

Ralph switched to English, now slightly tainted by Spanish inflections.

"Tom, yeah! Just sitting in my new Toyota Landcruiser, about to drive to work. I'm second in charge now at Madrid Airport. Yeah, Tom, it's going well. How are you?"

"Ralph, I'll come straight to the point. I'm here, in Spain, on the outskirts of Marbella. I'm on the trail of a biggie, money laundering, possibly worse. Mega-millions involved, we think. I need your help. I'm trailing a woman and her three nephews. Bad news is, they've given us the slip. Best information is they are heading to Madrid Airport. Destination unknown. Would you watch out for them, take a peek for us, please? The name is Bishop, Arlene Bishop. The boys are also Bishop, Milloy, Madden and Morran. Milloy the eldest is six, we think. Chances are they may also have counterfeit passports and different names. Given the stakes involved, Ms Bishop may have other helpers, perhaps a male, to make it look like a family group. That's all I have. Can you help, please?"

"OK, Tom, I got that. But what's in it for me? And who is 'we'?"

Tom groaned inwardly. Another mistake.

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"Julie McRobert. She's the other half of the team."

"McRobert! No way am I doing anything to help her. That cow was the one who started the campaign to oust me, right?"

"Was she? I thought it was Sadie and Morag."

"No, it was McRobert and her little cabal of Lesbos."

"Ralph, you are my last hope here. Please have a peek. I'm on my way to Madrid now."

"No!" Maitland disconnected.

Tom sent a quick *WhatsApp* message update to Julie and Sadie explaining his predicament. The heavy sleet was now almost horizontal. Tom checked his weather App to discover there was a snowstorm raging over Madrid and that the airport had been shut down, its runways not expected to re-open until noon at the earliest.

At least this weather might hold her up, give me a chance to catch her.

He sent a further *WhatsApp* to Julie and Sadie explaining his situation and asking for suggestions, switched the wipers to high-speed, gripped the steering wheel and put his foot down, swooping down onto the motorway, dominating the outer lane.

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Janina

When the buff-coloured VW people carrier taxi arrived at the main gatehouse, the driver leapt out and rushed across with an umbrella to help Arlene and the boys get aboard quickly out of the steady downpour. Janina was about Maureen's age, small, wiry, energetic, a woman who did everything with practised efficiency.

"Right, hen, where to? Back to Malaga Airport, eh?"

The taxi driver's accent was Scottish, with a Fife lilt but almost posh.

"No, Madrid Airport, please."

"Not a good choice. It's snowbound, according to the news on the radio. But, no worries, eh? You're the boss. Or rather Maureen is the boss. Which means you're under orders, commanded to obey, to the very letter. Total obedience, no arguing, eh? No worries, she's been the same all her life, has our Maureen Bishop. So, Madrid it shall be."

Taken aback, all Arlene could say was, "Yes, Madrid, please. Thanks."

"Look, hen, I'll put on my headphones to give you privacy, let you get the weans settled, eh?"

They drove off into the night, the rain turning sleety. Within minutes, wrapped in duvets, the boys were fast asleep. Arlene was feeling tired, shivery, slightly disorientated and worried about the daunting prospect of negotiating a busy airport and sticking faithfully to Maureen's instructions, the details of which were becoming hazy and muddled in her tired mind. She had been running on adrenaline since the call from Maureen at Parnie Street the previous morning.

As a distraction and to comfort herself, she delved into her rucksack for her makeup bag and started from scratch, applying a simpler makeup scheme then combing out her hair and tying it back in a short ponytail.

Sighing, she stared straight ahead, trying to remember what bookings she must make first and worrying if the boys would behave.

The taxi driver watched and waited until she sensed the moment was right. Seeing an all-night self-service filling station ahead, she decided to stop to give Arlene her full attention and gauge her reactions. Janina topped up at the pump using her fuel card then moved to a quiet corner of the parking area where she offered Arlene a coffee from her large flask.

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"Better if you move up front with me, hen, let the wee ones sleep in peace. Look, I'll pull down the privacy screen. It's nae soundproof but it will take the edge off, eh?"

Arlene moved as suggested and took the mug in both hands. She sipped. Piping hot, sweet and milky.

"Hi, so, you're Arlene, Maureen's sister-in-law. I expect she didnae tell ye about me, need to know and a' that stuff, eh?"

"No, sorry. No mention. You're Scottish?"

"Aye, Ah'm Janina Crossley, frae Kirkawdy, eh?"

"Kirkcaldy, yes, I thought I heard it in your voice earlier."

"As they say, hen, 'you can take the girl out of Scotland but you can never take Scotland out of the girl'. But I've poshed up, so my clients can understand me, eh? So, where do I start. Shall we do a 'Julie Andrews' and start at the very beginning, eh? Well, I was in the same class at primary with Maureen. We were best mates back then. So, the long story short, eh? We both needed friends. My mother was a junkie. I never had a father. Mam said he was a fisherman, from Spain. He was her 'wee fling' and I was the result. Back then I was like the Wicked Witch of the East from a panto. Have you heard of mandibular prognathism, also called underbite? Maureen was bald of course, wearing crap NHS wigs, not the proper wigs she has now. So, there we were in Kirkcaldy, two oddballs the other kids made fun of. No one wanted to know us, both with junkie mothers and old tatty clothes and leaky shoes, hardly any money. So, you can see how it happened, eh? We were more like sisters back then. After she left for Edinburgh Uni, we lost touch, just the occasional postcard giving her latest address. Back then, on my own, I went a bit crazy. Booze, drugs, shoplifting, blagging old people and other stuff I'm ashamed of. I was a mess. That went on for years, I think, it's all a blur, eh?"

"One day Maureen turned up, out of the blue. She was dressed in fancy clothes with a good wig and nice makeup, eh? To me she looked stunning, like a supermodel. She took me to her place in Edinburgh, locked me in an en suite bedroom until I dried out. Then she set me up as a live-in employee at a refuge for abused women and their kids. The manager told me Maureen was their main patron and served on the management committee. I worked in the kitchen, skivvying at first then learning to be a chef, eh?"

"Maureen gave money to a charity. Really?"

"I think it might have been a tax scam. Anyway, basically, Maureen saved me from oblivion. Although we are the same age, she was sort of like my guardian. She sent me to Geneva to get my jaw fixed. I was there for about six months, in a private clinic, dozens of painful procedures but treated like royalty. She paid for everything, new clothes,

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treatments to remove my tattoos, professional counselling, everything. Back in Edinburgh, she organised lessons and I passed my driving test and became a delivery driver with *DHL*. She found me a two-bed flat in Dalkeith, ex-council but completely made over, perfect, like from a magazine, eh? I moved in, rent free, all I had to do was pay the rates and utilities. I have no idea where she got the money, she clammed up when I asked anything about her businesses."

Arlene checked her phone noting the time.

"Janina, should we not be heading for Madrid? I have flights to book and a schedule to stick to."

"No worries, Arlene, Madrid Airport is closed. Anyway, I don't think Madrid is where Maureen really intends you to go, is it?"

"What? No, I **MUST** go to Madrid. I **MUST** follow my instructions."

"Arlene, calm down, hen, you'll waken the boys. Hear me out, please. Give me a few minutes more, eh?"

"OK."

"Listen Arlene, hen, you're going to have to cut me some slack here, eh? I've had all this bottled up inside for years and you're the first person I've been able to tell, eh?"

"Oh, yes, I know what you mean. All this about Maureen, it's all new to me, I hardly know her, or, should I say, I don't know any of this side of her."

"Right then, here we go again. So, When Maureen graduated from Edinburgh University, she moved to Glasgow, eh? After a few years on my own in Dalkeith, I started using again, just at weekends. Then I moved back to Fife, to face down my demons, a big mistake. But I was still coping, not great but not off the rails. You see, I was hiding it from everyone, pretending I was clean. Do you know what that means, Arlene, living a double life? It messes with your head, eh?"

Arlene nodded, not sure why Janina was confiding the details of her past life.

"OK, good, So, once every three months or so Maureen would send me a postcard and we would meet up, always in Glasgow, just for a few hours each visit, eh? Over the years I visited all her fancy houses, even *Ben View*. Declan was part of her life by then. Although I never actually met him, I know he was important to her. More recently, she mentioned you too, showed me the photo albums of the Baptisms. You looked gorgeous, by the way."

