

ALEX WARREN MURDER MYSTERIES - BOOK 1

MADE A KILLING



ZACH ABRAMS

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To my wife and children who have provided assistance and moral support

Chapter 1

Following a fairly ordinary morning, Alex Warren's day had taken a distinct turn for the worse. He was not a happy man.

The sickening sight of the corpse lay in front of him. It was a mess of blood and guts. A bright red pool surrounded the wound which was edged by ravaged flesh and dotted with black congealing clots. The horrified, wide-eyed stare of the victim exacerbated the profound ugliness of the scene. Overwhelmed by the smell of blood, Warren felt nauseous imagining he could taste metal in his mouth, and with great reluctance he took another look at the body before exhaling loudly. Even when he looked away, everything seemed bathed in a red haze. He was confused. There could be no doubt about how Stevenson was killed and Warren had strong suspicions about the murderer's motives. He wasn't surprised that someone murdered him but, rather, that it hadn't happened sooner. What perplexed Warren most was thinking about all the possible candidates for the crime.

The normally towering, muscular frame of DCI Alex Warren was weary and his shoulders drooped. His black hair seemed lank and the clean-shaven skin of his normally tight, angular face sagged. Instead of his usually healthy colouring, his skin came closer to matching the white protective one-piece coverall he was wearing. He normally carried his age well and most people, on first impressions, imagined he was in his early-thirties, but today he looked all of his forty-one years. Only his bright green eyes showed their usual sharpness. He was unhappy to be the poor sod assigned as senior investigating officer on this case and given the task of finding Stevenson's murderer. It was most unusual for him not to be keen to solve a crime. His fundamental problem was that he was happy to see Scott Stevenson dead. He couldn't consider the person who terminated his life to be a criminal, a hero more like. Yet he was the one given the task of finding the murderer so that justice could be served. What kind of justice was this?

Alex Warren was all too familiar with Scott Stevenson. He'd investigated countless complaints of how he'd robbed and cheated people and, in particular, claims that he'd targeted the elderly, conning them out of their life savings, their valuables, or the inheritances they'd planned for their offspring. At least three of the poor buggers who Warren was aware of had taken seriously ill and died as a direct consequence of the anguish Stevenson had caused.

Although he couldn't ever utter his opinion, Warren was of the view that Stevenson deserved to die. He believed the ancient, eighteen inch, ivory carving impaled below his chest to be a fitting end. The carving was crescent in shape, presumably pointed, and appeared to have been ornately carved from a slice of elephant tusk. Warren smiled at what he saw as an ironical statement. Reputedly, an elephant never forgets and clearly, someone else wasn't prepared to forget or overlook Stevenson's heinous deeds. Added to this, Stevenson had a reputation for dodgy deals involving antiques. Yes, using an antique, carved elephant tusk to end Stevenson's life was most appropriate.

Scott Stevenson had had no redeeming features. He was five foot four tall and his circumference wasn't too much less. His obese frame was topped by a spherical, bald head, thick-framed black spectacles which only served to emphasise his little piggy eyes, and was accompanied by an equally piggy nose and large pointed ears that a Vulcan would have been proud of. Despite all of this, he'd been vain and was once flattered when a paid for, nocturnal partner claimed he had the body of a God, little understanding her sense of humour and that she'd been thinking of Buddha. His looks were only the start, as it was his character which was most obnoxious. Over the years, he'd developed his despicable strategy; he'd endear himself to elderly householders, particularly little old ladies. He would target poor souls who were desperate for company and conversation and this gave him the opportunity to gain access to their homes. Even when they weren't forthcoming with information, once entrusted into their houses, he was quickly able to identify anything of value. In his earlier years he mostly targeted their cash, abusing his position of trust and convincing them to purchase unsecured investments. He persuaded them by explaining how easy it would be for them to enrich their own lives or that of their offspring. In his time he had sold life assurance policies before they were regulated, then went on to an assortment of strange and allegedly lucrative plans from foreign property to ostriches. In recent years he'd concentrated more on depriving them of the value of their antiques and collectibles. He'd convince them he was being generous and doing them a favour by taking their heirlooms off their hands, but he did so at a fraction of their true value. Then he'd make a killing selling them on at their full worth. Unfortunately, it was hard, nay impossible, to prove a crime had taken place as Stevenson was fastidious and ensured he had all the paperwork he required to justify and support his transactions.

Over the last few years there had been countless complainants and every one of them, together with each member of their family, was a potential suspect for the murder, not to mention what must be a multitude of other unknown victims who'd been too embarrassed to levy an official complaint.

Warren was sick at the thought of what lay ahead. To properly investigate the death, he'd have to interrogate the victims of Stevenson's cons and, worse still, force them to relive the trauma they'd been put through. Hadn't they suffered enough already?

When first assigned the case, Warren had considered his options. He wanted to refuse, but without a legitimate reason it would most likely have damaged his promotion prospects. His most compelling reason was because of his previous encounters on a personal level. Eighteen months ago, not long before the final breakdown of his marriage and not totally unrelated to it, his wife Helen's elderly aunt had fallen prey to Stevenson's charms. Spurred on by the insistence of his wife, it had taken all of Warren's persuasive powers, using some not so metaphorical arm twisting and tactics not considered acceptable to today's constabulary, before he regained her valuables. No reports were ever filed, nor could there be, and Alex could hardly give his prior dealings with the victim as a reason for not becoming involved now. He could have faked an illness and taken time off sick, just long enough for someone else to take over the job. That would have been cheating the system and, although not in the same league as Stevenson's transgressions, in his mind it would have put him into the same category. The potential hypocrisy was not lost on him. No, it just wasn't an acceptable option. He decided he'd just have to grin and bear it and hope his team's skills would be sufficient to solve the crime and do it quickly before too much damage was done.

Walking around Stevenson's shop, Warren took in the scene. The emporia was of modest size, about fifteen hundred square feet. There were small partitioned areas for office, kitchen and toilet but most of the expanse was open space artistically laid out with furniture, porcelain and an eclectic mix of collectibles. Behind the stench of death, the air was rich with the aroma of teak oil and polish which had been used to embellish the appearance of the brown furniture. Against a far wall was a line of locked, glass-fronted cabinets containing expensive, second-hand jewellery and an array of gold and silver artefacts. Nothing had been disturbed and, as the office safe and cash box also seemed to be intact, it appeared clear that a botched robbery was unlikely to be the motive for the death.

Warren looked again at the corpse. Stevenson's body was positioned half-sitting and half-lying across a chaise longue. One leg was stretched along its length while the other was bent at the knee with its foot on the floor. His mouth was agape and his eyes were wide open, but what drew the most attention was the ivory slice protruding from Stevenson's abdomen and the large red patch spread across his previously white shirt and blue blazer. Looking closer, Warren

could see the blood had spread down and across the brocade fabric covering the antique seat. Judging from the aroma emanating from this part of the room, Stevenson had evacuated his bowels at time of death and Warren considered it highly unlikely that the chaise longue would attract any buyers willing to pay anything approaching its three thousand pound price tag.

“Better give us some space, Sir,” Connor called. “Not much of a challenge to determine cause of death,” he added with a chuckle. “But you never know what we might come up with.”

Warren quickly stepped aside. He had a lot of time for his scene of crime team and, in particular, he respected Connor immensely. Connor had been the catalyst to solving many a case, and in numerous others he'd provided evidence which proved crucial in securing a prosecution. Stepping back and from the vantage point of his six foot four height, Warren gazed down on the diminutive technicians scurrying about in front of him. There was a flurry of activity as they quickly but carefully identified, photographed, tagged and bagged anything that looked suspicious or seemed out of place. Not one of them was over five foot six and clad, as they were, in their protective white tunics and foot covers, he couldn't tell one from another unless they spoke. He was reminded of the 'umpalumpas' from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

“Okay, fine, this is your territory. I'll leave this all to you and your techies for now.”

“That's a really nice piece of carving. Look how neatly it's been done.”

“You mean the tusk or his torso?”

“I was thinking about the ivory. But now that you mention it, the other's been quite neatly done too. I'm rather interested in antiques and old, ivory carvings can be very valuable. There's a lot of newer stuff about where the animal's been illegally poached, but this looks like an old piece and, if it is and has some provenance, then it will be highly sought after. It could be worth checking if there's any significance in the choice of weapon.”

“That's a fair point. I'll look into it. How long do you think you'll need? 'Cause I want back in to check the security system and go through his records to see if they tell us who he might've upset.”

“Give us a couple of hours, three tops. Then it's all yours. Mind you, we'll still have to wait for the Medical Examiner to arrive before we can get the body off to the mortuary. Don't know what's happened as old Duffie's normally out a lot sharper than this. All being well, I should have my preliminary report for you by the morning.”

“I'll look forward to it,” Warren replied, striding towards the front door. He started to strip off his protective gear as he stepped through the doorway and was

relieved to gasp in some icy-cold, fresh air, freeing his lungs from the cloying smells of death and furniture polish.

The shop was positioned on a narrow side street just a few yards off Great Western Road in the Kelvinbridge area of Glasgow's fashionable West End. Typical for a November afternoon, the sky was grey with a watery sun occasionally sneaking through a preponderance of heavy clouds. The broad pavement was still damp and slippery, carrying the residue from a sleety shower earlier in the day, and Alex staggered as he fought to keep his footing while removing his shoe covers.

“Easy there, Boss,” Sergeant Sandra McKinnon said. She'd been following him and automatically reached out a steadying hand. Struggling not to fall, Warren precariously towered over her slight frame. Although proficient in martial arts and able to keep her footing on a tightrope, there was no way Sandra's pretty, petite form could support Warren's fourteen stone bulk. Incorporating a couple of dance steps which had never been attempted on 'Strictly,' he was able to regain his footing without bringing them both tumbling to the ground. Grinning with embarrassment, he guided them towards her Mondeo to use it as a makeshift command centre, leaving behind two uniformed constables who were chuckling at his balancing act.

Trying to regain the high ground by criticising someone else, Warren turned on her.

“What a bloody state this car's in. When's the last time you cleaned it out?” he exclaimed, picking his way through sweet papers and cola cans to find a clear space to sit.

“Sorry, Boss, it's since I quit smoking, I've been eating to compensate. I'm planning to clear all the rubbish at the weekend.”

“I'll believe that when I see it. Anyway, down to business. You arrived first. Fill me in on everything you've found out.”

“Okay, as you know, the call came in as a '999' from Stuart Findlay, a young lad who works in the shop. He'd been out for his lunch, left at one-fifteen and returned just after two to find the door locked. He had a key and let himself in, then found Stevenson dead on the couch. He says he never touched anything. He just made straight for the office, phoned it in, then waited outside the door. A squad car was first to arrive. Jarvis and Campbell met him. They said he was standing shivering in the street. They didn't know for sure if it was nerves or the cold. They checked out the place. Nothing seemed untoward, other than the body of course. They took a brief statement and called in the cavalry. They waited there with him until I arrived with McAvoy and then they took him down to Dumbarton Road. He'll still be there if you want to interview him while

everything is still fresh in his mind.”

“Fine, I'd like to do that. In the meantime, let's take stock. If Findlay's telling the truth, we have a fairly small window of opportunity, smaller than forensics are likely to give us. Judging from the body and the weapon, it wasn't anything premeditated. It looks more of an impulse or striking out in anger. That makes it a lot more difficult for us. There's loads of blood about so whoever did this has probably been covered in their fair share. We want to start asking questions as quickly as possible. Can you arrange for copies of close circuit tapes from all the security cameras in the area? It'll take a hell of a time to check, particularly when we don't know yet what we're looking for, but it lets us start somewhere. If we're lucky, the shop security tape will give us the answer or, failing that, forensics will give us a break. If not, we're going to be clutching at straws. We'll also need to get moving on a door-to-door. See if anyone saw or heard anything suspicious, anyone covered in blood for instance. I don't hold out much hope, this area's mainly populated by students and there's not too many about in the middle of the afternoon, but let's hope. An incident caravan's on its way and we can use it as a base. Release to the press that there's been a serious incident but there'll be no further information until next of kin have been informed. I'm leaving you here in charge. You get it all set up and I'll head down to the station and see if I can get any more out of Findlay.”

Alex reached across and gave Sandra's arm an affectionate squeeze before exiting the car. There was still chemistry between them although neither of them had let it develop. Since Sandra had joined Alex's unit two years earlier, they'd shared a friendly and often risqué banter. Last year, just about the time of Alex's split from Helen, when he was moving out of the family home, there'd almost been a time. They'd been on a night out with others from their unit and both had a glass or three too many. They had shared a passionate kiss and a grope outside the back door of the pub before Alex had pulled away, realising his life was confused enough without having to worry about the complexities of a workplace relationship.

Sandra was still attracted to Alex but wasn't too upset by the rebuff. She was an intelligent girl and entered the police force on a graduate recruitment programme. Although slight in stature, she was strong and athletic with an attractive figure. She had jaw-length, pageboy-style, jet-black hair framing a pretty face of unblemished, lightly tanned skin with small cute features. Although now twenty-nine and with good steady earnings, she lived in her parent's home in Bishopbriggs. Being clever, attractive and modestly wealthy, she was not short of admirers.

Alex considered the team he had to start the investigation. Sandra was one of

the two sergeants available and she was his natural deputy. She was smart and ambitious and Alex felt confident letting her handle anything, as she would apply the same intelligence and rigour he would himself. His other sergeant was Sanjay Guptar and, whilst Alex had equal confidence in his commitment, he felt Sanjay lacked the same intuitive streak and had less experience as a detective. Nevertheless, he was confident that Sanjay would apply solid support. To supplement, his first choice would have been Detective Constable Philip Morrison but as Phil was still on his annual vacation, he couldn't bring him on stream until the following Monday. In the meantime, he had Constable Donald McAvoy. McAvoy had accumulated twenty-five years service, mostly in CID. He was in the twilight of his career, marking time as he moved towards his retirement. He signified all that was best and worst in the police force of old. He was brave, honest and determined but his aptitudes favoured brawn over brain. He had never fully come to terms with political correctness and, although not overtly a racist or a misogynist, he struggled to cope with the idea of having an Asian and a female supervising his work. Although wary of Donny's values, Alex rated him as a reliable foot soldier, provided he was effectively supervised. Alex knew that, whenever required, he also had access to a number of other less experienced officers both from CID and uniformed divisions.

Chapter 2

Alex made for his own car, a four-year-old Hyundai Santa Fe which he obsessively maintained in excellent condition and polished until he risked lifting the paint. He called Detective Constable Donald McAvoy to join him. McAvoy shuffled along to the car and, not wishing to incite his Boss's wrath, carefully stamped any sleet or mud from his footwear before climbing up and into the SUV.