"Oh."

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"So, back to Kirkcaldy. I met Gerrard again when he got out of Saughton. Gerrard Houlihan. *Disaster*. Things went downhill and I was using again, full on. I lost my *DHL* job. But look, Arlene, now I'm through it, over it, I don't want to discuss this ever again, OK? Not ever. Too many issues to explain, a lot of things I'm not proud of but Maureen rescued me again, OK? She put me through a detox and re-orientation programme. This time I was in a fancy place in Manchester with celebs, mostly rock stars, media people and ex-footballers. I was there almost a year. That's when I started talking posher, I suppose. It worked, eventually. They got my head right, eh? So, I'm totally clean now, honest. Maureen knew I had to get away from Fife, right? I mean, that was never going to work, going back there, eh?"

"Janina, we all have secrets, I suppose, but really, you don't have to tell me all this. I mean, you don't know me, do you? And after all, it's your life. We all make bad choices. I'm not a strong person either, not really. We are all susceptible, are we not?"

"Well, Maureen held a different view, she told me you were the very best of us all. I asked why but she was her usual tight-lipped self. Anyway, hear me out, eh? It's important. And look, I've never told anyone else this stuff, OK? So, why am I telling you? Because about the same time she bought the *Madronal* complex then moved her mother here, I think she was already planning my future too, eh? Let me explain.

"When she brought me here, she promised that if I lived clean, she would look after me. She set me up with my own taxi business. I live about a mile from here on the coast. I have ten of these VW taxis now. I make a good living, so do my drivers. They are all women like me, all reformed and living clean, all rescued by Maureen, from all over the world, clinging to each other, resisting the temptation to slip. We test ourselves every day, eh? We're not perfect but we stick together. I have the franchise for the *Madronal* complex. No other taxi businesses are allowed beyond the gatehouse, OK? What you need to understand is that *La Reserva de Madronal* is a gated community whose residents live what I would describe as 'discreet lives', which means they need a secure, discreet taxi service they can trust, right? Like Maureen and me and you, these people have their secrets, and they want to keep themselves to themselves. Most of them are older and don't want to drive. With this franchise we get lots of good fares, drop offs and collections from golf courses, lawn bowls, shopping trips and meals out with a steady drip of airport pick-ups and drop-offs, for residents and for friends and families too. But the only person allowed to drive Maureen and the boys is me. I also drive Teresa and her ever changing toy boy studs then report back to Maureen on how her mother is getting by. Teresa is an enigma, eh? Possibly bi-polar. She can go for weeks living like a nun, clean, working out, swimming miles every day but then it's 'meltdown' time and off she goes again on another binge.

"Oh, I thought she was totally alcoholic, totally addicted. That's what Declan said."

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"She is, of course she is but there is a remnant there in her mind, clinging on, trying to escape. This is a guess, I think Teresa might have been in rehab like me but baulked at it, reverted."

"Janina, I saw her naked back there, comatose. Even drunk, she looks amazing."

"Yes, Well, the point is, I believe Maureen lives her entire life ahead of the curve, manipulating people and circumstances for her own ends, her own reasons. If you're lucky enough to be inside her circle, she will protect you. If not, watch out because she is ruthless and very determined to get what she wants. Does that make sense to you, Arlene? Is that the Maureen you know?"

"Janina, what you are saying is that both you and I are inside her circle?"

"Exactly! Think about us, Maureen and Teresa, Declan and you and me, all from Kirkcaldy, all outsiders in one way or another."

"OK, Janina, yes, that makes sense to me."

"Arlene, what I'm trying to say by all this is that you can trust me to keep your secrets too, OK? Look, we both know for her whole life Maureen has been obsessed with security and secrecy way beyond reason, on the verge of paranoia. And look, I suspect she is worth zillions so I totally get this means she must have enemies but even then, most of the time she is way OTT. Do you agree?"

"Yes, yes. Declan said once she has OCD, with food, with sex, with money, with getting richer, everything. Religion too, latterly."

"Well, Arlene, I don't know about you, but I can't live like that, not without friends I can trust. I realise that as far as she could allow herself, Maureen trusted me, and you too, big time, or you would not be here in my taxi with her boys."

"Janina, it was totally horrible at Teresa's place, the boys were frightened of her. But she was totally out of it, thank God, so I didn't have to fight her for them. I just sneaked them away."

"Aye, I heard she was back on the booze and the pills. I was booked to collect you at Malaga Airport earlier. I was planning to warn you. So, you took a local cab, right? . . .

Arlene's mind was whirling:

Had Maureen booked Hank as Janina's replacement?

If so, why Hank?

Or had Hank been scamming her, part of the plot to steal the boys?

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And why had he not thought to return her Gucci suitcase would nigh on three thousand pounds of new clothes, shoes, jewellery and perfumes inside.

. . . But no worries, Arlene, I still get paid for 'no shows' and all us drivers get a fixed twenty-percent tip on everything too, so no worries. It's the sort of thing she does, changing things at the last minute, right? She's a total control freak, always has been. Does that sound familiar, eh?"

"Yes, very familiar."

"Arlene, there is something I need to tell you. Something a bit scary. I think Maureen might be dead. I took her to Madrid Airport. Her voice was odd, croaky. She could hardly walk. We had to get her a wheelchair. I helped her to check-in for the flight to Geneva, heading for a clinic. She told me she had cancer, that it was terminal but she was hoping for a few more months. After we hugged, she whispered a message for you, an emergency codeword, she called it. **LINOLEUM**. She said you would know how to get to her website from information she left for you at *Villa de Mare*."

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Initiative

As Tom neared Madrid airport the blizzard was in full force, visibility down to ten metres, the snow and sleet packing on the road surface, making the rear wheels lose traction. After a long frustrating search, he found a parking place. He checked on *Google* that the airport was closed, all flights on hold. Bracing himself for another refusal, he rang on *WhatsApp*.

Maitland picked up quickly.

"Yes, what now?"

"Ralph, are you inside the airport?"

"Yes, but my wife's getting contractions, wants me home. I'm just about to handover to my oppo who is on his way in to take over from me. Where are you?"

"Parked in short stay. Ralph, can you view your CCTV screens?"

"Yep, I'm sitting at the control desk now and before you ask, no, your lady and her three nephews are not here. Of that I am ninety-nine percent certain. We are heading for lockdown here, clearing the place out, asking people to leave, to go home or find a hotel. The weather boffins say we are in for two days of this, maybe more. There are still thousands of people here but the numbers are dropping by the minute. I guess she must have got the news. Those who are desperate are trying to re-book from Barcelona or other regional airports. And before you ask, I speed-checked the archive on the entry/exit doors for all our terminals. So far as I can see, she's never been here. Maybe they are holed up in a hotel somewhere nearby, toughing it out? Who knows?"

"What about their flight bookings? Any luck?"

"Tom, learn to take no for an answer. If I got caught doing unauthorised snooping, they would probably sack me. I'm not exactly the most popular guy around here. They Spaniards don't like the fact that I am here at all. They think I am spying on them for Europol or the CIA or GCHQ. I know for a fact they regularly go through my office emails. So, no is no, sorry. Got to go, got a date with a stork!"

Julie rang on *WhatsApp*.

"Tom, drama here. Mega drama. Please hear me out without badgering me, OK?"

"Shoot, but make it all good, my dear one, please. I'm sinking here."

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"Oh, sorry to hear that. Well, some good, some bad. Here goes. Picture the scene: I'm in the main public area of the Water Park in a dark corner with a good view over the staff car park. The police arrived within fifteen minutes of my call. It was impressive how they set up the trap. Looked like a rapid response unit, antiterrorist, on foot. One minute nothing, next minute they were there, like a football squad, carrying sports bags with their weapons inside. They took up strategic positions in the undergrowth and hunkered down, out of sight. Another guy arrived on foot with a spaniel, found the Patel weapons bag I had hidden. This guy was replaced by another guy in a special protective suit, some sort of explosives expert, I think. He had various gizmos like sniffers. After an age, he unzipped the bag, looked at it, videoed the contents then checked out the weapons. And yeah, of course he was wearing gloves just as I had been when I disabled them. The boffin talked on his radio to someone then a heavy box was brought to him. He packed the weapons bag inside and then hefted it away, out of sight, probably back to his lab, I imagined. That was around seven-thirty. Everyone took up their positions again, out of sight. There was another wait and then the Ford Ranger pick-up arrived, just after eight. Three guys with shaven heads, wearing blue boilersuits and one smaller guy in a black suit, white shirt with a bow tie, goatee beard, and ponytail. They got out, pee-ed in the bushes and lit up, stood around, chewing the fat. One of the baldies put *AquaFirst* decals on both front doors, magnetic, I imagine. Then the rain started again and they all got back in the pick-up."

"The Madrid hostage takers, the SAS crew?"

"Yip. I thought the police would make a move, but they held off waiting for Patel and Bez to come at nine, as per my phone call. And no, Tom, before you ask, I made no mention of Arlene or the boys, just saying it was a weapons exchange deal, drugs related. Nine o'clock came and went."

"So, what happen to Patel and Bez. Do you think they re-scheduled when they realised the weapons were missing?"

"Tom, please, let me tell it as it happened, OK? I checked the tracker on Patel's Mercedes van which showed it had not moved, still in the hotel car park. Just after nine-thirty the *AquaFirst* team decided to call it a day. The front passenger got out of the pick-up, removed the decals and got back in. My guess was Patel had been on the phone to goatee to re-arrange their meet. When the pick-up started to move away, SWAT team ran towards it, weapons raised. The Ranger tried to force its way passed them, but the police threw stingers under their wheels and the tyres exploded. They were all taken out, made to lie down, cuffed and searched which revealed they were carrying pistols and knives. There was a lot of shouting from the *AquaFirst* guys. I've no idea what they were saying, it wasn't proper Spanish, not the stuff I got at evening classes anyway. A small convoy of police vehicles arrived, blue lights flashing, and the baddies were taken away. Then it

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was the usual, with the dogs and SOCOs and the explosives guy inside the pick-up swabbing."

"What about the Merc, was it on the move too?"

"No, still stationary. Then I began to think Patel and Bez must have found the tracker and left it in the plantings, to throw me off. I decided to head for the hotel to check things out."

"So, we've lost them! Bugger."

"Yes, Tom, we've lost them big time. They've gone forever, into the Big Blue Yonder!"

"What?"

"Here is my tale of woe. As I approached the hotel, a SOCO team was leaving. The Merc was taped off and guarded by two cops. No cars were being allowed in or out of the carpark. I parked further down the road and got hold of Carlos on the phone. More drama! Both Patel and Bez are dead, head shots, while they slept, found by the maid. Carlos had been forced to identify them, tell them everything he knew about them, give all the details he had."

"Julie, where does that leave us? Are you in the clear? Carlos hasn't given you up to the police, has he? Who killed them? What does it mean?"

"Good questions Tom but with few answers. I'm still trying to work it out. I was hoping you would have some ideas. For what it's worth, I think the hit must have been ordered by Maureen. I think she is still alive, still active. But how did she know where to find them? Anyway, tell me good news about Arlene."

"Ah, if only I had good news."

Tom brought Julie up to speed on his conversation with Ralph.

"God, Tom, looks like we are both dead-ended, no pun intended. Any ideas."

"Nope. I'll ring Sadie, see what she says."

"By the way Tom, before I headed to the Water Park, I had already cleared out my stuff from the hotel. Carlos has agreed to say nothing about me being there. Should I still fly to Morocco, just in case? I know it's a longshot but what else do we have? And how many airports are there in Morocco anyway?"

"Twelve, I think. But only four or five bigger ones. But Julie, put a hold on that for now. As I said, I'll ring Sadie. We have to keep going, play out our hand to the bitter end. They don't call us the perspicacity twins for no reason."

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"Tom, I disagree. We've lost Arlene. I vote we should give up, return to Scotland, re-group, keep an eye on *Ben View* and *GNB* and see what transpires. Maybe we could set up a video link camera from the woods near the *Ben View* gatehouse, monitor the ins and outs? I could try going back to *GNB* for a few weeks anyway, until the 'baby' is due. How about that for a plan?"

"No Julie, not yet. Tell you what, why not go to Malaga Airport and have a nice breakfast, check out availability of flights to Morocco while I speak to Sadie. OK?"

"Yeah, whatever."

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Final Call

The *WhatsApp* reply released by **LINOLEUM** from Maureen's website did not come immediately but when it did, it came as a voice message.

Maureen's voice was very weak, hesitant, sobbing, tearful, difficult to make out through a hubbub of voices in the background.

"Arlene, I must assume that you are with Janina and that you have my precious boys with you. I must further assume you are safe and well, all five of you. Now, Arlene, make sure you are alone before you listen to the rest of this message, this is for you alone. I'll give you time to get to a secure and private place."

"Janina, I need to listen to this alone. It's Maureen. She sounds dreadfully weak. I can hardly hear her. Sounds as if it's a recording, made in the clinic."

"OK, Now it's open at last, I'll go into the filling station and use their loo. Just wave when it clear for me to come back, eh?"

Maureen's voice resumed its jerky monologue.

"First, good news. The man who was chasing you is no longer in play. However, you must never return to Scotland or contact any of your family. Never, never, never. We must assume Declan is dead. I'm sorry, I know you were close to him once. We did love each other for a few glorious years but in recent times, ours was a purely business arrangement. He was always a weak link. Police Scotland and others are trying to bring me down. I don't want to explain my reasons but please accept that any sort of contact with your mother would incur a great risk for you and my boys. As I said before, you are at the start of a new life. Your future is secure. I hope it will be a good life. Money will never be an issue. The credit card you collected from Ben View will be constantly funded, topped up daily, maintaining your limit at fifty thousand US dollars ad infinitum, increased to keep pace with inflation, controlled by an algorithm linked to my Swiss account. This software will monitor your spending and respond to your needs, even should you live to a hundred. There is an entirely separate sum in this account which will be revealed to the boys when they are old enough to receive their own legacies. Everything is already in place, ultra-secure backed by assets of precious metal bullion, diamonds and artwork. Think billions. Wait, please, while I clear my throat and take my medication."

Maureen's voice came back, stronger but still hard to follow.

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"Arlene, although you have done nothing wrong, you are still a target. I regret to have to tell you, now I am at my end, you are their primary target. But do not worry, if you follow my plan, it will keep you and my boys safe. Please understand, there are many other people and agencies who wish to destroy my businesses, people who wrongly think you might lead them to me. Regarding my businesses, I have contingency plans in place to ensure they are liquidated profitably and in an orderly manner with the proceeds sent to my Swiss account. I promise you I will also take care of all those I care about. Jen, Sasha and others you know nothing about, people like you who have signed binding arrangements, contracts which I would never renege on. Excuse me again, please, I need a break."

Arlene looked out at the driving sleet and shivered, wondering if she was about to catch a cold. Her mind was also frozen. Listening to a dead person speaking was unnerving. Turning in her seat, she studied the boys. They were beautiful, all so very like Declan when he was their age, when he had been an angel. Her heart swelled and she teared up, promising herself she would do anything required to protect and nurture them.

"Arlene, as I said before, for your protection, you must continue with the pretence that I am still alive. It is far better for you if the focus of my pursuers is on finding me. That way they will leave you alone. The truth is, people become weary when they do not get quick results. They simply give up, either out of boredom or to avoid another failure. I learned that from Chess. Do not worry, even though you know I am already dead, I have set out my plans well in advance to lead them away from you, take them on a merry dance by setting false trails to give them something to chase, all dead ends, ha-ha. Gallows humour, I think they call it!"

Maureen's chuckling deteriorated to a coughing fit. She sighed, waited, gathering herself then barked:

"NO! Not now! Thanks."

A door closed and the background chatter ended.

"Arlene, these people were my rivals and, as they say, 'know your enemy'. I have outfoxed them for years. I know them inside out, everything about them. In the end they will conclude I am no longer a player, that I have squandered my wealth by gambling online, reverting to my old, weaker self. In the end they will conclude I am not worth chasing. According to my schedule, all financial and other matters will be finalised within three years, certainly no more than five. Only then can you relax and move on. Meanwhile, you must stay under the radar. Wait, please, there's more, much more."