The journey was only a short distance but the traffic was heavy on Byres Road. The road was broad and lined with shops, cafés and bars, most with tenement flats above. The whole area had a cosmopolitan flavour with restaurants offering the fares from a multitude of European and Asian countries and this was more than matched by a varied mix of patrons. Most of the properties they passed on the Byres Road and on the adjacent thoroughfares were brightly lit and well maintained. Some were recently built while others looked centuries old, interspersed were a few dilapidated buildings, some on the verge of collapse. The overall effect was most strange. The pavements were crowded with shoppers and students milling around and wandering in and out of the retail premises. They had to crawl along at a snail's pace. Frequently, jaywalkers squeezed between the stopped or slow-moving vehicles and the trip seemed to take them forever. The tailback from the lights at University Avenue alone held them back for the best part of half an hour. They travelled mainly in silence before pulling into the station's car park. Once there they arranged to see Findlay straight away.

Alex walked into the interview room and McAvoy followed him in while he started the recording equipment, noting the time and those present.

The room was small, about eight feet square in size. It was stark and contrasted sharply with the opulence of the antique shop they had recently left. The ceiling was covered in speckled, polystyrene, acoustic tiles. Other than grease and coffee marks, the walls were plain, painted green and reminiscent of the décor traditionally used for public lavatories in Glasgow. The floor was covered in grey linoleum giving a tiled effect. It was of an age and style that no matter how well it was scrubbed it never looked clean. The only furniture was a melamine-covered, rectangular table positioned against the wall and bolted to the floor. On each side were two stacking-style, metal-framed plastic chairs. The

recording equipment was mounted on the wall above the table. There was a mild aroma of watered down disinfectant lingering from the last time the room had been cleaned but it barely disguised the resident smell of cigarettes and stale BO. Although smoking was no longer permitted, the pungency lingered from the years before the ban was introduced and this was topped up by the occasional breaches of regulations together with the carryings off the clothes and skins of its many guests.

One of the chairs was occupied by a young man who had the archetypal look of a student. He was tall and scrawny with shoulder-length, ginger hair and an incongruously short, well-manicured beard. His face was acne scarred and gold-coloured, wire-framed spectacles covered his watery grey eyes which perfectly matched the floor covering. He was wearing blue corduroy trousers, an open-necked, denim shirt and a loose-fitting jacket which had overstretched pockets from being stuffed with Coke cans and bottles.

He jumped to his feet when Alex entered the room, "Can I go home now?" he enquired.

"Not quite yet, I'm afraid," Alex replied. "Please sit down. We just need to hear what you have to tell us and get you to sign a formal statement."

"Not again," came the reply. "I've been through it twice already and I just want to go home."

"You must realise this is a very serious matter. It doesn't get more serious than murder. You found the body and we need to find out exactly what you know before you leave."

Findlay resignedly collapsed back into the chair. "But I don't know a thing. I just came back and found Mr Stevenson lying there, dead. I've already said."

"We need to take this one stage at a time. Please speak clearly into the microphone and we'll get this out of the way as quickly as we can. First of all, for the record, please state your full name and address."

In a tired voice Findlay replied, "My name's Stuart Findlay and I stay at flat 2/2, 42 Oakfield Avenue. I've got a share of a student flat. Out of term time I still live with my parents. That's at number fourteen Skean Crescent, Galashiels."

"I believe you worked for Scott Stevenson in his shop, 'Odds and Ends.' How long have you worked there and what do you do?"

"It's only part-time. I'm a student at Glasgow Uni. I'm studying 'History of Art.' I thought it would complement my studies to work in an antique shop. Mr Stevenson thought so too. That's why he gave me the job. That and 'cause he gets away with paying me next to nothing."

"So he didn't treat you well?"

Findlay became a little bit more animated. "Christ no! He treated me like

shit. He took me on to sell in the shop because I knew a bit about antiques and about history. But once I'd started, he wanted me to be a general skivvy. He had me cleaning the toilets and everything. He paid me minimum wage, not even that as he had me working extra hours and wouldn't pay for it. I know I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but the guy was a real bastard.”

“So you didn't really get on. How seriously did you fight?”

Findlay chewed his lip for a second before answering, “We didn't fight at all. He was a bully and I accepted it.”

“Did you have any arguments with him?”

“No, not really. I once tried answering back and claiming my rights but he just told me that if I didn't like it, I could fuck off. He wasn't really into Human Relations Management in any way. I'd have gone too, but I didn't see too much chance of another job, not with my hand,” he said, holding up his left hand and showing it was weak and wasted. “My arm was scalded when I was a toddler and it never grew properly. There's no chance I could get a job in a bar or a restaurant the way it is. That's why I was happy to take the job with Stevenson even with the little he paid me. He knew I didn't have any options and he took advantage.”

“Have you been doing it for long?”

“It must be about eight months ago I started. It was in the spring. At first it was just a Saturday job but during the summer, when I wasn't away, I got extra hours and it became more like full-time. When Uni restarted, he wanted me to keep working extra days, but I had to fit it around my lectures, or occasionally have to miss them. He even asked me to miss my exams on one occasion. On Thursdays, there aren't any lectures but sometimes I have a tutorial. I should have had one today at twelve o'clock and that's when I planned to take my lunch break, but Stevenson said he needed me to stay until after one. He said he had someone coming to see him about one and he'd let me go then as he'd be there to look after things.”

“So what time did you actually leave?”

“It must have been about ten past one.”

“Had his guest arrived by then?”

“No, he chased me out before he arrived. There was no one else in the shop.”

“You said 'He'?”

“I don't know for sure. I was just guessing it'd be a man.”

“Did anything unusual take place in the morning?”

“No, there'd been hardly a soul in and the phone had been quiet too?”

“Were you aware of Mr Stevenson having any fights or making any enemies in the recent past”

“Mr Stevenson seemed to upset a lot of people. He was always having arguments and there was often shouting. But there was nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Where did you go when you went out for lunch?”

“I went up to the Uni. I wanted to see Dr Wilson, my tutor. I wanted to explain why I'd missed the tutorial and pick up any papers or guidance that I'd missed.”

“So will he be able to confirm that?”

“I'm afraid not. He wasn't there. He'd gone to lunch. But I saw his secretary, Mrs Burns. She can tell you I was there.”

“Where is his office?”

“It's in University Gardens, just along from the QM, sorry, the Queen Margaret Union.”

“How long did it take you to walk?”

“It's about ten to fifteen minutes each way. I had packed some sandwiches this morning and I took them with me. When I didn't get to see Dr Wilson, I detoured to Kelvingrove Park and sat on a bench to eat them.”

“Was it not a bit cold for that?”

“Yeh, I suppose so, but I needed some fresh air.”

“And you came back at two o'clock?”

“It must have been just after that. When I got back, the door was locked and I'd to use my key to let myself in. I thought that was strange 'cause the shop was meant to be open. Then I found Mr Stevenson. I could tell right away that he was dead. I came straight out of the door and used my mobile to call 999.”

“You didn't touch anything?”

“No, I don't think so. I just came straight out.”

“Okay, that will be all for now. Sit out in the waiting area and we'll get your statement written up for you to sign, then you can get off home. It's very important that you tell no one about the details of the murder and you can't speak to the press for now. I want no leaks or I'll know where to look,” Alex added menacingly. “Leave your shop keys with us and we'll be back in touch. If you think of anything else, let us know. Here's my card”

Once Findlay had left, Alex asked McAvoy for his opinion.

“He seemed pretty genuine, I guess. If he did go to the Uni during his lunch break, I don't see he'd of had much time for any mischief. That said, I don't buy the story about eating his lunch in the park. He clearly didn't like Stevenson, but I doubt he had the guts to do anything about it and judging from the body, it would have taken both hands or else someone a hell of a lot stronger to stab him the way it was done. As Findlay's not able to use one of his hands, I can't see it

being him. I think he may have some more information that he's not telling us though.”

“Pretty much my thinking,” Alex replied. “Also he said he called 999 from his mobile, but earlier Sandra told me he'd said he phoned from the office. I didn't pick him up on that just now. I wanted to first check out what actually happened.”

“Okay, next stage is to check Stevenson's car and his house. See if that gives us any clues. Did he have the keys on him?”

“Dunno, Boss. I didn't check. Maybe Sandra did. I'll give her a bell.” McAvoy pressed the fast dial and was connected in seconds.

Although only hearing one side of the conversation, Alex didn't need to use his detective skills to follow the thread.

“Hi, Sandra, did you pick up Stevenson's keys? ... Nope, were they in the office or on the stiff? Not in the office. You didn't want to touch the body until Connor had finished. Gonna ask him to check his pockets? ... Aye, I'll hang on You've got his car keys and shop keys and they've already dusted them so we can have them, but there aren't any house keys. That's strange. Right oh. You'll check out the car. It's a Beamer five series if I remember right. We'll head over to the house. No, wait, the Boss is saying we'll check the car and maybe see if the house keys are there. We'll be up there in a few minutes, maybe less the way he drives.”

If McAvoy had made a career out of fortune telling instead of the police then his family would never have had bread on their table. The journey back to Great Western Road was even more tortuous than the one coming down. Sandra was waiting with the car keys and the three of them quickly found the BMW parked a couple of hundred yards from the shop, not too surprisingly illegally sitting in a 'disabled only' bay.

Being a grey, damp, November afternoon, daylight had already faded and they used powerful hand-held torches for their search. They all put on gloves and Alex clicked the remote. Within minutes, they had thoroughly checked the interior of the car and found nothing suspicious and nothing of interest. The car was only a few months old and seemed to have been freshly valeted. They could still smell the detergent coming from the seats. They opened the engine compartment and the eight-cylinder, V8, twin turbo looked polished and clean enough to eat your dinner off. They had no better luck in the boot; inside was a complete Callaway set of golf clubs and equipment, appearing never to have been used, but there was nothing else there and only golfing paraphernalia in the pockets of the bag. Either Stevenson didn't carry his own house keys or someone had taken them.

Chapter 3

Alex knew where Stevenson lived as his personal confrontation with him had taken place at his home, but as no one else knew of this he had to go through the process of having his address confirmed before setting out. Stevenson's house was located in Whitecraigs, one of the most affluent suburbs of Glasgow.

Most of the rush hour biz had dissipated and the traffic was comparatively light. However, masses of pedestrians were still around on Great Western Road enjoying the novelty of the first evening for a month where it wasn't pissing down with rain. The Bohemian-style of Glasgow's West End meant many shops remained open late and this was complemented by the abundance of restaurants, cafés and bars seeking to lure in early evening trade.

Alex turned right towards Charing Cross and was lucky not to be held back by its profusion of traffic lights before dropping onto the slip road to the M8 motorway, rising onto the Kingston Bridge to cross the River Clyde. After passing the first turn off, he pulled across to the inside lane and opted for the M77 when the motorways split. Even though it had been open for several years now, Alex marvelled at how much time this new road saved him when he was travelling out of the city towards the South Side or Ayrshire. Although knowing the road well, he allowed himself to be guided by the satnav as he negotiated his way to Stevenson's residence.

Alex parked with two wheels mounting the pavement on the narrow avenue outside the house and he and McAvoy took the long walk along the mono-block driveway towards the sprawling, ranch-style, detached property. Their path bisected a large lawn with symmetrical flowerbeds cut into it arranged with geometric accuracy. Given the time of year, it was not surprising that there were no flowers and precious little foliage. The lawn had apparently missed its last cut of the season and was ankle length with an abundant sprinkling of autumn leaves which had yet to be gathered.

As they approached the entrance to the house, they could see a tiny red light flashing. It was coming from an alarm box positioned on the wall to the side of the front door about ten feet above the path. As they came nearer, it became obvious that the box had been tampered with as the damaged casing swung back and forward on its hinges, squeaking in the breeze. Behind the facing some wires and electronic components were hanging out. The front door was double-glazed

uPVC with multipoint locks. The locks were serving no purpose as the door was ajar and a wedge of light shone out illuminating a triangle on the ground at the entranceway. Alex slipped open his mobile and called for backup together with the scene of crime team. He stood guard while McAvoy patrolled the perimeter but there was no sign of anyone inside. While waiting, Alex called through to Giffnock police station to check if there had been any reports from neighbours or automated calls from the intruder alarm. No reports had been made and the alarm was of a stand-alone variety, more a cosmetic deterrent than an effective protection for the house.

Before long reinforcements arrived and, kitted up again in a white suit, gloves and shoe covers, Alex, followed by McAvoy, cautiously entered the property to assess the situation.

The inside of the house was a shambles, looking as if a tornado had hit it. Walking from room to room, Alex found only devastation. The hallway opened onto a large open-plan lounge, dining room and kitchen. All the furniture had been overturned and the couches were slashed open, their poly-fibre contents spewed across the floor. A huge LED television screen was half hanging from its mounting on the wall and a Blue Ray player, DVD recorder and satellite decoder had been toppled onto the floor along with a shelf load of disks containing several current titles, some pirate versions of soon to be released movies and several hardcore porn films. Alex noted that the cases were open but no disks were inside. Broken pieces of fine porcelain adorned the thick-piled carpets and a large number of what looked to be good quality original artworks had been stripped off the wall and cast about in a haphazard fashion, often with frames broken and glass smashed. Amongst the debris, Alex immediately recognised works by some well-respected contemporary local artists, including Peter Howson, Ed Hunter, Joe Henderson and Jolomo, the signing name of John Lowrie Morrison. After meeting his alimony, child maintenance responsibilities and paying his day-to-day living costs, Alex had little left over to indulge in other interests but he still maintained a passion for art and he was deeply saddened to see fine pieces treated so badly. He fought the urge to pick them up, dust them off and replace them on the walls, knowing the scene of crime team had first to exhaust their investigations and tests, so instead he turned his back and scanned the kitchen area. Shelves had been cleared and drawers tipped out, including the fridge and freezer. The only sign of life he had so far detected was a group of flies congregating over the deposit from an overturned cat-litter tray in the utility area behind the kitchen. Trying to pick his steps carefully to avoid disturbing anything, he checked the sun lounge, bedrooms and bathrooms to find similar results, furniture upset and slashed and contents strewn across the floors.