After another short pause, Maureen continue:

"Arlene, during this period, there will be no more WhatsApps between us. That phase is at an end. The Nokia mobile phone I gave you in Glasgow when you took charge of GNB is

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very special. Keep it switched off. Do NOT interfere with it in any way. This is essential. Excuse me. Please don't hang up. The next part is vitally important but first I need help with the pain."

Maureen's voice was raised, sharp and dismissive.

"YES, nurse, I know. Thanks. Just another few minutes, please. Thank you."

"Arlene, be very careful who you trust. Basically, trust no one. There are two exceptions. Janina and Valeria. Janina will explain about Valeria. I don't have the time or the energy to go into that. You must go to Valeria now, please. When you see her, I am sure you will recognise her. You did meet her in the past, on two occasions when she was in disguise and using a different name. You can trust Valeria totally. She is a remarkable person in her own right. You two will make good partners. Valeria has agreed to co-parent with you when you adopt my boys, but you, as blood kin through Declan, must take the role of their new mother. I've explained all this to Milloy. He is a remarkable child. Quite amazing. With help from Milloy and Valeria you will soon become their 'new mother.' Please wait, there is more which is important but I need to do something else for a few minutes, hold on."

After what seemed like an endless silence, Maureen's voice continued:

"Arlene, I was just checking a few things. From Google, it is almost certain that when you hear this message, Madrid Airport will be snowed in. That was Plan A. Plan B was to send you instead to Barcelona and fly you to Morocco from there. However, with the roads in chaos, Plan B is no longer viable. So, Arlene, forget Madrid and Morocco. In any event, your final destination is to be Tenerife and now, with Janina's help, you can go there directly. Is Janina nearby? Call her to you as she must be allowed to hear this next part. While you arrange this, I'll get the help I need. Hold on, I'll mute but I'll be back soon."

Arlene waved to Janina who scuttled across from the shelter of the doorway to retake her drivers' seat. Arlene explained in outline what was happening. While they waited for Maureen to resume, she switched to speakerphone:

*"Arlene and Janina, forget about Madrid and its complications. That rigmarole was set to create a smoke screen primarily for the man who is no longer able to act against you. Now you must go to Tenerife, at once, but go by sea, not by air. Air travel is reliant on bureaucracy creating records which are very insecure. Travelling by sea is the best option, trust me. Janina will arrange this for you. She has a contact in Cadiz, a woman who she has guaranteed is discreet and secure. **Janina**, please leave Arlene alone now, at once. This is for your own good."*

A few seconds later, Maureen continued.

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"When you are at sea, find a way of disposing all unnecessary papers I left for you at Villa del Mare and, vitally, your special Nokia phone. Remember, even switched off, without me to monitor it and intervene as required, it is now highly dangerous.

"When you get to Tenerife, Valeria will look after you. When the time is right, she will transfer the deeds of my property to you. Valeria is a special person. I think you will like her. Excuse me again, please. I've had a wee accident and I need to call the nurse. I'll mute the phone but don't ring off, please. A few last instructions to follow."

After a much longer delay, Maureen's voice returned.

"Arlene, it's time up. The surgeon is waiting. I am rolling the dice for a final time, I fear. If you are listening to this it means that I have not survived. Hug my boys for me. Hug Janina and hug Valeria. And thank you for doing this for me. I wish we had been better friends, back in Glasgow. A lost opportunity for me but as circumstances have dictated, probably better for you. Goodbye."

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Cadiz

Janina reached across and took Arlene's free hand in both of her own. Both women sat in companionable silence for many minutes before Janina said, "Arlene, do you believe she really is dead, eh?"

'Yes. Definitely. Do you?"

"Yes, me too. While I was driving her to Madrid for her flight to Geneva, she told me she had left it too long to get treatment and that her fate was sealed. The oddest part for me was that she was wearing a crucifix, fingering a rosary. I had always assumed she was not religious. Does that make sense to you?"

"Well, to be honest, as I said earlier, odd as it may seem, I hardly knew Maureen. As I explained earlier, when she had the boys baptised as Roman Catholics, I was surprised. I think we all were. And as I explained earlier, I was persuaded to give my public promise to be their Godmother. Janina, to be totally honest with you, those Baptisms were the only times she was nice to me. Day to day when I was running the nail bar for her, she was harsh, down on me if I strayed in the slightest from her rules. I just can't work out how different she has been to me since she got in touch yesterday morning. But I explained all that. Maybe she had a split personality. Declan certainly worshiped her and would never allow any criticism of her although I know for certain he was not as obedient as he tried to make out. He was messing about with other women. I know he was."

"Are you religious, Arlene?"

"No, not really, no. Nor Declan. Who knows, maybe it was the fear of dying that made Maureen turn to religion?"

"Yeah, who knows. Anyway, as we drove to Madrid, we talked through what she called Plan A and Plan B. She was on her iPad the whole time. I think she had been looking up the long-term weather forecasts, but that's a guess, eh? Then she dreamt up the Cadiz back-up plan. I think it was very hard for Maureen to trust me on this as she had never met Marcela but eventually she agreed to it, as just confirmed in her message. Part of her difficulty is that Maureen had never met Marcela although she knew about her, of course."

"Who is Marcela?"

"OK, here goes, synoptics only, eh? I know this must all be hard for you to process, all this chopping and changing but Maureen is right, by sea is best. When I first arrived

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here in Spain, Maureen arranged for me to be taken to a sort of treatment centre cum language school. It was in a former nunnery, deep into the hills, miles from anywhere, surrounded by olive trees as far as you could see in every direction. We were in seclusion, isolated from temptation. A key part of the treatment was to have a buddy. My buddy was a woman called Marcela, chosen for me because she could speak English. It turned out that we had similar stories. Like me, she had made a bad marriage to a junkie husband, eh? However, in her case her husband died, of an overdose. Marcela is a native of Cadiz, from a rich family who own a small but profitable shipping line. She has six brothers, who captain these ships. Now she is clean, Marcela has replaced her father as the CEO, running the business side of the enterprise. One of their contracts is to run supplies to The Canaries. While we were in the car park at Madrid Airport, with Maureen listening, I made a call to Marcela and she agreed to smuggle you to Tenerife, if required, and to forewarn Valeria, give her your expected arrival time. There will be no charge, no credit card trail, no paperwork."

"Janina, I don't fancy the idea of being on a ship, I used to get queasy crossing from Largs to Millport. The boys might get seasick too. What do you think I should do, Janina?"

"I say you should go with Maureen's new plan, take the risk. Tell you the truth, Arlene, I'm not good on ships either but it is the best way in your situation, eh? In fact, I've never been to any of The Canaries, but I did some *Google* searches and it seems Tenerife has a permanent population of around thirty thousand, about a quarter of them British, not counting the six million holidaymakers who visit annually. The attraction is the weather, of course. Tenerife get hardly any rain, less that ten days a year in the tourist resorts at the south of the island. I think it should be a perfect place to settle, living well under the radar. The main issue is getting you there without leaving a trail for anyone trying to find you. However, it's your call, Arlene, not mine. So, what is it to be? Shall I ring Marcela, eh?"

"OK, but first, please, who is Valeria?"

"We'll have plenty time to talk about Valeria when we are on the move again, OK?"

Arlene listened to a one-sided conversation as Janina spoke in rapid Spanish.

"Right, Arlene, sorted, eh? In this weather it'll take us about three hours to get to Cadiz. Why don't you use the loo in the filling station and grab us some food while you're at it. I'll have a tuna wrap and a double shot latte, two sugars."

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Due Diligence

As the VW pulled out of the service station heading for Cadiz, Arlene asked again about Valeria.

"OK, Arlene hen, but first you need some background to make sense of the relationship between Maureen and Valeria, eh? So, just try to listen as I doubt Valeria would ever be willing to tell you what I'm about to share, OK?"

"OK, thanks."

"So, when I was rescued by Maureen for the first time, before my jaw was fixed, Maureen was still a student at Edinburgh University, studying law and accountancy. But you know that, eh? Anyway, after the spell at the women's refuge and before I moved to Dalkeith, she put me into a one-bedroomed flat on the top floor of a tenement near the Botanics, near Cannonmills, if you know Edinburgh at all. It was while I was learning to drive, after my surgery and therapy sessions. Nearly every day she would pop in, she had her own key. I was sure she was monitoring me to see if I could stay clean, eh? Time after time she told me the trick to breaking addiction is to keep busy. So, she organised Spanish lessons for me, told me that after English, it was the most useful commercial language to have, eh? As a backup to my lessons at a language centre, she gave me a set of Michel Thomas CDs, and almost every day I would sit at the bay window of my tiny kitchen cum living room, wearing headphones, parroting Spanish. Looking down to the street below, I began to cotton on to what was going on with Maureen because I could see her enter and leave a building opposite. Her pattern was bizarre, eh? Sometimes she would leave and stay away for days at a time, or so I thought. Sometimes she would return within the hour. That was before I found out there was a rear access, eh? A way into her place behind the building, from a service lane."

'Janina, where does Valeria fit into this, please?'

"Arlene, just hear me out. It will all make sense soon. So, here goes. It turns out that Maureen lived across the road from me, in a huge townhouse flat, occupying the first floor and basement, opening onto a superb garden at the rear. Later Valeria told me Maureen owned the whole building and that her tenants were all hand-picked, all female university lecturers, all spinsters, older women. I suspect but don't know for sure, but I think she probably owned the flat she had provided for me, eh? But never once did Maureen invite me across to her place and I knew that unless she did, I had to let on I had not realised where she was living. Maureen's flatmate Valeria was also a student at Edinburgh University, studying medicine. Afterwards, when I knew the layout of the

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house, I realised most of the time Valeria entered and left the flat by the garden which led onto a lane as I told you earlier. Maybe Maureen had trained her to come and go like this? Who knows? She was very controlling, was Maureen. Everything always had to be done her way, eh?"

"Yes, Declan used to say, "the only right way is Maureen's way."

"Anyway, one time when I saw Maureen leaving in a taxi with her largest suitcase, I took a chance, went across, rang the doorbell, introduced myself. It took a bit of persuading but eventually Valeria let me in. Later, when we got talking, I realised she knew about me, my jaw operation, my drug and alcohol addiction and so on but Maureen had revealed only some of my background, not the worst bits, thank God, eh? I think I probably got lucky that day because Valeria was lonely and a bit down. She told me Maureen was heading to Tokyo to play in a winner-takes-all Chess tournament and that she would be away for a week."

"Chess? I didn't know Maureen played Chess. Why Tokyo?"

"Hear me out, Arlene, and try not to interrupt, eh? Anyway, Valeria and I had coffee and chatted all morning. It spilled over into a snack lunch then on through the afternoon. It was the most amazing few hours of my life. I've never talked about it before or since to anyone. Valeria swore me to absolute secrecy because we both knew Maureen would hate it if she found out we had been discussing her. In the years since, I've thought a lot about that day with Valeria, eh? I think 'entranced' might be the word to describe how I felt. Fanciful, eh? Hey, cut me slack, I read too much chick-lit stuff. Anyway, when you meet Valeria, I think you will discover there is something both uncanny and intriguing about her. Serenity might be the right word. It's her eyes, I suppose, apart from her looks."

"Her eyes, are they green?"

"Yes, green. Anyway, we shared our backgrounds and discovered we were very alike. Like me, she had never known her father, eh? He moved to London during the pregnancy, hoping for work as a chef but he never returned and never sent any money, no letters, silence. Sound familiar? Turns out her parents were not married, bringing shame on her family. After Valeria was born, her mother moved away from her village in Fuerteventura to *Santa de Cruz de Tenerife*, the island's main town. The girl and her baby were taken in by her mother's widowed aunt who lived in a run-down council high-rise block where all the residents helped each other as best they could. Valeria described it as a sort of commune. When the aunt died, Valeria was already at primary school, eh? So, her mother got a job working as a kitchen skivvy in a local hospital. Then Valeria got her big break. When she was about ten, she was 'adopted' by a consultant in the same hospital, an elderly single man called John Macpherson, a member of their church who had moved to Tenerife

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decades earlier, when he was in his early thirties, for the better weather to ease his bronchitis and to enjoy sea-fishing, his main hobby. Macpherson was a deeply religious man and ran an informal medical centre from the church and enrolled Valeria as his 'nurse'. Look, Arlene, just to put you right, I asked Valeria straight out and she assured me everything between her and her Uncle John was above board, nothing inappropriate. When she went to high school, he made Valeria a promise that if she got good enough grades, he would sponsor her to go to Edinburgh University, where he had studied as a young man."

"Valeria is a Doctor on Tenerife?"

"Yes, did I not say that, eh? Look, Arlene, I feel I have to tell you this, even though Maureen is dead, eh? You need to know because it's relevant to Valeria. There's no way round this, eh? From what Valeria told me that day, it was obvious she was completely head over heels in love with Maureen. Never once had I suspected Maureen was gay. To me, it didn't stack up because when we were teenagers, she told me she was going to have a huge family of boys. Like other ideas with Maureen, she obsessed about it, even though she had never been out with boys. Later, when I heard she had married your brother, I realised she was bi-sexual. But back then, in Edinburgh, it was Valeria who had captured her heart. The thing is with Valeria, it's not just her stunning looks. Look, I can't really explain it, Arlene. I used to think the word was 'charisma' but I think that's too glib, too shallow, eh? Like you, Valeria's a good listener but that's just part of it, eh? Somehow, within minutes of being in her company, she has the knack of putting you completely at ease. I've thought about it many times since then and think maybe her gift might be a form of hypnotism. I know some Doctors use medical hypnotism to help patients, some even undergoing surgery under hypnosis."

"OK, Valeria is a medical hypnotist? How is that good for me and the boys? Sounds a bit off, weird."

"No, Arlene, don't jump to wrong conclusions, hear me out, eh? And cut me some slack here, hen, fact is I'm struggling to remember all the details 'cos I wasn't completely off everything and anyway, it's so long ago, eh? Water under the bridge and all that, eh? OK, OK, let me try again. What I know about Maureen and her life at that time, is nearly all second-hand, from Valeria. Later, when I was based here in Spain, I tried to ask Maureen some leading questions to see if she would confirm or deny what Valeria had said but she clammed up and told me to mind my own business. So, here goes, let's see if this stacks up. Hold on while we get through this busy junction. Commuters, eh? Would ye look at them, eh? These people can easily get you killed. Bloody amateurs!"

Ten minutes later, Janina relaxed and restarted her story.

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"OK, Arlene, here we go again, eh? While Maureen was helping me fight my drug and alcohol addiction, paying for my surgery and other treatments, paying for my rent and food and so on, what I did not understand was at the very same time she was caught up in her own cycle of addiction. To me, in my version of Maureen she was clean, but this was because her addiction was 'invisible', eh? It was from Valeria I learned Maureen's weakness was gambling, Chess and any sort of game particularly poker, remembering and counting the cards already played so she could know what was left in the deck allowing her to calculate the odds enough to make her moves but with an edge, eh?"

"Maureen was a gambler? Really?"

"Yes, but she was a *professional* gambler, eh? It was how she made her money, even while she was a student. Valeria told me Maureen had been doing this since she was in her early teens, her way of earning money. I was stunned. I thought we had shared everything back then but here was a new version of my buddy from school in Kirkcaldy, eh? According to Valeria, this was not reckless gambling like betting on horses or dogs or football matches, which she saw as 'uncontrolled betting' where the gambler must rely on the ability of others or the luck of the draw. Roulette, for example, was no use to her. It always had to be one-on-one. Valeria called it 'duelling', like the olden days."

"Was Maureen cheating or doing something unlawful?"

"Who knows, eh? But Valeria confessed she thought Maureen was being drawn to higher stake games online with a gangster element, although that was just her guess, as she had no proof because Maureen kept everything secret. As you know, with Maureen, everything was another secret, eh?"

"Janina, are you *sure* of all this? I thought Maureen was mainly involved in accounting and financial services and investing in property and businesses like *Glasgow Nail and Beauty*."