There were a number of designer label suits and jackets with their linings torn out. It was clear to Alex that whoever did this to the house was not a random thug out to cause damage, but someone exhaustively taking the house apart looking for something in particular. But what? It didn't take long for him to know for sure. The last room he entered was Stevenson's private office. Alex realised that it must have been kept locked as the door was hanging askew with splinters on the frame where it had been prised open. Bookshelves had been toppled and an array of leather bound texts littered the floor. A beautifully carved mahogany desk lay on its back, showing signs that its drawers had been chiselled open to access its contents. The casing of a Hewlett Packard computer was amongst the debris and a similarly labelled screen lay broken on the floor. Several plain, plastic-covered photograph albums were spread about having already disgorged most of their contents. Looking closer, Warren realised many of the photographs depicted couples and some groups of naked bodies. They seemed to be stills taken from movie films and he could tell, even from the few that he could see, they formed sequences and showed the participants before during and after sexual activity. Many were partial shots or strange angles and it was clear that they hadn't been posed but instead had been taken surreptitiously.

Alex knew they weren't the type of photos used to titillate and the only conceivable purpose in Stevenson having them was for blackmail. He had always classified Stevenson as one of the most hateful forms of vermin but this new revelation took his opinion to a new nadir as he considered blackmailers to be the lowest possible form of scum. For the second time in only a few minutes, he resisted the temptation to leaf through pictures, wanting Connor's team to finish their work first, but this time he had no interest in the artistic value; he merely wanted to identify a further group of people with a grudge against Stevenson and to search for clues to help him identify the actual murderer.

Alex was in no doubt that the person who trashed this house was the murderer. Stevenson must have driven him, or her, over the edge. To kill Stevenson in that way was unlikely to have been premeditated. Stevenson must have pushed them too far and they lashed out. They then must have been desperate to find the source Stevenson was using to blackmail them so they stole his keys to search his house. That meant they must have known where Stevenson lived, or been able to find out within a very short period of time.

While waiting for Connor's crew to get on with their work, Alex phoned through to Sandra to make her aware of the latest developments.

“Nothing's changed, you still need to do all the same groundwork, but because of the photos, I now think the murderer's more likely to be a blackmail victim than someone Stevenson's conned. So we can maybe go a bit easier in

that direction. The only silver lining I see is that maybe some of his con victims needn't undergo further torture. How's progress with you.”

“I've put in a request for all CCTV footage in the area and it should be delivered by first thing in the morning. I've assigned teams to do a door to door, and we've got the mobile incident unit set up outside the shop. Anything else you want from me?”

“Nope, you've done well. I'm going to hang on here until I can get access to have a proper look round and collect everything we need to work with, then I'm calling it a night. I'd like to meet up with you at the incident van first thing tomorrow and we'll take things from there. Wait a minute. Check out next of kin and any known family, friends and contacts. That way, come tomorrow, we can hit the ground running.”

Alex and McAvoy waited in the car until they were given free access to the house. The dry interlude had not lasted and a heavy sleety shower was descending. Alex switched on the engine to give them a modicum of heat and he had the wipers on intermittent with the demister on full and facing the screen to give them some visibility as thick condensation had clouded all the other windows. Once admitted, they conducted a slow and careful search for any items of interest. They lifted carpets looking for a safe but there was none. They collected and boxed all the photos and any paperwork relating to bank accounts and investments, without paying much attention to the content. Uniformed officers were assigned to make enquiries of the neighbours and then, sometime after 10.00pm, with the temperature dropping and a white covering already forming on the grass and pathways, they left the house. Warren made a four mile detour so he could drop McAvoy at his home in Croftfoot, a cottage flat, a quarter villa on the south side of Glasgow, then he found his way back to his own flat. Warren also lived on the south side. He rented a two-bedroom apartment in Shawlands, on the first floor of a traditional red sandstone tenement built more than a century ago. Although requiring little space himself, he maintained the larger property for the odd occasions when he was allowed to have his boys stay over with him. The flat itself comprised of an entrance hallway, large dining kitchen, bay-windowed lounge measuring eighteen feet by fifteen feet and overlooking a small private park and two spacious bedrooms, one with a double and the other two single beds. All the rooms had high ceilings, nearly ten feet tall, and they were bright and airy. Furnishings were adequate but minimalist and mostly had been provided by his landlord. Alex's one precious keepsake was a watercolour painting he had commissioned from the artist Brian Large. The subject was his two boys when they had been aged two and four, pictured in happier days, when they'd been on a family holiday in Spain. Alex

had provided Brian with a photograph and he had produced a remarkably detailed reproduction. Alex had been privileged to have known Brian for years as Alex's uncle had attended school with him. Despite having received commissions from royalty and from the admiralty, Brian now lived the much clichéd, frugal life of an artist residing in a flat in a seaside town on a small island in the Clyde estuary, about forty miles from Glasgow.

Alex was worn out by the exertions of the day and he just wanted some sleep so he went straight to his bed. However, try as he might, sleep eluded him. He tossed and turned. Every time he came close to drifting off, images of Stevenson lying across the chaise longue returned to haunt him. He got up and made himself a hot milky drink, Horlicks, but it didn't help. He lifted the box of photos he'd taken from Stevenson's house and scanned through them but he was too tired to study them properly. All he really absorbed was the abundance of naked bodies indulging in a variety of sex acts. Realising the context, his reaction was pity rather than stimulation. He collapsed back onto the bed and tried again to sleep, but it was well after three am before he finally drifted into a fitful slumber and his alarm had been set for seven.

Chapter 4

Warren overcame the challenge provided by an icy cold rain carried by a moderate wind and, at a few minutes before eight am, with bleary-eyes and arms weighed down by a large cardboard box of photographs, he stumbled into the incident caravan to find Sandra. She was the only other person already there, working her way through a stack of filed reports which had already arrived. With a loud bang, he allowed his burden to land onto a spare desk and he slumped into a chair.

“You look like shit,” she uttered, taking advantage of their privacy to speak more personally than she might have dared had subordinates been present. “What the hell have you been doing?”

“Nothing, that's the sad part,” he murmured. “Just lack of sleep and thinking about the job.”

Alex gazed across with strained vision and it struck him that Sandra appeared particularly attractive this morning. She looked bright and fresh. Her cheeks were rosy, her deep brown eyes sparkled and he could see her rich, black hair was freshly washed, showing to best effect the Vidal Sassoon-style cut and the fresh, fragrant, soapy aroma of her shampoo wafted in his direction. She was wearing a smart, white, open-necked blouse and a tight-fitting black skirt which stopped a few inches above her knee. Standing as she was next to her desk and leaning over her files, Alex was treated to the pleasant view of her athletic, curvaceous outline. As was regulation when on duty, she wore no jewellery and had little or no make-up on, but the pure and wholesome look just seemed to add to her allure.

Alex hadn't realised he'd been staring until Sandra enquired, “Are you okay? You don't seem yourself.”

He blinked a couple of times and then cast his eyes down at the desk.

“Yeah, yeah, fine. Just thinking about where to start,” he lied. “Okay let's compare notes. Where are you up to?”

“There's nothing unexpected. We've had the ME's report already though. Duffie may have arrived late but he must have worked half the night to rush it out. Death most likely occurred sometime between twelve noon and three pm, which is consistent with what we've already been told. The victim had a hearty breakfast of fried bacon, sausage, black pudding and eggs about four hours

before death, probably sometime about 10am. The cholesterol didn't kill him though. Death resulted from being stabbed in the abdomen with the tusk. It did have a sharp pointed end but not razor sharp. It must have been swung with some force, penetrated the abdomen and was then forced upwards puncturing his heart. Death would have been quick. The assailant must have been very strong, almost certainly a man. He must have used both hands to wield it and, from the angle of entry, he would most probably have been right handed. It doesn't narrow down the search too much but I suppose it helps.”

Alex was satisfied with the summary. He nodded as she was talking, making a mental record of each piece of data while intending to read the full report later to pick up on any lesser details which may come in useful.

“Next, we had a call from Connor. He promised the report for this morning but that was before you called him out to Whitecraigs. So he can't deliver. He expects to have prelim' reports on both incidents by early afternoon.” Alex nodded again and tried to withhold a scowl.

“Next, the door to doors. So far a big fat zero. No one saw anything. No one heard anything. Zilch, and that's for both locations. You predicted as much. There's still a few doors to go back to but I'm not hopeful. Nobody's been told the details of what's happened yet and there's been plenty of complaints about Stevenson but that's all. It's all been documented,” she added, pointing to a stack of cardboard covered files.

“I'm still waiting for the CCTV footage and I've asked for the same in the vicinity of the house. It could be a breakthrough if we tracked a car to both locations but there's nothing to say there couldn't be dozens and it'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack. I've assigned Fitzpatrick to work on it, when it arrives. He's not that sharp at the pit face, but he's got a really good eye for detail so the job will suit him. Mind you, we might need to pay for a couple of packets of Aspirin and a visit to Specsavers for his next pair of glasses as compensation.”

“Finally, I've checked up on Stevenson's family. He had been married but there were no children and their bliss ended about fifteen years back when the ex moved to London. We've no more details on her yet. His father died five years ago and his mother stays in a care home, not far from where he lives, or lived, I should say. It's called Eastwood House and it's just along from Eastwood Toll. He has a sister, a few years older than him. She moved down south ages ago. She's married to a guy called Grant Nelson. He works as a bookkeeper and they live in Bristol. They have two teenage kids.”

“Right, I want to see the mother myself. I want to find out what she can tell us. I'd better take you with me though. Phone ahead to see if the home can have

a nurse present 'cause we don't know how she'll take the news. Arrange for the local force to pay the sister a visit. We can get McAvoy to man the caravan and keep his eye on things while we're away.”

Alex indicated the box. “We can start our own porn factory with what's in here. We need to give this a lot of attention.” Seeing Sandra's smile, he added, “No, seriously,” but he couldn't continue without grinning. “It looks as if our Mister Stevenson's been a very naughty boy. He's been blackmailing a lot of people by the look of it. I've only had a quick browse, but there seems to be a lot of victims. I reckon he's had a room wired with cameras and arranged for some prostitutes, both male and female to bring their punters there. All the photos seem to be in the same flat and at least one of the girls is in several photos with different partners. A few kinky ones amongst them. Judging from the way we found them, the murderer's already been through them and picked out any that implicated him. We didn't find much in the way of money in the house, although that could have been lifted along with the photos, and there wasn't a safe. I've got all Stevenson's banking records, at least all that I found, and we'll need to study those. Blackmail's a cash business normally so I reckon Stevenson's got a stash somewhere else. Maybe he's even got copies of the photos somewhere and if we can find where, then we could have our murderer.”

“It's hard to solve a crime when there seems to be no leads to follow but it's even worse when it's like this one and there's just too many. Where in God's name do we start?”

“Let's keep religion out of this one. It's about the only complication we don't have. Now down to business. Here's what we need to get going. We want to get Fitzpatrick started on the videos. We want to have someone work through the finances. We can see if we can borrow one of the specialists for that. We need to see what Connor's lot have to give us and find out if their infotech geek's been able to rescue anything from his computers or his security system. I want someone else researching Stevenson's businesses. It can be done in tandem with the finances. Find out any companies he owns or is a director of. Find any premises he or his companies own or lease and check them out. You know the procedure. I'm locking these photos away just now 'cos I want you, me and McAvoy to work on them together. I want us to go through them carefully, catalogue them according to who's in them and what they're doing. I want to work out who the whores are and see if we can pick out any faces we recognise.”

“Only their faces?” Sandra replied with a broad grin.

“Fair point,” he replied sternly, without rising to the bait. “There could be tattoos or other distinguishing features”

“A lot of distinguishing features, from what you've said. I've not seen any

yet,” she continued undeterred and showing a mock puffed lip.

Alex couldn't keep a straight face any longer and they both howled with laughter only to be interrupted as McAvoy entered the cabin.

“Sounds like I'm missing out on all the fun,” he muttered with a grim face, which only made Sandra laugh all the more. McAvoy's lacklustre attitude was matched by his appearance; his creased, plain grey suit complemented his untidy, silvery-grey hair and his sun-deprived, grey pallor.

“Not a bit of it,” Alex replied. “But come to think of it, what is it about 'first thing' you don't understand?”

“Sorry, Boss, the wife needed the car today for a hospital appointment and the bus across town took longer than I expected.”

“Right, let's get on, here's the plan...” Alex said and repeated what he had in mind as priorities, finishing with the instruction for them to meet up later in the morning and take the photos into their Pitt Street office where they could work on them in privacy and with the benefit of the technology infrastructure which wasn't fully accessible from the cabin.

By 9.30, all arrangements had been made and bodies assigned to each of the tasks, and Alex and Sandra set out for Eastwood Court taking the same route Alex had the previous evening. Seeing the sign for the care home only at the last moment, Alex turned sharply to pull the Hyundai off the busy road and found the only available space large enough for his SUV next to the home's own minibus. He sat for a moment and looked around. The building was unusual in shape and most of it looked relatively new. The main central area was three stories high and was constructed with a rustic-style, golden-red brick finish. Off to the right the building was of a lower level with large windows. Through the windows he could see that inside was laid out with lots of dining tables and chairs, each made up with four place settings and a vase of flowers. Beyond was a kitchen and what looked to be a storage area. The central area had a large bright conservatory attached to the front of the building. The whole front was glass and Alex could see bookcases and several large squashy bamboo framed couches and chairs. To the left of the conservatory a porch-style entranceway extended out from what must have been the original building, a two-storied structure built from blonde sandstone. At the far corner, the stones were more rounded and formed a medieval-style, turret-shaped tower.

Alex had an awkward feeling about the place and couldn't think why. Then he remembered. Only a short while after he had joined the force, while he was still a raw recruit, he had attended the scene of a terrible accident somewhere very close to this location. It was back in 1990; a Bell JetRanger helicopter had been chartered by the police. A sudden and severe snowstorm had started and the

aircraft's engine had failed resulting from snow blocking the air intake. The helicopter was flying low but dropped from a height of seventy feet and collided with an apartment block. One officer died after being thrown out by the impact and others suffered serious injury. The incident was still vivid in Alex's memory and he shuddered at the thought.

“What's up, Boss? Aren't we going in?” Sandra's words broke into his reminiscing.

“Let's go then,” he responded, releasing his seatbelt. He strode towards the front door to ring the doorbell.

Within a few moments, a receptionist let them in. After checking their warrant cards, she took them into a side room and introduced them to a nurse.

“I'm Irene. I gather you've come to see Mrs Stevenson and that you've got some bad news for her.”

“Yes, I'm afraid that's right. Her son's been killed and we've come to inform her. It would be good if you could be with her when we speak with her. I'd like to ask you a few things first.”

“How terrible, she'll be devastated. I'll be happy to do anything I can to help. We all would. She's such a sweet old lady.”

“First of all, can you tell me about her? What's her state of health like? Is she strong enough to take the news and is she mentally able? Will she understand?”