"Yes, hen, maybe later but back twenty odd years ago, Valeria told me Maureen would only risk her cash in situations where she had 'controllable parameters', like Poker, Bridge and Blackjack. It turns out that Maureen was taking language courses in Mandarin, Cantonese, Hindi and Punjabi because many of these high-stakes online gamblers were Chinese or Indian businessmen, addicted like herself, hiding their weaknesses, gambling in secret, men brought up on Chess, taught by grand masters. Arlene, from what you do know of Maureen, does any of this surprise you, eh?"

"It seems like a fantasy. Are you sure Valeria wasn't scamming you?"

"No, Arlene, I believed her back then and she has always been a straight person ever since, so far as I hear from Marcela. Why not judge for yourself when you meet her, eh? Look, Arlene hen, I'm telling you now because I think you need to know and I doubt Valeria will ever tell you, eh? Anyway, it turns out that all those times when I saw her from my

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bay window leaving all dolled up with her carry-on bag, she was flying to London and Manchester to play high stakes card games, anywhere she could find people she felt she could beat. When she had defeated all the UK people several times, there was no one left willing to put up against her, eh? That's when she began flying to Las Vegas to find opponents. Do you know, Arlene, there are direct flights from Manchester to Vegas, going back and forth every day of the year, every flight jam packed with gamblers?"

"But what about her university classes?"

"Turns out she passed all her exams with flying colours, always top of every class. But it was her passion for Chess that was her downfall, eh?"

"Chess? But Maureen was an active person, always super fit. I can't imagine her sitting down for hours on end playing Chess or cards as a professional gambler."

"Yes, Arlene, Chess, eh? When Valeria told me, I remembered that back in Kirkcaldy Maureen used to get Chess books from the library and study them and that she had a pocket Chess set, but I never saw her play anyone. The point is, by this stage in Edinburgh, Maureen would only play Chess for money, and only when she found an opponent such as a grand master, someone whose playing records could be accessed and studied before she took them on. Valeria said Maureen had found them online, grand masters with sponsors willing to fund their stake with big money. Look, Maureen was not interested in winning as such, it had to be for money and almost all this play was by then online. Remember those matches on TV? And it meant she could challenge a known opponent while remaining anonymous, changing her name and country of origin, trying to ensure that no one could build a dossier of her moves which might reveal her thinking, reveal her own foibles, weaknesses, eh?"

"Janina, if Maureen was a professional gambler, carefully preparing, why was online Chess her downfall?"

"Look, Arlene, just to clarify something you might be missing here. Maureen was on a high at that time, not on drugs as such, just the drug of success and yet, while she was doing all this extra work, remember she was also passing all her university examinations. I suppose with what we know now of her recent health, this is what might have been at the root of her illness, living on the edge, hardly sleeping, desperate for the next high, eh? Trust me, I know that feeling, the feeling of never wanting to land. And as if that was not enough, according to Valeria, Maureen was reinvesting her winnings to buy and develop high-earning cash-based businesses like bookmakers, brothels, massage parlours and other places which could generate the footfall she needed to sell drugs direct. Don't forget, our Maureen was not angelic, she was totally amoral and viciously ruthless and if you were outside her circle, you were fair game. Arlene, dare I ask, did she force you to sell drugs for her at *GNB*, eh?"

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"Janina, when I was in charge of *Glasgow Nail and Beauty*, we never sold drugs, never. Maureen hated drugs of any kind and smoking and alcohol and even caffeine."

"Yes, I agree, Arlene, that was my view of Maureen too but when I challenged Valeria, she said Maureen had been sucked into these businesses by the very people she was gambling against. To her it was another challenge, outdoing them by running smarter operations under tighter control. Weird, or what, eh? But hey, what could ever surprise us about Maureen, eh?"

"Janina, just to add, I think some of our clients thought we might be selling drugs. If I picked up on this, I banned them. In fact, I was not allowed to employ anyone with any kind of obvious habit and if I discovered they had lied to me, I sacked them at once. We paid top wages, so no problem getting new beauticians."

"OK, but I bet she had you running some other scam, eh?"

"Janina, I don't want to talk about this sort of thing. Not ever. Tell me about her 'downfall' as you called it, please."

"OK, hen. I know it must be hard for you to hear all this, speaking of the dead and so on. And I know it seems perverse that Maureen would help me to get clean while trading drugs to others. The difference was simply that she cared about me. She did not care in the least about them, the people Valeria said she called 'the gullibles'. I mean, although she was very good to me, I don't think she was ever any kind of saint. In my experience she was as hard as nails, ruthless. According to Valeria, even while she was still a student, she had around a dozen businesses, a few in Edinburgh and Glasgow but mainly in Aberdeen which was booming with oil money. Remember that film called *Jerry Maguire* and his phrase - 'Show me the money!', eh? So, for Maureen, it was all about winning, getting richer and richer, having the biggest house, the best cars and so on. Even the most beautiful kids too, right? And no doubt she made a lot of enemies along the way, eh?"

"And her *downfall* was? I need to know."

"Yeah, OK, here we go, eh? According to Valeria, while she enjoyed playing card games for money, Chess was always her first love, her consuming obsession, head-to-head, duelling, warfare, an outlet for her aggression, a way of hitting back against the injustice of being born hairless. Valeria told me that one time, while she was still an unknown, she managed to buy her way into a tournament where she played ten opponents at the same time, all in the same room, against the clock, Guess what, eh? She beat them all, cleaning up, earning several millions. After that the word about her got around and opponents dried up because they would no longer admit her to their sessions."

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"Janina, stop! Please, I need to know. Did I or did I not hear you say 'downfall'? If so, I need to know the details, all of them. If I'm going to put the lives of these three wee boys and myself on the line by going to Valeria the medical hypnotist in Tenerife, I really need to understand, *please*."

"Arlene, OK, OK. What I'm trying to say is, even as a student Maureen was mega rich, eh? So, you and I know that rationally, she should have stopped back then and used her winnings to build her business empire, but this did not have the buzz she craved. Her *downfall* came about because of technology and her 'blindness' to what was about to happen to her because of it. So, to remind you, this happened around the millennium when the first of the more powerful laptops were becoming commonplace and the Internet was developing rapidly. Maureen could afford the very best, of course, and soon discovered she could play Chess online against opponent from all around the world, all from her own front room. According to Valeria she had always loathed travelling, most especially after 9/11 and all the additional security checks. I expect it was because of her baldness, her wigs and special adhesives and so on, always a problem with airport security. *Geez, did you feel that?* Hell's bells, the back end is skidding badly."

Janina hauled on the steering wheel and braked heavily as a huge artic forced its way across her path into the middle lane blacking out the windscreen with its backwash of slush.

"*OH MY GOD!* Look at that nutter! Crazy man. Look, Arlene, this sleet is getting too heavy, too dangerous, eh? At the first chance, I'll pull off, call Marcela and let her know our situation, ask her to hold the ship for us, if she can."

"Good idea."

"*Hey, this is our turn off!* God, I nearly missed it. OK, I'll pull over and ring Marcela, eh? Give her a heads up. Get details of where to drop you off, OK?"

From the slip road they found a quiet side road and parked in a lay-by.

Snug in their zip-in duvet suits, the boys slept on, unaware of the drama.

Janina spoke to Marcela handsfree, listening to her replies through her earpiece, nodding and confirming she understood.

"OK, Arlene, Marcela says the weather is clearing from the south-west. We have about ninety minutes before your ship is scheduled to sail and we should be able to cover the last stretch in say thirty minutes to forty minutes. Let's sit tight here for a bit, eh?"

"Janina, great driving, well done. Now, please, tell me about Maureen's 'downfall'?"

Under Contract

"OK, OK, I hadn't forgotten, eh? According to Valeria, playing from her front room in Edinburgh, Maureen accepted an invitation to play in a big money online Chess tournament, moving from one opponent to another in a round robin, playing under a short clock system, eh? But now she was not winning. She was losing and losing heavily. Instead of quitting, she kept going, round after round, eh? Valeria thinks she lost about half of her wealth in that four-day period, maybe as much as £20 million, Valeria thinks. The result was a mental breakdown, eh? Complete personality collapse, psychosis, Valeria said."

"Oh, I often wondered why she was so edgy at times."