“Physically, she's quite able for her age. She's seventy-six years old, been with us for about two years. Her knees are bad with arthritis and she can't get about without a zimmer or a wheelchair. It's considered too risky for her heart to have knee replacement surgery but I reckon that's borderline because she's reasonably fit otherwise. She's also a bit deaf and a hearing aid doesn't help much, but that's not unusual at her age. Mentally, she's bright as a button which could be a mixed blessing as she doted on her son”

“What can you tell me about her son? Did you know him? Did he visit regularly?”

“Yes, I knew him, but not well. He came to see his mother on a regular basis. It was quite strange really. He came every Monday morning at 9.00 am and would stay for about an hour. Then he would return later the same day, usually about 3.00 pm and stay for half an hour. It was the same thing every week, like clockwork. You could rely on his visits.”

Sandra and Alex exchanged quizzical looks before Irene continued. “He didn't come any other times, even on holidays or her birthday. Only once, when she had a fall, about six months ago, we phoned him and he came to see she was okay, but that was the only time. Any other visit has been on a Monday at the same times every week. Besides that, he always kept money in his mum's

account so she could buy newspapers and have her hair done every week”

“Can you tell me anything else about him?”

“No, not really. I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but I really didn't like him. I don't know what it was. He had this way of looking at you that made you feel uncomfortable.”

“Did Mrs Stevenson have any other visitors?”

“No, not really. Her daughter, from England, and her family come up every now and then, maybe once or twice a year, but that's all. The daughter phones as well. Not too often, maybe once or twice a month.”

“Did anyone else phone?”

“Yes, I think there was a cousin in Australia, but it was only once or twice a year.”

“Thank you. That's been very helpful. Now could you please take me to meet Mrs Stevenson? Is there somewhere private where we can talk?”

“Yes, of course. I'll take you through to the conservatory, then I'll bring Mrs Stevenson through to talk with you.”

Irene led them along a corridor lined with doors, rather like a hotel. Each door had a name label outside. They passed through a set of double doors into a very spacious bright and airy lounge. Large armchairs were laid out along one wall and in two large rectangles, with the chairs from each rectangle pointing in the direction of large LCD television screens. The same programme was showing on both televisions. There was also a large birdcage in one corner of the room with a brightly coloured budgerigar chirping away to anyone who'd listen. Only a few of the residents seemed to be watching the TV as others were either reading, talking or sleeping in their chairs. Alex was pleasantly surprised to see that all the residents he saw were smartly dressed, clean looking and seemed well cared for. There were a number of carers in the room attending to the residents' needs. Having only recently watched a television documentary on some of the deplorable conditions in a few of the nursing homes that had been investigated, Alex was comforted by the thought that they might have been extreme or unusual examples.

The layout of the two rectangles of chairs created a makeshift corridor between which Irene led them and opened the door into the conservatory. She bade them to sit on the couch and said she would go and collect Mrs Stevenson.

A few minutes later the door opened again and Irene backed a wheelchair over the threshold and turned it round to sit facing them. Looking up from it was a very alert looking little old lady. Although difficult to tell from her sitting position, Alex judged that she couldn't have been more than five feet tall. She was slim without being thin with a full head of well cared for, shoulder length

white hair. A large pair of tortoiseshell-framed spectacles partly obscured her contented looking round face, which had surprisingly unwrinkled skin.

“Okay, Maggie, these two police officers have come to speak with you,” she called out quite loudly and then turned to close the door before sitting herself in an upright chair next to her patient.

“Hello, Mrs Stevenson, my name's Alex Warren and this is Sandra McKinnon. We've come to talk to you about your son, Scott”

“Oh, my Scott. He's a lovely boy and so good to his Mum. He comes to see me every few days and he always brings me a packet of Jaffa cakes. He knows they're my favourites.”

“I'm sorry to tell you we have some very bad news for you. There was an incident in Scott's shop. He was attacked and I'm sorry to tell you that he's dead.”

“What, what did you say? This hearing aid's not very good. It sounded like you told me that Scott's dead.”

“I'm really sorry. That is what I said.”

Maggie started to shake and tears formed in her eyes. Irene moved closer and took hold of her hand.

“What happened?” she managed to blurt out as tears now started to flow down her cheeks.

Just at this point, the door opened and another of the residents walked in. “Sammy, I thought it was you. I knew you'd come to see me,” she called making her way towards a horrified Alex. Just then, another carer followed her into the room and Irene rose to prevent her further approach.

“No, Jean, that's not Sammy. This is someone who's come to see Maggie,” Irene said as she and the other carer ushered the woman back out of the door. Irene returned then closed and locked the door. “I'm sorry about that. Jean's a little bit confused.”

Alex returned his attention to Mrs Stevenson. “We're still trying to work out what's happened. Do you think we could ask you a few questions? It might help find out what's taken place.”

“I don't think I can help, but I'll try,” Maggie whimpered.

“That's very good of you. I'd like you to tell me about Scott. I'm trying to get a better picture of what he was like and who he knew.

“He's always been such a good boy. Who would want to hurt him? He's taken good care of me. After my Arthur died and I couldn't look after myself at home, he got me in here. He's made sure I've always got money to pay for anything I need. I didn't want to take anything from him but he told me he's been really successful in business and he can afford it. He's been really good to his sister too. He gives her money, and when her husband needed an operation last

year, Scott insisted he went private and paid for it all. I couldn't have asked for a better son.”

“Has he ever told you about having any trouble or problems with anybody?” Sandra asked.

Concentrating on talking about him seemed to settle Maggie down and the tears gradually subsided. “Oh no! Well, not for a long time, anyway. Way back when he was young, he got in with a bad crowd. I remember they were caught stealing from one of the big shops in town. Woolworths, I think it was. Anyway, Scott had nothing to do with it, but because he hung about with them, he got into bother. It was never his fault though.

“The only time after that was when that bitch of a wife he had created a fuss. She just wanted his money and she claimed he'd hit her, but he never did. She just said it to get at more of his money and that was years ago.”

“And there's not been anything after that?” Sandra persisted.

“No, nothing at all.”

“Did Scott ever discuss his work with you or tell you about the people he worked with?” Sandra enquired.

“He'd sometimes tell me he'd had a good week or that a deal had gone really well but he never said more than that. He never said who he worked with or for.”

“I believe Scott came to see you regularly,” Alex asked.

“Oh yes, he was here all the time. I told you he was a good boy.”

“Yes, you did say,” Alex replied, trying to hide his true feelings. “Did he ever bring anyone or anything with him?”

“He always came alone, except for when his sister came up to visit. But every time he came, he'd bring me another packet of Jaffa cakes, every single time. He'd take them up to my room for me. He'd put this wooden box inside my wardrobe and every time he came he'd go up to my room and check there was enough biscuits for me in the box. It was our little joke. I can take some out whenever I want but every night I have one before I go to bed.”

“This might sound funny, but would you mind if we had a look in the box before we left?” Alex asked.

“Yes, that will be okay and you can have a Jaffa cake each. But only one, mind you.”

Irene said she would get a carer to show Alex and Sandra to Maggie's room, and while Maggie and Irene remained in the conservatory, they followed the carer through a set of double doors then through a key code operated door and out to a lift. They took this up to the first floor then had to pass through another key code operated door to access a corridor. Maggie's room was about half way along.

“There's better security here than we have at Pitt Street,” Sandra whispered.

Maggie's room was well proportioned. It had a large double-glazed window looking out over the car park. There was a hospital-style adjustable bed, a wall mounted LCD television and a set of teak fronted bedroom furniture comprising a double wardrobe with top box, two chests of drawers and a bedside table which held a number of framed photographs. There were two different ones of Scott, smiling and dressed casually, as if on holiday. There was one of Maggie standing next to an elderly man, presumably her now deceased husband, and one showing a family fitting the description of Maggie's daughter.

“The Jaffa cake box is in the lower section of the wardrobe,” said the carer.

Alex opened the wardrobe and pushed aside a number of hanging garments to find the large wooden box. He pulled it out and opened the top. Inside were four packets of Jaffa cakes, one of which was open. Underneath there was a wooden tray. When he removed the tray he found a key underneath. It was a precision-tooled security key, nothing like a door key, being flat on both sides with no grooves, square cut teeth, an embedded microchip and a number engraved on the outside. “Bingo!” he called out.

Sandra realised it was a breakthrough and wanted to ask Alex about the significance of what he'd found but knew she had to wait until they were in the car and could not be overheard.

They returned downstairs and asked Maggie about the key but she had no idea what it was or how it got there. She happily gave her permission for the key to be taken away hoping it might help the police solve the mystery of why Scott had ended up dead.

Chapter 5

Once they were back out in the car, Alex and Sandra compared notes.

“The moment she told us about Scott visiting twice every Monday and at no other times, I knew there was something fishy,” Sandra said. “I think he must have come by in the morning, collected the key to lock away money or photos or something and then come back to replace the key in the afternoon.”

“Yes, I think you're absolutely right. Now what we need to do is find out where the key fits.”

“Perhaps it's a safe or it could be for premises or for a safe deposit box. It will be tricky finding out what it's for and where it is,” Sandra continued.

“No, it's better than that,” Alex corrected. “I recognise the type. It's used for bank safe deposit boxes, but only of a certain sort. Often there are two keys required to open a box. Nearly all banks now keep both keys for the boxes in a tamper proof container and you have to prove your identity every time you access the box. There's only a few left with a system where the owner keeps one key and has free access. That ought to make it easier to trace.”

Alex started the car. “Let's get back and see whether there's been any other developments,” and with that he guided the car back through the gateway.

Before long they had collected McAvoy, the box of photos, the ME's report and the newly arrived scene of crime documentation and were on their way to their office in the regional police headquarters.

Before starting with the photos, they pored over the reports, first making copies so each could work with their own version.

Alex read the detailed ME report but found little more than Sandra had already précised for him. The two reports from scene of crime were more illuminating.

Not surprisingly, there was an abundance of prints found in the shop. These were being catalogued and checked against a database to see what links could be made to known felons who had been working with Stevenson. The office of the shop only yielded prints from Stevenson and Findlay. Some surfaces and the floor had been freshly washed down with disinfectant and there were no fibre traces or DNA. There were a number of smudge marks that seemed to have been made by a gloved hand, probably from rubber gloves. The security system had worked by three separate CCTV cameras sending their signals to an old-style

VHS video recorder but with a secondary signal being captured on a tower-style computer. There was no videotape in the machine although there were tapes in boxes labelled for each day of the week lying next to it. Thursday's box was empty and the tape was nowhere to be found, so the murderer had undoubtedly removed it. The computer had also been tampered with. A program had been run to delete all current files and format all disks but, not content with that, the machine had been opened and the hard disk removed. There was no sign of the back door being used and there were no footprints outside. The front door had not been tampered with and there were no signs of blood on or near it. It was fitted with a Yale barrel-style lock which had only to be pulled shut from the outside. There was a lot of blood spilled and spread on and around the body. There were some bloody footprints in the close vicinity but nowhere else. One or two tread-marks were distinguishable and it was consistent with a size eleven of a particular style of Clark's brogue, so quite large feet, but the shoes were fairly commonplace and not easily traceable.

“Doesn't this strike you as odd?” Sandra asked. “The murder shows all the signs of being an act of anger, impromptu, nothing premeditated, yet the murderer obviously knew how to cover up, and he found what he needed to do it or he had it with him. He must have known a fair bit about police procedures and not just the sort of thing you'd pick up from watching CSI. He knew his way round a computer. He had or found the tools to open it up. He had or found gloves and disinfectant. Bloody footprints discovered only close to the body suggest he took his shoes off, probably before entering the office, and that was cleaned to avoid leaving traces. Why on earth would he do that? The guy's most likely been covered in blood and not wearing shoes, he's been carrying the shoes, the tape and bits of computer then walked out the front door trying not to be noticed. I can see that if his shoes were bloody, he'd have not wanted to leave footprints at or near the entrance, but I don't follow why there aren't any other signs and, if he's covered in blood anyway, why bother? Once he's already out the shop without being noticed it would hardly matter if the footprints were seen. The only risk would be the body might be found a bit sooner.”

“Good work, Sandra,” Alex said before continuing. “It's not a busy street but he must have had a car and been parked close. He couldn't have been walking about in Great Western Road or he'd surely have been spotted.”

“Maybe he found a change of clothes in the shop, or he had one in the car,” McAvoy added.

“That's a possibility,” Sandra continued. “If his car was right outside the front door, he might have risked going out in his stocking soles to get the tools he needed and the change of clothes. He's probably used a bag or something to

carry everything in.”

“Too late now to check for footprints at the entrance as there's been far too many people in and out, but we can concentrate questions on anyone seeing a car parked at or close to the door around that time,” McAvoy speculated.

“Worth trying, pass it along to the team,” Alex instructed. “Now, what about the house?”

“Similar story,” Sandra began. “It was expertly taken apart by someone who knew what he was looking for. No prints, just glove smudges. The alarm system, such as it was, was deactivated first and the phone lines were cut as well. He was taking a bit of a risk there because a more sophisticated alarm system would have triggered at the point the phone-line was cut. He must have been in the house for quite a long time, so it was odd for him to take that sort of risk, unless he knew...?”

“You could be on to something there. But how could he know? He'd need to either be familiar with the house or have something to do with the alarm company or the police.” Alex's words were followed by a long pause as they each digested the possibilities.

“There's more if you read on,” McAvoy added. “Stevenson had an internal system. He had webcams set up around the house recording onto his computer; they were all movement activated so they ought to have caught the intruder. The computer also had a regular online backup set up. So there would have been a safe recording of anyone moving about in the house. The only problem was the phone line being cut so the backup was never transmitted and, same as the shop, the hard disk's been removed from the computer. This can't be coincidence. The murderer couldn't have been that lucky. He must have known what he was doing cutting the phone line to stop the backup.”

“So what you're saying is the murderer knew exactly the system that Stevenson had before he entered the house. How does that fit in with the way the murder was done?” Alex asked.

“I don't know. I haven't a bloody clue.”

“There's far too much that doesn't make sense, but at least we're making some headway.”

Alex paused for thought. The webcam security must be a fairly recent addition. He was sure it couldn't have been there the night he'd gone to visit Stevenson. He remembered that night as if it was yesterday. In the lead up to it, and by stark contrast to her previous berating about his commitment to his job, Helen had nagged and nagged him to do something to get back her aunt's precious belongings. He'd remembered the stinging accusations querying what point was there in being married to a workaholic senior police officer when he

couldn't protect his own family. Their relationship had been struggling for some time and he'd convinced himself he'd work to save it. Against his better judgement, he'd researched where Stevenson lived and 'paid him a little visit' in the early hours of the morning. He remembered Stevenson answered his door wearing his striped pyjamas and Alex had been amused thinking he resembled a cartoon impression of a convict. But that was where the humour ended. He assertively invited himself into the house and suggested Stevenson might want to do the right thing. When his request had been met with derision, Alex, for the only time in his career, used his fists to add persuasion. He'd come away from Stevenson with what he'd come for together with bruised knuckles and a deep sense of remorse. Alex was certain Stevenson could not have had his video surveillance at that time. If he had, it would be inconceivable Stevenson wouldn't have used it and he'd have been one of Stevenson's blackmail targets. Most probably, the system had been installed as a result of his visit.

When Alex returned home with his booty, Helen had been waiting for him. She'd stayed up through the night watching television and there were only the dregs left in a bottle of Pinot Grigio which was sitting on the table. She'd been dressed in a skimpy nightdress and negligee. When he opened the door and let himself into the lounge, she'd seemed so happy to see him back and asked for the details of what had happened. When she realised he'd recovered the valuables, she'd walked over to him and touched his face. She'd caressed his swollen fingers, literally licking his wounds, then passionately she embraced him. He could taste the sweet wine on her lips and thought he also detected something stronger, vodka perhaps. She took a half step back to give her space to strip off his jacket, letting it drop to the floor. She then undid his belt and pulled down his zip, sliding his trousers over his hips to fall around his ankles. She lifted his hands, holding them against her breasts, and then kissed him deeply again. Fired by the adrenaline and the excitement of the evening, Alex was powerless to resist. They had sex there and then on the lounge floor, urgent and frantic. Alex couldn't think of it as making love; it wasn't, it was pure animal behaviour. They'd been lost in the moment, oblivious to anyone or anything else. Their passionate cries could have disturbed the boys. They might have come in to see what had been going on and Alex and Helen would never have known. Afterwards they hadn't spoken. In the morning, Alex had gone to work early and Helen had gone to bed.

Alex had felt dirty. At Stevenson's house, he'd acted totally out of character, behaving like a thug, not a law enforcement officer, all to satisfy Helen's demands. He'd compromised his values because she'd pushed him to do it and then 'rewarded' him on his return in the most basic of ways. He'd felt really bad

about it afterwards and it was the final straw in their already overstrained relationship. It wasn't that he had any sympathy for Stevenson. Quite the reverse, he detested the man. Alex's and Helen's relationship had never recovered. They could hardly talk to each other and they'd never been intimate since that night. They'd grown further apart and a little over a year ago, they'd separated and filed for divorce.

His mind returned to the present.

“Now, Sandra, what else do we have?”

“First they tried to open the safe in the shop and found they couldn't. They've still not been able to and have sent off to get a special key. But they did pick the lock on the cash box. Inside was about fifty quid in notes and cash and there was also a set of keys, two Yales and a Mortice, and another little key, the sort you see used in a strong padlock. The keys looked like they could be house keys but they're not for Stevenson's home. We're making some enquiries but so far, we have no idea where they're for. Not a lot more than that. Whomever we're up against seems to be really smart. He seems to know what we're going to be looking for and how, and he's taken steps to stop us getting anything valuable. There was one other thing in Connor's report. Although the electronic devices were all smashed up, there was a DVD disk still in the DVD recorder. It was a porn disk, pretty hard core and not the sort of thing you would buy at HMV. It probably had to be bought over the internet and it's got nothing to do with our case, but the guy didn't think to check the player and remove it. It could have contained anything.”

“Well, that's reassuring. It shows us he's not infallible. Right, let's move on. Sandra, I want you to assign someone to track down where the safe deposit key came from. Donny, I want you to number each of these photos and then scan them onto the computer; that way we can all access them at the same time. I'll put together a database, and once I've done that, I want each of us to categorise every picture so we can batch them according to who's in it and what's been going on. We can pick out all the ones with the same whore and - or the same punter. We can pick out all the straight, gay, bondage or role-plays. I want us to know who and what we're dealing with. Afterwards, the next step is to put names to the faces.”

“Faces?” Sandra enquired, repeating her earlier quip.

“Well, we've certainly got a few pretty unique features to focus on, but we're going to have to keep straight-faced and just work through this like any other job.”

Alex and Sandra looked at each other, and when their eyes met, they both roared with laughter. Donny McAvoy looked from one to the other, not seeing

the humour, but he was too embarrassed to admit his lack of understanding.

“So who'll be doing what?” Sandra enquired.

“Let's all take turns,” Donny suggested. “I'll start picking out the whores. You can seek out the punters,” he said, looking at Sandra, “and the Boss can allocate them based on what they've been doing. Then after an hour or so we can switch round to have some variety.”

“Not a bad idea, Donny, but I reckon it would be better if we each stuck with the same task throughout. That way we'll become more familiar looking for the same thing. I'll go with the allocation you've suggested. Where there appears to be a set of photos from the same meeting, if I can call it that, put them all into the same category. Now if there's no other questions then let's get started. You can ask me anything else as we go along.”

Once the photos were scanned, they all worked their way through them and were careful and diligent in their analysis. After an hour they broke for coffee, then did the same after a further hour.

Plenty of quips passed amongst them which helped break the tension.

Donny started it by asking, “Have you two had a look at number twenty-two yet? I didn't know that was possible.”

Sandra replied, “I think you've got your numbering wrong, sixty-nine should never be like that.”

Alex also contributed, “Look at one hundred and seventy-three. Why on earth would a good looking girl like that be with such a wrinkled old prune?”

“Money,” came the reply from Sandra and Donny in perfect unison.

Their work was interrupted shortly before five pm. A call came in to inform Alex of some good news: the key had been traced. The description was consistent with ones used by the Canadian International Bank who had offices in Bath Street, just to the west of the city centre. In addition, the number engraved on the key was within one of the sequences used by the bank. There weren't many banks which still used the old-style keys with single microchip implants, but some customers preferred the less complicated style; particularly as they still kept their own keys and didn't have to reveal their identity whenever they wanted access. Unfortunately, the bank was already closed to the public for the weekend and no member of staff with sufficient seniority was available to help. The manager had been in London all week for a conference and wasn't due back in Glasgow until Sunday night and the senior clerk had already left for the evening and couldn't be traced. An appointment was made for early on Monday morning and the bank confirmed the manager would make himself available to provide any help they needed that he was permitted to give. Alex noted the condition, and just to play it safe, he put in a request for a search warrant, giving

him unrestricted access to the box. It was probably unnecessary but Alex wanted to ensure against any failure to cooperate or the bank manager being pedantic about paperwork. He also wanted to guard against the possibility of a smart solicitor destabilising any future case claiming information had been acquired by improper means. Being the weekend, it could take time to obtain authority and it could well be Monday before they were ready to roll. So although the senior bank staff were not available, they hadn't really lost any time. They continued with their task for a couple of more hours. By seven-fifteen, they had finished the three lists and the database was complete and populated. The table was covered in used Styrofoam cups from the regular caffeine top-ups they'd collected from the vending machine. The buttons they'd pressed had said coffee, but as experienced detectives, they had their suspicions. They were all shattered, none of them wanting to see another naked photograph for a very long time.

As a DCI, Alex didn't have to work the shift patterns required of the more junior officers, but he nevertheless worked whenever required. On this particular weekend, he'd been scheduled to take time off and he'd planned to have his sons stay with him. He'd planned a whole itinerary to keep them occupied and entertained. He was meant to pick them up from Helen at seven-thirty and keep them until Sunday night. With him only being allocated the case yesterday, it was still at a crucial stage and he wanted to stay in control of it. He was in a dilemma as he loved his boys and treasured the time he was allowed to spend with them. Against this, he needed to be giving his attention to the case. Alex was all too aware that it was his dedication to his job which sowed the seeds resulting in his marriage break up in the first place. Helen couldn't tolerate the erratic hours, the phone calls in the middle of the night and the cancelled or ruined holidays. Their relationship had been breaking down for some time before the Stevenson incident, and after it they could hardly speak to one another. It wasn't long before Helen brought someone else into her life, someone who could give her the attention she wanted. At first, Alex had been angry, wanting to kill them both for their disloyalty and deception. The divorce had not been pleasant and Helen had been awarded custody with Alex having regular visitation rights, with Craig and Andrew permitted to stay with him one weekend a month. They then settled into a relationship where they tolerated each other's needs for the sake of the boys. Over time, Alex had come to realise how difficult it had been for Helen and how he had most certainly driven her away by prioritising his work. The anger was out of their fight and they tried to cooperate, verging on being amicable, to minimise the complications for the boys. This weekend was for him, Craig and Andrew. He couldn't let that go. But by compromise, Alex accepted he would have to carry his mobile everywhere with him and call in

periodically.

Chapter 6

Alex phoned Helen before leaving the office to explain he was running late and he was pleasantly surprised not to suffer her normal berating.

After their split, and by mutual agreement so as to minimise the disruption to the boys, Helen kept the family home. It was a detached bungalow located in Clarkston, an affluent suburb to the south of Glasgow, only a couple of miles from Maggie Stevenson's nursing home.

Just after 8.00 pm, Alex drove along the narrow crescent and parked the Santa Fe half on the pavement. It was already dark and his footsteps crunched on the red blaze pathway announcing his arrival. The door was opened by Helen before he had the opportunity to knock. There was a loud yelp as Jake, their four-year-old mongrel, squeezed through the doorway and excitedly circled Alex, jumping up and down to try to get his full attention.

Alex squatted down to hug the animal and rough up his fur, not too concerned about covering his clothes in dog hairs. Alex had always loved Jake and the feeling was mutual. It had broken Alex's heart to leave him behind when he moved out of the house, but he was also the boys' dog and, as Alex was out working long hours, leaving him here was the kindest solution. They had no knowledge of the dog's parentage as, similar to all of their pets, Jake had been rescued from the Cardonald Dog and Cat Home. It was obvious from his look that he'd been mainly Alsatian, probably with a bit of Labrador because of his soft mouth. He had short black hair with a white patch on his chest and tan coloured socks. His long, kinked tail looked as if it had been broken at some time and rotated in a circle instead of wagging when he was happy.

Turning his attention, he saw Helen come through the door. She was five years younger than Alex, trim and attractive. Not too far short of six feet tall, she was slim and elegant. Although she had a very healthy appetite, working out at the gym three times a week helped her keep her weight under control and her muscles toned. Her cascade of blonde curls framed her face and rested on her shoulders. Her skin was smooth with a sun-bed induced orange glow and her powder blue eyes were bright and sparkling.

She stepped out from the entranceway and half closed the door behind her to give them a moment's privacy. "I saw on the news about Scott Stevenson being found dead in his shop. Is that true?"

“Yes, it happened yesterday afternoon.”

“Do you know yet who did it? I'd like to give him a medal.”

“It's early days yet and you know I can't talk about it.”

“Oh! Does that mean you're involved?”

“It's being dealt with by my department, but I can't say any more.”

Helen stepped aside to let him in.

Craig and Andrew were sitting in the lounge watching television, each had an overnight bag on the floor beside them containing their essentials, a toothbrush, a couple of changes of clothes and, of course, their iPhones.

Craig was fourteen, tall and skinny with angular features. He seemed to be all arms and legs. He'd inherited his father's bright green eyes but his shock of hair was thick and the same colour as his mother's. No matter how much he combed it, it inevitably hung with straggly ends pointing in all directions. Dressed in the standard uniform for his age of jeans and T-shirt, he wore the stern, disinterested look often associated with teenagers.

Being twelve, Andrew still carried a layer of puppy fat. He had a round, smiling face with laughing eyes, and although considerably smaller and a couple of years younger than his sibling, he seemed to have a greater inner strength supported by a wisdom and a sense of humour which was beyond his years.

“Hi, Dad,” they each called in tandem as they stood and picked up their bags, pecked their mother on the cheek and made their way out the door.

“Is Colin not about?” Alex ventured, referring to Helen's live-in partner.

“He's in the kitchen. Why? Did you want to see him?”

“No, that's okay. I just wondered.” Without thinking, Alex gave Helen's shoulder an affectionate squeeze as he followed the boys. She had to hold Jake's collar to prevent him forcing his way into the car with them. Alex would have loved to take Jake with them for the weekend, as he had done many times in the past, but he had outings planned for the lads which would not be suitable for the dog and it would have been cruel to leave him for long periods just sitting in the flat or the car.

“Right lads, off to the cinema. I'm running a wee bit late, and I've not eaten yet, so we'll just head straight to the Odeon and I can get a hot dog there. Have you decided what you want to see?”

“Andrew wants to see the new 'Tin Tin' film, but I think it will be too childish,” Craig answered.

“I think it might be quite good. Although it's an animation, Steven Spielberg directed it, and the reviews have been good,” Alex replied.

“There's nothing else on anyway that I'm old enough to get into,” Andrew added, “at least nothing worth seeing.”

“Well, I guess that's decided then,” Craig moped.

“Come on, give it a fair chance. Now what are you both wanting to eat and drink?”

They drove to the Odeon multiplex at Springfield Quay, by the side of the River Clyde, and found a space in the massive open car park. Despite themselves, both kids enjoyed the film, gorging themselves with popcorn, sweets and Irn Bru. In the comfort, heat and darkness, and following his near sleepless night, Alex struggled to stay awake.

Andrew was the one yawning when they arrived back at Alex's flat at 11.30. It was a late night for the boys but it wasn't a school night and they could all have a lie in on Saturday.

Alex was up early and had the table set with bowls and plates, orange juice and assorted boxes of cereal, together with milk, butter and jam. Freshly made toast and hot tea were added when the boys arrived

“Eat up, lads, we've got a full day planned and you'll need all your energy.” Alex was setting an example munching into a slice of brown bread toast spread thickly with marmalade.

After breakfast, Alex ensured both boys had their swimming trunks and towels then they set off for Eastwood Swimming Baths. The pool was of a good standard, twenty-five metres in length with separate children's and spa pools. One entire wall was constructed from glass, giving an attractive outlook onto trees and grass. The setting was magnificent, sitting in the middle of Eastwood Park, between St. Ninian's High School and the East Renfrewshire Council buildings. Alex purchased their tickets and they made their way to the changing area. The boys had donned their costumes, deposited their clothes in a locker and found their way into the water long before Alex was ready to join them. Craig and Andrew were both competent swimmers and represented their school in competitions in their respective age groups. They were all having good fun, swimming and playing games in the water, when Craig swam off by himself, powering his way through the water at great speed. Alex looked on concerned until Andrew explained by pointing to a couple girls of similar age to Craig who were watching him, clearly impressed. Alex struggled trying not to laugh. After completing four fast lengths of the pool, Craig glided to the sidewall beside the girls and they started talking. After a few minutes, the girls made off to join a larger group and Craig re-joined them. His face was bright red from embarrassment but he was also grinning from ear to ear.