"Arlene, trust me, Maureen has always been edgy, ready to fight anyone who tried to put her down. Everyone in our school was afraid of her, even the teachers, eh? Anyway, eventually, after a spell recovering in a psychiatric clinic which specialised in gambling addiction, when she was 'cured', she figured it out. She had been duped, scammed, set up as a patsy, eh? In that tournament she had been playing against a cabal of sponsored Chess grand masters assisted by their computer, analysing her every move, second guessing her, all this happening under Maureen's radar, unseen, eh? These other players were working together, feeding Maureen's moves into a powerful Chess program. Remember *Deep Blue*, the Chess computer invented by IBM? Anyway, nowadays they call it 'Advanced Chess' and its common in online matches but back then, it was under the radar, eh? On that long ago day in Edinburgh, when she left for Tokyo, Valeria was sure Maureen was up to something. She had told Valeria she was getting back to face-to-face Chess again, determined to rebuild her lost wealth."

"Maureen wasn't really beaten after all, not really, was she? I wonder what happened in Tokyo. Were these the people who had cheated her?"

"Arlene hen, who knows? Did she even go to Tokyo? I guess we will never know, eh? However, during her absence, I did visit Valeria on two further occasions but after that first 'magic' day, she clammed up on me where Maureen was concerned. Within a week of Maureen's return, I moved to Dalkeith, completely out of the loop and I never saw Valeria again. But knowing Maureen, I was certain even then she would find a way to rebuild her empire. No doubt she would invent her own money-making scams, right?"

"Yes, I know what you mean. According to Declan, Maureen was always up to something or other. But he's missing. Maureen thinks he is dead. I can't really take that in but she's almost always right, isn't she? God, Janina, it all seems so long ago, back in Glasgow, only yesterday. What will happen to the nail bar I was running? How can Maureen possibly organise everything if she's dead? But is she really?"

"Yes, Arlene, unfortunately we both have to accept that Maureen is dead, eh? If you had seen her when I dropped her off at Madrid Airport, you would have no doubts. She was like a stick insect, skin on bones, eh?"

Under Contract

"But Janina, I don't want her to be dead. I mean, can she really help us as she promised? How could anyone do that?"

Tears started to fall and Arlene could feel herself floating again.

Janina reached across and hugged, whispering in her ear:

"Look, Arlene hen, listen tae me. We baith jist huv tae trust hur, eh? To be honest, hen, Ah find this scary tae, probably why Ah've been runnin aff at the mooth, eh? Maureen has ayewis been thair fur me, ma safety net. And whit about Valeria, does she ken Maureen's deed?"

Their moment of intimacy passed. They sat back, facing forwards. The driving sleet had turned to vertical rain, washing the roads clear of slush.

"So, tell me everything else you know about Valeria, please."

"Look, it's clearing a bit. Let's get moving again, eh, I'll tell you what I know as we drive, eh? But first I'll update Marcela, eh?"

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The VW set off into the gloom, Janina driving carefully in the slow lane.

At the first sign for the docks, Janina resumed speaking.

"So, Arlene hen, since those few days we spent together back in Edinburgh, I've never seen Valeria but living back here on the mainland, I hear through Marcella she has become some sort of saint, eh?"

"Do you know why she split with Maureen?"

"No, just that Valeria went back to Tenerife to look after her mother and to help her Uncle John. Over the years the clinic has expanded into a mini hospital with a hospice attached run by nuns. The patients are all females, disadvantaged locals and refugees suffering from Aids and other sex related diseases the Tenerife medical authorities prefer to ignore. I'm guessing here, but I suspect her funding comes from Maureen. Anyway, you'll soon find out because here we are at last. Yes, that's the warehouse we are looking for and there's your transport, the good ship *MV Celeste*."

"Janina, how can I ever thank you, you're a star."

"No worries, eh? Probably best not to mention our chat when you meet Valeria. Let her tell you what she wants and don't push it, eh? Hopefully when things are on an even keel, we might be able to meet up. Who knows, eh?"

Under Contract

"Just one thing, Janina. If anyone comes looking for me and asks you who picked us up, what will you say?"

"It depends. I'll claim client confidentiality if I can but, if necessary, I'll tell them I took you to Madrid and when we discovered it was closed, I took you on to Barcelona and dropped you off there. Beyond that, I know nothing, right?"

"Yes, good plan. Thanks. I'll never forget what you've done for us. Bye-Bye."

Under Contract

MV Celeste

On arrival at Cadiz docks, Janina drove into the designated warehouse where Marcela was waiting out of sight, in a dark corner. Janina led Arlene and the boys to a half-sized container marked: *'Medical Supplies: Refrigerated'*

Inside the container, there was a narrow aisle between deep shelves with cardboard boxes of medicines. At the far end there was a stack of four green plastic seats, the sort used in gardens.

Janina handed Arlene her emergency lantern torch from the VW, hugged her goodbye, closed the door of the container then drove away into the murky gloom of the coming dawn.

A few minutes later the container door opened again.

"Hello, everyone? Boys, I've arranged a little adventure for you. There, take a seat and hold on tight for a little while. Please stay as quiet as little mice and soon you'll find out the next part of your surprise. Have a nice day! Oh, Arlene, would you step outside for a minute please?"

"I am Marcela. You must not worry about air supply. The refrigerator pack is not normal, it gives filtered air. You are not the first to make this trip. AS I said, you must stay seated and quiet, please. Now I must seal you in properly, for customs. *Hasta la Vista!*"

With that she ushered Arlene inside, slammed the securing bolts firmly into place then attached and crimped replacement customs tags with her unofficial pliers.

A few minutes later the container was hoisted on to a low-loader and moved to the quayside where it was checked through customs then hoisted aboard the *MV Celeste* and secured to the poop deck, adjacent to the Bridge.

The air temperature was rising on a light breeze from the warmer sea, swirling a dank foggy mist from the south-west with higher rain cloud scudding landwards. At the deserted quayside *MV Celeste* slipped her moorings and motored slowly to the estuary then to open water, picking up speed, butting through the Atlantic Ocean swell, heading south-west.

The rain clouds raced overhead to the mainland where the final phase of dark storm clouds rumbled slowly eastwards to the interior.

Ahead the sky was clear and sunlight sparkled on white horses.

Under Contract

A tall, thin faced, rather forbidding uniformed man with a greying Viking beard unlocked the secret pass door to the container and ushered them across the short stretch of deck into the ship. He then directed them along a narrow corridor to a large cabin where snack food was laid out on an oval table alongside a flask of coffee and bottles of juice and water.

Arlene said, "Milloy, would you make sure the boys use the toilet and wash their hands thoroughly. Stay inside the bathroom until I call you, I need a few minutes privacy. Thank you, boys."

The man smiled, dipped his head in respect and spoke in perfect English with a slight Glasgow inflection.

"Welcome aboard my ship, dear lady. I am Captain Juan Carlos Hernandez. This is my personal accommodation which I ask you to treat with respect. Through that door, there is a bedroom with a double bed which you and your children will use. The settee over there will convert to a single bed which I will use later, when you are settled for the night. This is necessary as you are not officially on board. I will return in an hour to remove the dishes and bring more food. I have five crew. To keep our secret, they must not discover you are aboard. Keep all portholes shuttered and do not leave this cabin suite. I will lock you inside. If you have an emergency use this pager and I will come as quickly as I can. Otherwise, remain here and try to keep as quite as possible. We shall be at sea for around thirty-six hours, to be sure we arrive at the docks when it is already dark. Because of the recent storm, it will be rough for a few hours but after that, it should settle down and we will have a smooth journey. Do you have any questions?"

"I have a special request, would you look away for a few minutes, please?"

"I am at your service."

Arlene lifted the Disney rucksack and sorted through the documents to remove the boys' genuine passports which she placed in her Gucci rucksack beside her own. Finally, she wrapped the Nokia, her personal phone and her iPad inside her scarf then stuffed the bundle into the Disney rucksack, placing the documents on top then zipping it closed.

Lowering her voice to a whisper, she said:

"Captain, I have a big favour to ask. Will you weigh this down with something heavy and throw it overboard. Don't let anyone see you do this and please don't look inside or ask what it contains. And no, if you are thinking I'm trying to get rid of drugs, you would be wrong."