“What was that all about?” Alex quizzed, but before he had a chance to answer, Andrew cut in chanting, “Craig's got a girlfriend,” in a loud voice.

“Shaddup!” he screamed back, pushing his brother's head under the surface,

but unable to stop laughing at the same time.

Alex managed to separate them and Craig was more forthcoming with his explanation.

“Tina and Alana are in my year at school. They were just telling me that a whole crowd are getting together tomorrow afternoon in East Kilbride at the ice rink. They've asked me if I'd like to go along. “

Seeing Alex's face fall, Craig remembered his Dad had made other plans.

“That's okay. I can drop you there after lunch and pick you up again at five to take you home.”

“I'm sorry, Dad. Would you really not mind?”

“No, it's okay. It'll give me a chance to have some quality time with your brother.”

“Aw shucks!” Andrew cut in.

It dawned on Alex that Craig was not a small child any more. He was growing up, a teenager already, complete with the raging hormones associated with that age. He knew better than to try to interfere with his plans.

It occurred to Alex that hormones, sex and lust were such a powerful influence. It was the main factor behind Stevenson's blackmail opportunities and as a result was probably the cause of his death. Often, statistics are quoted about the levels of crime that are alcohol related, but when Alex thought more about it, a hell of a lot of crimes were sex related. It wasn't just the rapes and sexual attacks, there were the acts of indecency, and of course blackmail, but there was also the fights and other actions resulting out of envy or greed or revenge; not to mention the more tenuous links affecting thefts and motoring offences. If only he wasn't so busy trying to solve the crimes, Alex would have loved to do the research and prepare a dissertation on the subject, maybe even try for a doctorate.

Back out in the car, Alex enquired further, “About tomorrow, will you need your skates or are you just meeting at the food court?”

“Oh shit! I never asked. Oh, sorry, Dad, I didn't mean to say that.”

Although discouraging the boys from swearing, Alex thought this wasn't the time to take issue.

“What can I do? I don't want to miss out if the others are going on the ice, but I'll look a right dork if I arrive with skates and nobody else does.”

“Why not phone the girls and ask?”

“I don't have their numbers, and besides, I don't want to look an idiot.”

“I'm sure you could get their numbers easily enough if you wanted to, but you said a whole group was going. You could try calling someone else.”

“No, Dad, please. I don't want to. How about I take my skates with me but

leave them in the car? Then if you'd just wait for me for a bit, I'd go in and see what was happening and come back out if I needed them and if I didn't I could phone you to let you know you could go."

Alex thought the arrangement ridiculous, but all he said was, "You'd better call your Mum to tell her we'll be dropping in to collect them."

From the swimming baths they detoured to collect the skates and set off for lunch. Alex had made a twelve o'clock booking at La Brava, a stylish Italian bistro-restaurant-delicatessen in Netherlee, a couple of miles from the Clarkston house on the road towards Glasgow. It was one of the boys' favourites. Alex loved it too and he had patronised it regularly before his marriage split. The only thing he disliked was the difficulty getting parked on or near the busy main road. However, today being Saturday, he easily managed to find a space in the teachers' car park of the adjacent primary school.

As Alex and the boys came through the front door, their senses were assaulted by the pungent aroma of cheeses, salami, olives and fresh bread. Running nearly the full length of the room, a cold counter was filled with enticing delicacies. Behind were shelves filled with continental breads and to the side a separate smaller chilled cabinet with several shelves containing wonderful looking cakes and desserts. The main area was set out with metal framed tables and chairs and the back wall had a large hatchway giving clear visibility into the kitchen.

Rico, one of the owners, came across to personally welcome them back.

"Alex, it's been a while. How are you? What have you been up to?"

"Can't complain," he replied, "at least no one ever wants to hear when I do. It's good to be back. The boys love coming in here and they're ravenous because we've just been for a swim. We don't have a lot of time either 'cause we've got tickets for Ibrox this afternoon. It's a three o'clock kick off."

"Not a problem, I'll get the menus over to you right away. Who's Rangers playing?"

"Dundee United today."

"That's not likely to be much of a challenge the way Rangers have been playing recently."

"I hope not, but we'll see."

"You want a 'Peroni' as usual?"

"Better not, I'm driving."

Craig's order was Panini with salad, Andrew's was Gnocchi Bolognese and Alex couldn't resist a Spaghetti Carbonara. They all wolfed down their food accompanied by Ferrarelle mineral water. To follow, the boys each asked for their favourite Scottish Tablet Ice Cream while Alex ordered an espresso.

Just as he was about to lift the cup, Alex felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. “I was just walking past the window and I thought I recognised you. I don't often see you in these parts, not these days.”

The figure standing over Alex looked much older than him. He was slightly less than six foot tall, muscular shoulders but with quite a stocky build. His heavy round face had a pale complexion with bloodshot eyes and puffy jowls. The little hair he had was grey and wispy and surrounded a bald pate. His most prominent feature was a thin red line running from the front of his ear across his pudgy cheek and down to his chin. This had been incurred when he'd been slashed in the course of carrying out an arrest early in his career. He'd required emergency treatment and had lost almost a month of service, returning with an unmistakable visage and an award for bravery.

“Hello, Bill. I'm looking after the lads this weekend. We've been swimming and then we're off to the footie.”

“Don't let me disturb you,” Bill replied. “I just saw you there and thought I ought to say hi.”

“That's okay, come and join us for a coffee. I hardly ever see you now you've made it to the command corridor.”

William Forbes had recently been promoted to become an Assistant Chief Constable. He and Alex had joined the force and undergone their training at the Tulliallan Police Training College at the same time. They'd both been recognised as high flyers and neither of them had disappointed expectations. They had stayed close friends for years and attended each other's weddings. William's life had been struck by tragedy. Fourteen years ago, around the same time as Craig was born, William's daughter, at only three months old was diagnosed with a rare cancer and only survived two more weeks. He and his wife couldn't come to terms with the loss. They each looked for reasons to blame themselves and then to blame each other. He had continued smoking during the first months of the pregnancy and she had taken anti-nausea medication. They dreamt up other causes when they looked hard enough. Of course there was no link, but they were looking for excuses to be able to attach blame. Within the space of a few weeks they transformed from being a loving inseparable couple into two individuals who couldn't talk and hated even being in the same room together. Their medical advisors, their families and their friends all tried to console them, immersing them in platitudes, telling them there was nothing they could have done, it wasn't their fault, time was a great healer and they were still young and would be able to have other children. None of it helped, quite the contrary, and there was no likelihood of more children when they couldn't stand even looking at one another. William immersed himself in his work and his wife started

drinking more and more in an attempt to escape reality. Exactly one year after the loss of his daughter, William's wife's car went out of control on the M8 motorway between Glasgow and Edinburgh and collided with a concrete bridge. It was a clear night and no other vehicle was involved. Although suicide couldn't be ruled out, the fatal accident enquiry concluded it had been an accident. This of course didn't stop the gossipmongers, who claimed William's coldness after his daughter's death drove his wife to taking her own life. William was aware of the rumours, but he didn't care and couldn't see beyond the self-obsession of his own pain. If anything, he withdrew even further and unable to engage in any social interaction, he devoted himself totally to his work. He made rapid progress through the ranks. He had no religion, he didn't partake in sports and rarely socialised. His only known interest outside of the police was working to support cancer charities, particularly children's ones. He held executive office on the boards and committees of the ones he was most passionate about.

Forbes pulled up a chair and called across to order a cappuccino.

“I hear you're looking into the Stevenson case. Have you got any good leads yet?”

Alex was surprised that Bill was interested, as it was not his province and Bill was normally very focused. However, Alex realised this murder had all the makings of a high profile case which would be discussed by the top corridor. With Forbes himself being such a workaholic, he wondered if there was some implied criticism of his taking the weekend off. “It's still early days yet,” he replied, not wanting to say too much. “There's some interesting features being investigated and I've got Sandra McKinnon on the ground, and she's keeping me briefed. I've had this weekend planned for ages, but although I'm not in the office, I'm still keeping my finger on the pulse,” he added defensively.

“Yes, I've heard she's a good girl, she's got a lot of potential.”

Alex could see the boys were starting to look a bit bored. “Why don't you drop into my office on Monday and I can give you a full update,” he added indicating he didn't want to have this conversation in front of the lads.

“No, that's okay, none of my business anyway, just curious. You said you're off to the footie, what game?”

“I'm taking the boys over to Ibrox for the Dundee United game. They're both Rangers fans.”

“Och, you're wasting your time with the big teams. Money's spoiled the game and taken all the fun out of it. McCoist's done a great job as manager but I think the new board are trouble. I've had to mop up some of the mess left by one of Craig Whyte's earlier deals and I don't rate him at all well. No, you lads, if you want to go to a game worth watching, you should follow a smaller team.

Something like Clyde. I've supported the 'Bully Wee' since I was a nipper and we may not have won any trophies but I've never been disappointed by their commitment. You ought to come with me sometime."

"What's wrong, are you feeling lonely, being the only one on the terracing supporting them?"

"Right, you have a point but it's still better than being crammed into a stadium where the players don't give a damn about the game, only the money. Anyway, while I've caught you here, I just happen to have some raffle tickets. It's the autumn draw for the Scottish Junior Cancer Foundation and it is being drawn during the gala dinner we're holding tomorrow night. As I'm the Treasurer, I've got a seat at the top table, so I'll make sure you have a fair chance. It's a black tie affair and I'm just on my way to get my kilt out of mothballs. So, you're bound to want some tickets. First prize is a Ford Ka. Only a pound a ticket or five pounds a book."

"Give me two books," Alex replied slipping a tenner out of his wallet.

"What's going on here? I've warned you before about soliciting on my premises," Rico asked, grinning, as he placed the frothy coffee in front of Bill.

"Guilty as charged. Don't worry, I won't drive away any of your good custom, just delinquents like this one."

"That's okay, put me down for a couple of books as well."

Chapter 7

Alex had only just turned the key in the ignition when his phone rang. From the 'Parrot' screen he could see it was Sandra calling. He switched off the car's engine so as to deactivate the hands free and instead lifted the phone's handset to answer. He turned on the radio for the boys to listen to. It was set to Radio Clyde and he noted it was part way through a play of one of his favourite songs, *Hotel California* by the Eagles, accompanied by the lyrics,

'You can check-out any time you like, but you can never leave.' He slid out of the door to stand in the car park so he was better able to converse privately.

“What's been happening?”

“A fair bit of progress. First, Connor's team got into the safe. There was about five grand there in cash, all used notes. No meaningful prints. The money didn't tie into shop receipts, so it may have been ill-gotten gains from blackmail or just a cash float for making purchases, there's no telling. There was also a notebook, the sort used for keeping accounts. You know the sort, with cash columns? The only things written were symbols and letters, a code of some sort. There were also numbers. I suspect it's how Stevenson kept tabs on his victims and what and when they paid him. They're arranging to have it looked at to see if anyone can break the code. But most interestingly there was a gun, a Smith & Wesson revolver, and it had Stevenson's prints on it. It wasn't loaded but there was a box of cartridges and it wasn't full. They've run tests and it doesn't seem to have any history. It's not a common gun for this part of the world and it's a mystery where the cartridges were used. It could just be target practice, of course.

“Next, the door to door has been continued but hasn't yielded anything worthwhile. We've a list as long as your arm with people who've moaned or complained about Stevenson but no one who's seen or heard anything meaningful.

“Fitzpatrick's been brilliant on the CCTV. He's still working through it but he's already given us a list of twelve vehicles that have been spotted near both locations. The man's amazing. I don't know how he does it.

“We managed to borrow one of the brains from forensic accounting. Connor set it up for us, and he's been working through Stevenson's financial records. He's part of some new department and I've arranged to go to his office at four

o'clock to go through anything he's come up with. When I spoke with him, he said he'd organised the research on other business interests and property. So I'm looking forward to seeing what he has.

“Now the bad news, we've been trying to find the working girls and boys from the photos. We've taken them round all the usual contacts but nobody's recognised any of them. They're not known on the normal circuits. We've checked the streets and the escort agencies too, but no leads on any of them. They could be new to the game or else they're from out of town. They're mostly young, but don't look underage. The folk we've spoken to said most of the new girls they come across are Asian or East European but from the photos that doesn't tie in with our lot.”

“Mmm, I'd have thought at least one of them would have been recognised.”

“Not so far. Anyway, a bit more luck with the punters. We've been able to pinpoint some of them already. It's nearly all top-level stuff. We've got a couple of bank managers, some senior business executives and, wait for it, a Sheriff.”

“What?”

“You heard right, I said a Sheriff. McSweeney, he serves regularly as a magistrate at Paisley court. You'll remember, he's the one the press went mad about a few months ago, not without good reason. It was because of his soft touch, accepting very iffy defence pleas. I'm planning to set up interviews but I've not arranged to see any of them yet. I thought you'd want in on that one.”

“You're right there. You've done well, very well. Is there anything else?”

“You bet and it's another strange one. One of the photos we'd been trying to trace thinking she was a working girl turns out to be one of the punters and not just any punter either, she's a local councillor. We should really have recognised her earlier but it was just so unexpected. It's Shirley McCann. She's married with two kids and she's only in her late twenties, but looks even younger. She's been recognised as one of the high flyers in the opposition, tipped for a Holyrood or a Westminster seat. I've been trying to pin down where she is so I can fix up an interview. I was planning to try and see her with Sanjay as I don't trust Donny not to put his foot in it, unless you want me to wait for you?”

Alex let out a low whistle. “You've certainly been busy. No, go ahead and fix it up at the first opportunity, and I think you're right to keep Donny clear of her. Donny and influential women are not a good mix”

“Just one more thing, remember the inconsistency in Findlay's story? We checked it out. He did make the emergency call from the shop phone but we checked he also made a call from his own mobile about a minute later, before anyone arrived. It was to a mobile number. We checked his records and he'd not called that number before, not within the last three months at least. But it had

been called from the shop number quite a few times and it had also been called from Stevenson's home phone. Very curious. I've tried ringing the number but it's only ever rung out. I'm having it traced and I'm arranging to see Findlay again tomorrow. I'll put him under some pressure and see what I get.

“Oh, one last thing. When we checked the shop phone, there'd been a couple of calls to a different mobile on the morning of the murder. The last one was just after ten past one so, based on when Findlay said he left, it could be our murderer. I've tried to check it out. The phone number corresponds to a cheap pay as you go bought from Tesco. The purchaser details were bogus so it looks like a dead end, unless we find it on someone or the owner switches it on.”