Under Contract

"Ah, you are from *Glasgow*. *Marcela* did not say. As a younger man I was at your College of Nautical Studies. Yes, I will do as you say. Now, please, I repeat, you must make sure the boys do not make a noise. This is very important."

"Yes, we will try to be ideal passengers."

"Now, I must go. I will return later, as I said."

"Thank you, Captain. You and your sister are very kind."

"I understand you are a friend of *Valeria Rosales* and that is good enough for me."

Under Contract

Dead End

After her call with Tom, Sadie had been unable to get back to sleep.

An hour later she was at her desk at Gartcosh, online, checking the flight information boards for Madrid Airport. She opened her Met Office app and studied storm and snow warnings for Spain. Then returned to the Madrid Airport site and studied its Facebook postings, noting that many of the incoming flights had been diverted to Barcelona Airport. On a hunch she began checking its flight information boards.

Her mobile phone jangled. Tom, calling on *WhatsApp*.

"Sadie, I'm in a bind. Ralph refuses to help. It's probably irrelevant anyway as the airport here at Madrid is snowbound. I had no idea how vast it is. It's massive and it's in absolute chaos. If Arlene is here, I'll never find her without Maitland's help."

"Well, I think she has probably diverted to Barcelona. There are direct flights available from there to various airports all over the place. I was just about to ask Brenda for her boyfriend's mobile number. You remember him, Pablo something, the one she had a fling with at the Europol security conference in Paris last year. Did she tell you she found out he's married with five kids but being Brenda, she still flies out to meet up with him every few months. She sure knows how to pick them, does our Brenda. Last I heard Pablo was promoted to head of airport security at Barcelona Airport. I know it's a longshot but it's the best I can come up with."

"OK, Sadie, go for it. In the absence of any other bright ideas, what else is there to try? Give me half an hour to get clear of this madness and I'll ring you back. I need to find a decent place to eat. My energy levels are well down. I haven't slept since a snooze on the plane. And thanks Sadie, once again you have gone above and beyond!"

"Tom, I've had another idea. That travel agent in Leicester which booked Patel and his buddy on the flight to Malaga, I have been burrowing and I think I have a lead on Patel. It needs more work but if we do lose Arlene, it might be worth trying, what do you say?"

"Yes, please. Who knows, it could lead us to Maureen Bishop by another route. Assuming Declan is isolated now, he might be easier to crack, if we can locate him. Any ideas?"

"Leave it with me, Tom, I'll see what the tech team can turn up if I trade a few favours."

"Again, brilliant work, Sadie. I'll ring you as soon as I have some man food inside me. Bye-bye."

Under Contract

Tom was merging from the car park feeder road into the faster traffic on the two-lane flyover which looped over the motorway. He had been riding his clutch for several minutes when he took a chance, let it out, pressing down on the accelerator, attempting to force his way into a gap. His wheels whirled on wet ice. The Renault slithered. In tiredness and frustration, he floored the accelerator, slewing the Espace into the path of Ralph's Landcruiser accelerating over the flyover, trying to make it home for the birth of his third child.

The initial impact crushed the driver's door, killing DI Tom Graham outright.

Ralph Maitland wasn't so lucky. As the Toyota's momentum carried it upwards, his head slammed down onto steering wheel, rendering him unconscious.

Both vehicles were carried up and over the safety barrier, falling eight metres onto the motorway traffic below. The Espace was pulverised under a high-sided lorry travelling too fast to avoid it. Arriving milli-seconds later, the Toyota crashed down onto the lorry cabin, killing its driver outright.

As the lorry slewed and slowed, it was hit from behind by a tail-gating fuel tanker unable to stop on the slushy hard-packed snow. The records would show this was the first hit in a concertina effect pile-up involving a total of seventeen vehicles with an ultimate toll of thirteen deaths and nineteen seriously injured.

Despite the vigour of the blizzard, the spilled aviation fuel from the tanker burned for nearly an hour.

Ralph Maitland, suspended upside down by his seat belt, concussed but still alive, was barbecued by these flames.

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It would be three weeks before the news reached Police Scotland that one of their officers had been killed in a tragic accident.

In the aftermath of the fractious enquiry which followed, DS Julie McRobert resigned, having decided on a career change, becoming a self-employed dog walker during her mornings and a Yoga instructor on her afternoons and evenings. Luckily, she did not lose her pension.

Under Contract

Vistas al Mar

Arlene stood on the upper terrace of her new home, leaning on the banister, sipping freshly squeezed orange juice, smiling. She was entirely clean for the first time in decades. Her last drink had been during her binge the night before leaving Glasgow three months earlier. Caffeine was no longer allowed or desired.

Below her at the far end of the 25-metre pool, Milloy was standing on the highest level of the diving platform.

On the artificial lawn beyond the pool, his brothers were playing a game they had invented called 'rings' which involved throwing tennis balls backwards over their heads while keeping their eyes closed, trying to land the balls in a small blow-up paddling pool.

"Mummy Arlene, watch this," shouted Milloy, stretching his arms high and rising onto his tiptoes. "And Mummy, remember to count after you say 'go'."

"Go!"

She watched as he sailed upwards and outwards in a perfect arc to enter the water with hardly a splash. Staying deep, he swam underwater towards her. When he popped his head out and raised his hand at the nearside pool edge almost directly below her, she shouted:

"21! Well done, Milloy, that's your best time so far."

"Mummy," shouted Madden, "can we try now."

"OK, you first then Morran."

Madden moved to the end of the pool below the diving board and stood with his arms stretched high above his head.

"Ready, Mummy."

"Go!"

Less elegantly, the middle boy dived in, swam a few strokes under water, spluttered to the surface and pounded in a furious front crawl towards her. When he reached the nearside pool edge and raised his hand, she shouted, "32! That's a new personal best, Madden. Well done. You now, Morran."

"Ready, Mummy!"

Under Contract

"Go!"

Fearlessly, the smallest boy ran from the lawn area behind the diving platform and threw himself upwards and outwards, curling himself into a ball to 'bomb' into the water. When he surfaced, he began heading towards her using a mixture of doggy paddle and crawl. When he arrived beside his brothers, he too held up his hand. Arlene screeched:

"57! Great stuff Morran. Well done."

Below her from the poolside terrace another voice called out, "Hey Guys, anyone ready for breakfast yet?"

"YES!" came the unison reply.

"Right, showers first and change into dry shorts and sneakers."

The boys scampered off into the house leaving a trail of wet footprints behind them.

Arlene looked down and her heart skipped a beat. Valeria was wearing another new bikini, its colour a perfect match for her piercing green eyes.

They smiled. Words were not required.

Arlene skipped down the external stairs.

Halfway across the patio they embraced and kissed.

As they parted, tears welled up in Arlene's eyes.

"Tish, Tish, my dear one, let it go. Come now, that old life of yours was not so great, was it? The nightmare is over. You are safe here with me, I promise you. Now, fifty lengths please. If you can beat yesterday's time of 29 minutes, I'll make you special scrambled eggs with smoked salmon. Scottish of course. No more tears, please."

Arlene's happiness spilled over into a sighing sob.

"No, no, Valeria, I'm not sad. Not in the least. I'm happy. I'm happier than I've ever been in my life. Living here with you is like a dream come true."

"Hush now, I know, I know my dear one. You know I was just teasing. It's like a dream come true for me too. After all this time waiting and praying, here you are at last. Maureen promised she would send you to me and, as we know, she always keeps her promises."

"Valeria, what time is it? I've been sleeping so well I've lost track."

Under Contract

"Just after eight. Juanita and Maria will be here at nine to take the boys for Spanish lessons. My cousin Paquita will be here at nine-thirty to do your hair. Let's get you back to your natural chestnut brown with maybe a few subtle highlights. What do you think?"

"Sounds nice. What time will you be home today?"

"Around four. The boys have tennis lessons with Loretta and Maria-Angela from four thirty so we should have a clear hour together to focus on the Spanish homework I've set for you. Make sure you complete every item in your workbook, no excuses this time. Ah the thunder of hooves approaches. Now, off you go, and **SWIM!**"

Arlene stepped forwards and dived in, took three strokes underwater, surfaced and set her mind to concentrate on her breaststroke technique and her breathing.

"OK men, settle down there. Heads bowed; eyes closed. Madden it's your turn to give thanks for God's Bounty."