“You've done amazingly well, keep up the good work and keep me informed.”

Alex climbed back in the car and noticed the music had finished and the radio broadcaster was speculating about the afternoon's football program. He drove back to his flat and they all changed and picked up the match tickets. They then continued across to Ibrox where, knowing many of the support staff, Alex was able to find a parking spot close to the stadium. They showed their tickets at the turnstile, picked up a programme and found their seats. Then while waiting for the game to start, they enthusiastically discussed Rangers' prospect of retaining the premiership title after their successful start to the season. A win today would add to their lead at the top of the table. They were already nine points clear of Motherwell and twelve clear of Celtic with these two playing each other the following day.

Within minutes of the game starting, Alex became first irritated and then increasingly infuriated by the behaviour of a middle-aged spectator sitting three rows in front of them. The man was clearly intoxicated, jumping up from his seat and shouting and swearing at the players and the referee in the crudest possible way. Nothing seemed to please him and he made sure everyone knew about it.

Although he wasn't in favour of the boys being too insulated from the real world, Alex was unhappy with them being exposed to this sort of obscenity. Eventually Alex had had enough,

“We all came to watch a game of football, not to listen to your ranting. So just keep it to yourself!”

“Oh yeah! And who's gonna make me?” came the reply from the thug who spun round showing clenched fists.

“Well, I'm ready,” Alex replied holding up his warrant card while standing up to his full height which, from the lout's viewpoint, was further exaggerated by the tiered seating in the stadium.

The thug turned back and sat down, doing no more than mumble to himself

for the rest of the afternoon. A spontaneous round of applause burst out from around them and, witnessing the pats on the back and the voicing of thanks from fellow spectators, the boys looked approvingly at their father.

Their enjoyment of the game was increased further when Nikica Jelavik headed the home side into the lead in what was Rangers first real attacking movement of the match. Although being far from their most impressive performance, the game ended with Rangers victorious, winning 3 – 1 and establishing a twelve point lead at the top of the Scottish Premier League. Their fans left the ground happy with the result.

* * *

Sandra had not been to this office before. She hadn't even known it existed. She arrived at the modern tower block building on Waterloo Street slightly ahead of her four o'clock appointment. She entered through the revolving door and, after showing her ID at the security desk, was told to take the elevator to the third floor and go to the fourth door along the corridor, labelled suite fifteen.

Approaching the entrance, she saw the office wall was constructed out of opaque glass bricks and the door itself was heavy figured glass with three separate steel plate reinforced Mortise locks. Her rap on the glass was quickly answered as the door was opened into a very large, bright and airy office. All the furniture was modern and fronted in aluminium or beech. There was a scattering of desks, a couple of large tables, a profusion of computer monitors and a bank of filing cabinets. Only two other people were there. Sandra wondered if she had come to the wrong office. The girl who had opened the door looked to be aged in her early twenties. She had very white skin, long jet-black hair and was dressed as a Goth.

She introduced herself, “Hi, I'm Celia, you must be Sandra. You've an appointment to see Geoff. He's just finishing a call, but go across to his desk and take a seat. He'll be with you in a sec.”

Celia sat back down at her desk by the door. It struck Sandra as odd the way the room was laid out. It was such a large office and the two people in it were sitting at opposite ends. Didn't they like each other or were they just trying to make use of the space?

Just as she approached the desk, Geoff turned to face her. He looked to be about her age and was of medium height. He had the broad shoulders and muscular arms normally associated with a swimmer or a rugby player and neatly cropped, sandy-coloured hair. He was clean-shaven with hazel eyes and smooth,

even features other than a kink in his nose, which looked like it had been broken at some time in the past, perhaps confirming the rugby playing. His tight jeans were straining to contain his muscular thighs and he was wearing a Rolling Stones' 'forty licks' tee-shirt.

Sandra blinked a couple of times. This was not what she had been expecting. Having been introduced by Connor over the phone, she'd made an appointment to see someone she'd thought was from the force's financial investigations section. Although she truly hadn't known what to expect, this certainly wasn't it. She'd probably have felt more at ease in a dark dingy office, piled high with paper and old, brown wood furniture and staffed by someone bald, bespectacled, podgy and middle-aged wearing a pin striped suit. She couldn't help herself from staring.

To add to her discomfort, she was dazzled by his wide even-toothed grin, his eyes dancing with mirth. "Have I disappointed you? You must have been expecting a suit, collar and tie?"

"No, no," she stammered showing her embarrassment. "I've just never been to this section before."

"You wouldn't have. It's new. Let me explain." While talking, Geoff was reciprocating by casting an appreciative scan over Sandra's lithe form. "We're trying out an experiment with collaboration from the police, the accountancy bodies and the law society. This office was only set up last month on a trial basis. It's being staffed by some of your people together with secondments from some of the accountancy firms and the legal practices. I'm Geoff Thomson and I'm an Accountant. Christ that sounded like an introduction at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Have a seat and I'll tell you more about it.

"As I said, I'm a qualified accountant and I work for Ross Marwick's, one of the big four accountancy firms. After I qualified, I worked in insolvency for a while and I really liked it. It gave me a taste for being at the sharp end, running a business, but what I really loved was getting involved in investigations and tracing where the money had gone. I've spent some time with the forensic accounting department too. When this secondment opportunity came up, I leapt at it. You met Celia when you came in. She's a law graduate. We're planning to staff this unit with three accountants, two lawyers and a few of your people, but that will take a bit more time to pull together. For the time being, there's just us and Tony and he's on holiday this weekend. Most of the work will be done in association with the Serious Fraud Office, but where there's time, we want to have greater interaction with CID. Inspector Connor told me about this case on Thursday evening and I said I'd be happy for us to have a look into it and maybe give you some pointers. I picked up the files yesterday. We don't have a lot of

time because from Tuesday our time's committed as we're starting on a major investigation working with the Liverpool SFO looking at the Scottish end of one of their cases. That's why I've been working the weekend.”

“That was good of you,” she replied smiling.

“Well, what else would I be doing on a wet and windy Saturday? Now I've retired from rugby, at least on a regular basis, I've got so much more free time.”

Sandra inwardly congratulated her own detective skills.

“I miss the after match socialising though. Maybe, after we've finished this briefing, you'd like to come out for a drink.”

Sandra was taken aback. “What? You're asking me out?” She'd only met this guy two minutes ago and thought he was coming on to her. Had she been sending out the wrong signals? No doubt he was good looking and he must be intelligent to have this job, but she didn't feel ready to accept an invitation without knowing him better.

Seeing her concerned expression, Geoff continued, “Whoa. Wait a minute. There's nothing heavy here. We've had a hectic week and I'm calling it a day after our meeting. Celia and I had already agreed we were going for a beer when we finished and I thought you might like to join us.”

Now Sandra felt even more embarrassed. Had she misread and jumped in too quickly? Or was it really a try on? Sandra had never been short of admirers but she hadn't had too many real boyfriends. When she'd broken up with one a few years back, he'd accused her of being scary and frightening other people away. Maybe he'd been right and she was too guarded, not prepared to give anyone a chance.

“No it's okay. I was only joking. Anyway, I'm afraid I've still a number of things to do before I finish up. Maybe another time,” she recovered.

“Fine, we'll take a rain check,” Geoff replied. “Another time it is. I'll not be staying out long myself. I need to get back to relieve my partner. Liz has been home watching the twins all day and she'll be looking for reinforcements.”

So he's got a partner, Sandra thought, and children. Either he's a genuine guy who's just been looking to unwind a bit before going home, or my instincts were right and he's a bit of a cad. Either way, I'm here on business so let's get on with it. “Well, what have you been able to find out?”

Geoff pulled a spare chair over to his side of the desk, patted it inviting her to move seats so she'd be better able to see the papers and the screen.

“As I said before, we haven't had a lot of time but we've been through Stevenson's bank statements and his business records. At first, it looked as if all the records were immaculate. There were invoices and receipts to support nearly every transaction. But when we looked deeper, it wasn't so clear. It wasn't clean

at all. It was quite strange too because we looked at the last three years and there seemed to be a major change just over a year ago.

“In the earlier period, there was an inconsistency where there were a lot of transactions which made large profits, but that was offset by several other transactions which made losses. Sometimes it was when purchases had been made from the same person. With the profitable sales, the associated purchases were quite often made by cheque but most often with the loss making ones, the purchases were by cash or mainly cash and part cheque.”

“I don't understand. Why would that be?”

“We had our suspicions but we had to do some research to really find out. We've made a number of sample calls. All the purchases we checked where a big profit was made were confirmed by the seller. A few complained that they'd been robbed on the deal. It was a different story for the ones where a loss was made. We weren't able to confirm the price with any of the sellers. Some knew nothing about the transaction and others agreed the sale but claimed they were paid much less. We looked in detail at the purchase documents and found quite a few had been doctored. Look at this one: it's for a ring that was purchased for fifty quid and it's been changed to two hundred and fifty. Look closely, you can see the pen strokes are different on the 'two.' Then when it was sold it only fetched one twenty. He really made a profit of seventy but the books showed a loss of one hundred and thirty.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Two reasons; one, to reduce his profits so he wouldn't have to pay corporation tax, or less tax, and two, so he could take cash out the business without it showing and again so he didn't pay tax to take it out. It was a limited company. If he was taking money out, he should have been paying income tax and national insurance.”

“It was pretty well thought out then?”

“Yeah, I suppose so, but not very sophisticated. It was a pretty amateurish fraud to cheat the taxman and not too difficult to detect if you know what to look for.

“Most of the sales look kosher. A lot of them are through the shop and he mostly received the money by cheque or credit card, and that didn't give him room for manoeuvre. He sold a bit through the trade too which could stand some closer examination. He sold many items through the auction houses and did some buying there too. He mostly used Great Western Auctions, the place out at Scotstoun, you know, Anita Manning's place, the one that's used on Bargain Hunt?”

“Oh yes, I like her.”

“So did he, apparently. He did a lot of business there, and from what I see, that's all completely legit.”

“You said that was the earlier period and then it all changed, so what happened then?”

“It didn't all change. Everything that had been happening before continued to happen but all of a sudden a new type of transaction began to occur and quite often.

“A number of transactions went through that didn't seem to make either a profit or a loss. That in itself wasn't very strange. You don't always know how the market's going to react and you might just want your money back, the way the economy's been, things like antiques can be very volatile. The strange thing here was that they were bought and sold within days of each other and the items were more like commodities, mainly gold and some diamonds. The gold was mostly coins, sovereigns and the like, and the diamonds were all over one carat, so they were investment diamonds and not costume jewellery.”

“Why was that odd?”

“To a dealer, items like that have a known price. You wouldn't expect Stevenson to buy them unless he was getting a very good deal, or unless he already had a buyer and would be making a decent margin. But in most cases, the price he paid was on the money. There wasn't any scope for him to make a profit and true enough he would sell them on almost immediately, but at a price that was more or less what he had paid.”

Sandra's face had a quizzical expression.

“Maybe it'll make more sense when I tell you that he invariably paid for his purchase by cheque and then sold the items for cash. The receipts all went through the bank even though it was paid for in readies.”

“So was this some sort of money laundering scam?”

“Exactly; Stevenson had cash he couldn't account for. From what I've heard, it'll be from his blackmailing scams, and he's converted it into gold and diamonds. Things that can be fairly easily converted back to cash, that are easy to store and that can't be traced, not without a gemmologist's report at least.”

“Phew, he seems to have had it pretty well tied up?”

“Yep, it will have worked like a dream, just so long as no one looked too closely at the records. And that's where I came in.”

“Well, what does that tell us about the murderer?”

“Nothing really. We have evidence suggesting fraud, tax evasion and money laundering but how to link that to the murder is your department, not mine.”

“Is there any action we should be taking about the crimes that we've discovered?”

“That's a difficult problem. You can't prosecute someone who's dead. But then the assets he's accumulated have been derived from illegal activities so we don't want them passing onto his family with his estate. The Procurator Fiscal will need to have a look and HMRC might want to start its own investigation.”

“What about the coins and diamonds, where do you think he's stored the loot?”

“Ah! That one's your job too. Having said that, I was also asked to look and see if I could trace what other business interests or properties Stevenson had, so that might give you some leads.

“I've searched Companies House records and Stevenson's listed as director and owning nearly all the shares of Odds and Ends Limited. He's also listed on three other companies: SS Sales Limited, Steve Scott Antiques Limited and Meg Assets Limited. There was a fourth but that went bankrupt and was liquidated about ten years ago. SS and Steve Scott are dormant companies and Meg is non-trading. It's an investment company and owns some property, stocks and shares. At one time, the shares in Meg were owned jointly by Stevenson and his mother but a few years ago she transferred them, most of them to him with a couple to his sister. She probably didn't want to own them, or more to the point, he didn't want her to own them so it wouldn't affect her entitlement to benefits.”

“I'm sorry I don't really understand that?”

“It's all to do with the benefit rules. Stevenson's mother is living in a care home and the charge for that is hundreds of pounds a week, probably about seven or eight hundred pounds. If she has her own money then she has to pay for it but if she doesn't have any money then the Council pays. It's not quite as simple as that. She's allowed to have some money or assets but if it's worth more than about fourteen thousand pounds then she has to pay.”

“Really, I thought the Scottish Government had a policy about not having to pay for care for the elderly.”

“There is a policy but it doesn't cover care home costs.”

“But if she had assets and gave them away, surely that could be traced and challenged.”

“That's true, but first the authorities would need to suspect they had a claim and whether the gift was okay would depend on how long ago it was made and if it could be explained as being for another reason.”

“God, I hadn't realised these things were so complicated.”

“Count yourself lucky. With an ageing population and limited resources, it's affecting more and more people. In past generations, it was a lot more common for elderly relatives to be taken care of by their family, but that's now become very much the exception rather than the rule. Now most folks' lives are so busy

and complicated they struggle to look after themselves, never mind having to nurse or care for their parents. With the added problems of greater longevity and near epidemic levels of dementia, the system is straining at the seams and costs are passed on to the families who can afford it whenever possible. Those who have never worked or who've spent or given away their assets get it for free, but any poor bugger who's been cautious and saved to create an inheritance gets it taken away from them.”

“That doesn't sound very fair.”

“It's not, but who said life had to be fair. A lot of those smart enough or aware enough do what Mrs Stevenson's done and give away their money or put it in trust.”

“You sound as if you have some experience.”

“I do, my grandfather has Alzheimer's and had to give up his house to go into a nursing home a couple of years ago. My parents and uncles had no alternative, the house had to be sold to pay the fees and so far they've amounted to over sixty grand.”

“Ouch!”

“Anyhow, none of this is going to help you solve your case. I was telling you about Meg Limited. It owns a portfolio of shares, nothing suspicious, all blue chip investments. But the properties are more interesting. The accounts only show it as property investments but I've checked it out with the Land Registry and the company owns three flats, two are in Newton Mearns and the third is in the Glasgow Harbour development at Partick. He also owns the freehold on two shops in the West End. I don't see any immediate links to him; one's a fast food carryout and the other's a newsagent. They may just be leased out to get the income but you'll probably want to check them out. I've written down the addresses.”

“Thanks for all your help,” Sandra smiled gratefully.

“Any time,” Geoff replied and patted her three times on the leg in a friendly gesture, just above her knee, but with the third one his fingertips gently grazed her inner thigh and he gazed into her eyes longingly.

To Sandra the effect was like an electric shock and she sprang to her feet. She felt very uncomfortable in his company. She was now more certain that she hadn't misinterpreted his earlier intentions. She was glad Celia had been in the room, albeit at the other side, as she wouldn't ever want to be left alone with him. She fought back the urge to utilise her martial arts training. Just one straight arm punch to the centre of his face would be so pleasing. It would break his nose in an instant. Maybe that's what had happened to it before. It might not have been rugby after all. She decided against making an issue of his behaviour or

making any formal complaint, as she had more than enough to cope with at the moment. However, she'd maybe pass on a comment to her union rep so that Geoff could be monitored more closely. Sandra rushed away and as she approached the door, Celia ran to open it for her, not saying a word, but her eyes were downcast staring at the floor.

Sandra was desperate to tell Alex about the new information but waited until she was back in her office to call him.

Chapter 8

Crowds of contented supporters were meandering all over the road as Alex drove away from the stadium. He was making slow progress, being careful to not inflict any bodily injuries with his wing mirror, when his phone rang.

Eyeing the screen, he pressed the accept button on the 'Parrot' and immediately spoke, telling Sandra where he was and that the boys were with him, as a caution to be guarded in what she said.

“Okay, Boss, give me a call when you can. We've now got the low-down on Stevenson's business and property holdings. Very interesting, I'll give you the details later.”

“Fine, I'll give you a call from the flat, half an hour to an hour tops.” They cleared the jaywalking crowds fairly quickly but progress along Dumbreck Road was still slow as they vied with traffic heading out of the city which was exiting first from the M8 and then the M77 motorways.

They arrived back at Alex's flat and the boys were ravenous. Alex quickly heated a pot of soup he'd prepared earlier. He was a dab hand at Scotch broth and he had left the pulses soaking overnight so they would swell to a solid mass. Although he gave them each a spoon with their mug, a fork and knife might have been a better way to handle it. Buttered rolls were laid out to accompany the soup. “Eat up lads. We don't have a lot of time if we're to make it out before the fireworks start.”

The boys were eating while watching the early evening television and Alex, armed with his own mug, disappeared into his bedroom to call Sandra for a quick update.

Being the 5th November, it was Guy Fawkes' night and, as had become a tradition for Alex and the boys, they were going to a firework display. Last year was the first time Helen hadn't been with them but previously Guy Fawkes' night had been considered one of the traditional family events. When the boys had been younger, Alex had bought their own fireworks and they had a private bonfire and then set them off in their back garden. One memorable year, the family had a weekend, mini-holiday away in Manchester during September and visited Chinatown where they had purchased some interesting looking firecrackers. Little did they realise they'd bought display fireworks which when they set them off nearly deafened them, the ground actually shook and many of

their neighbours rushed out thinking there'd been a gas explosion. Last year, with Helen's absence, they'd gone to the free entertainment provided on Glasgow Green which boasted Scotland's largest organised display. The event was produced in association with the ABBA show 'Mamma Mia' and with its musical accompaniment together with participation from Radio Clyde, it had various sideshows and food booths. Although the entertainment was sensational, the experience was spoiled by groups of unruly teenagers running about, throwing bangers and other fireworks, smashing bottles and shouting and yelling obscenities. This year Alex decided to avoid the big show and instead he would take the kids to their local display. He didn't mind having to pay for the tickets as they would be far less likely to encounter the same problems and it was somewhere they might bump into their own friends. It was still a significant display and it was to be held at the playing fields of the Glasgow Hutchisons' Aloysians Rugby Football Club in Giffnock. The location of the GHA stadium was roughly half way between Alex's flat in Shawlands and the bungalow in Clarkston.

Alex considered taking the car but knew the car park would be full long before he got there and the adjacent side streets would be no better. He thought about parking at a local supermarket and walking the remainder of the distance but decided it wouldn't be worthwhile. Instead, he made sure the boys were warmly dressed and, at 6.45 pm, they set off at a brisk pace to walk the near two-mile distance. They arrived in good time to buy hot dogs and find their seats before settling down for the show to start. Not unexpectedly, the boys both met up with school friends and Alex had a chance to unwind and chat with some of the other parents.

When the show ended, they declined the opportunity to go to the family disco in the clubhouse. Instead, they started their walk home, discussing the comparative merits of this year's display with the larger one last year, rubbing their necks as they went, to ease the strain from spending a long time looking skyward.

Once home, Alex made them all hot, milky drinks and they ate toasted, buttered muffins. They sat watching television for a while but as the boys were physically drained after their very full day, before 10.30pm they chose to have an early night and went to their beds to read.

Alex took the opportunity to phone Sandra and, hoping to have a more leisurely discussion, he dialled her landline. "Hi, I'm sorry to break into your Saturday evening."

Sandra answered and then immediately lifted the cordless phone into the hall so as to be out of hearing range of her parents and so not to disturb their

television viewing.

“The sorriest part is you knowing that you'd get me at home on a Saturday night. Poor, sad, lonely bastard that I am, and you'll never guess what we've been watching on TV? *CSI* followed by *Law and Order* no less. No rest for the wicked, I could bloody well write the script”

“Who on earth's phoning you at this time?” Alex overheard in the background.

“It's okay, Mum, It's just to do with my work.”

“What, at this time on a Saturday night?”

“Mum, you need to realise it's a 24/7 type of job.”

“Sorry about that,” Sandra came back on.

“I didn't expect you to be at home, I was just trying on the off chance.”

“Sorry, Alex, nice try but you don't win a coconut. That doesn't sound remotely likely as you didn't try my mobile first, and besides even if it had been true it wouldn't make me feel any better. The truth is, at the moment, I don't have any social life.”

“Well, we'll just need to do something about that. If you don't fix yourself up with a better offer, I'll take you out for a drink next week.”

“Hmm, that's the second offer I've had today.”

“And there was you complaining. Women, I'll never understand them.”

Sandra hadn't intended to tell Alex about Geoff's behaviour, not now at least, but whether by accident or not, the conversation had led to it and she found the words flooding out, telling Alex exactly what had happened and her concerns about Geoff's predatory behaviour.

Alex was angry. “It sounds like he's good at his job but there's no excuse for that type of behaviour and we need to nip this in the bud. I understand you'd prefer not to make a formal complaint but we need to deal with this quickly. I'm going to find out who's supervising the project and see what we can do. From what you've told me, this is a joint agency task force and he's meant to be representing his profession. Marwick's will be mortified when they find out.

“Leave this with me for now, okay. Right, what have you got planned for tomorrow?”

“I'm seeing Findlay at ten o'clock. McAvoy's going to be with me. We'll find out what he has to say about the phone calls. I'm also seeing Shirley McCann with Sanjay, we're meeting her at six o'clock in the evening We've managed to trace a few more of the punters from the photos and I've already arranged interviews with a couple of them and I'm setting up meetings with some others for Sanjay. It's quite tricky because we are trying to be discreet.”

“I hope they appreciate it, but I doubt it. Anything else?”

“The warrant's being processed and we should have it in good time. We'll be able to go to the bank any time that suits us.”

“Good.”

“So what have you got planned?”

“I didn't think it possible but I've managed to exhaust the lads, what with the swimming the football and the fireworks. They've both called it a night and have taken their books to bed. Andrew's reading a 'Harry Potter' and Craig's into some vampire series. I'm just about to go and put my feet up, but before that I'll pour myself a whisky. I think I've earned it. I was given a nice bottle of Glenlivet for my birthday a couple of months back and I'm sure I still have a fair amount left. Some nice relaxing music for background and I might just drift off myself.”

“Are you around tomorrow?”

“Call me if you need me. I'd been planning to take the boys round the Kelvingrove Museum but Craig's got himself a date, an invitation to meet up with a crowd at East Kilbride. It came from a girl he met at the swimming and she asked him to join them.”

“Well, that's your problems really starting now. One's already a teenager and the other one's almost there.”

“Thanks for your words of encouragement, and with that I think we should call it a night. Whisky beckons and I'm sure you'll want to get back to Benson and Stabler. Good night, sleep tight”

“Night,” Sandra replied with some regret, she'd been enjoying the warmth and camaraderie of their discourse and returned to the loneliness of the family room.

When she'd been twenty-two, Sandra and her then boyfriend, Graeme, had rented and moved into their own flat in Glasgow's fashionable Merchant City. They'd had plans to save up so they could afford to buy their own place, but a few months later Graeme was made redundant and never found any replacement permanent work. He sometimes took temporary positions for a few weeks at a time but mainly just bummed around the flat relying on Sandra's income to keep them. She wouldn't even have minded too much had he taken a fair share of the household chores, but he rarely cooked, shopped or cleaned. All too often Sandra returned from a hard day's work to find no food in the fridge, the flat being filthy, with dirty dishes piled high and needing to be cleared before she could even think about food. Graeme would be sitting playing on a games console. Sandra tolerated his behaviour for some time, too long actually, making excuses to herself that Graeme was suffering from depression but would soon find a job and be okay. The job never arrived, mainly because he wasn't trying, and eventually Sandra stopped making excuses for him and called time on their

relationship. She realised she'd had a lucky escape but nevertheless was bereft at the loss of the life she had planned and expected, having instead to move back home with her parents.

Much as she loved her parents and they were devoted to her, this was not the life Sandra had wanted for herself, and it did not fit with her parents plans either. Her father was a chartered surveyor and he was only a year off retirement, while her mother was already retired, on a full pension, after a career as a modern languages schoolteacher. Sandra had two older siblings who were both married and each had two children. Her sister now lived near London, and her brother lived in Stirling, each with their families. Sandra's return to her parents' home had inhibited their plans for a more carefree time with greater freedom and more travel as they instead had to resume their roles as mother and father. They had always joked about 'SKI-ING' through their retirement - 'Spending the Kids Inheritance.' They had even taken the first step, not long after Sandra had moved into her flat, when they purchased an apartment in a small spa town in the Vallespir valley in the South of France, only a few kilometres from the Spanish border. Although they took every opportunity to holiday there, Sandra became concerned that her presence was slowing down their plans.

Without the distraction of a relationship, Sandra worked hard to build her career, and although she dated and took part in many interests and activities, she was unable to commit to anything serious. Only after several years of living back home was she now looking to rent a flat of her own to establish her independence.

Alex, too, felt rather lonely and melancholy. He changed his mind about the whisky. He enjoyed having a drink as a celebration or in company but was wary about drinking alone being particularly cautious not to drink to forget or cover up thinking about problems. In his line of work he was all too aware how easily it could become habit forming and lead to much worse problems. In his job, he often had to pick up the pieces after other people had made that mistake.

* * *

In the morning Alex rose early and prepared the batter to make waffles and pancakes as a special treat. While waiting for the boys to wake, Alex made a few calls to find out who was responsible for the project Geoff Thomson was employed on. He was delighted when he was informed Superintendent Charles Hunter was in charge. He knew Charlie very well, having worked for him for a number of years, earlier in his career, when he'd been a newly promoted

sergeant. Charlie had been a great boss and a good teacher. Alex had learned a lot from him and he had enormous respect. Alex still had Charlie's private number and he gave him a ring.

Charlie was appalled to hear about Sandra's experience and they discussed various options.

"The force has had enough problems with claims of sexual harassment over the years without importing it from outside. We could just ask Marwick's to take him off the project but they'd want a full explanation and that could prove awkward, as there's not a lot of evidence to go on. The other lass, Celia, did you say? She might be a help, but we can't be certain, and if Sandra would prefer not to be roped in we're snookered. We might be better to keep our powder dry and wait until we have something else to work with."

"We could always send Edwina round to see him?" Alex suggested stifling a chuckle.

"What, you mean mad Eddy? Eddy Torrance, the transvestite? The ex-copper who won that beauty contest without telling the organisers he was in drag?"

"That's the one, but you're exaggerating a bit, he only came third. He's a professional entertainer now. We could hire him."

"Aye, that would be hilarious. Find some excuse to let him meet up with Thomson and then let nature take its course, so to speak. It would scare the shit out of him. Christ, I'd pay for tickets for that show."

"Lovely thought but not too practical," Alex added.

"No, I suppose not, but I'm pleased to see you've not lost your sense of humour. What we need is something more formal and controlled. I've an idea though."

"Shoot."

"Thomson is the supervisor on the project and we've still to recruit most of the staff. How about we ask him to interview some of the hopefuls to assess their potential? Just him and them, not a panel interview. We could hold the interviews in one of our offices, one wired for sound and vision. We could make sure all the signs were up warning about taping. You know what it's like, after a few minutes you forget its running. We can set up the candidates, a few who have ideal credentials who're either older or are guys and then maybe a couple of lookers who have far poorer potential. We then wait and see who he recommends and we'd have the whole thing recorded to take him to task on. There's even the chance he does or says something really stupid."

"Sounds great, keep me posted." At this point Alex heard movement from next door and begged away, explaining to Charlie that he was looking after the

boys this weekend.

“Yes, we haven't spoken for a while. I'd meant to say to you that I was really sorry to hear about your break up from Helen. How are you coping?”

“It took a while, but I'm okay now. I just want to make sure the boys aren't badly affected, and on that note I'd better go.”

Craig and Andrew found their way to the kitchen by mid-morning and Alex finished making their breakfast. They devoured every last bit, smothering the pancakes in maple syrup. They had a leisurely time before setting off for the ice rink. Although cold, it was a beautiful clear day and the sun was shining. Alex had the thought of picking up Jake so he and Andrew could take him to the park while Craig was with his friends. He called Helen to see if it would be okay and she gladly accepted as it relieved her of the responsibility of dog walking.

Alex and Craig sat in the car outside the house while Andrew went in to collect Jake and all his accoutrements. A few minutes later, he and Jake came bounding back out, Jake wearing his safety harness with Andrew carrying his bowl, a two litre Coke bottle full of water and his ball and catapult. Alex opened the tail gate and the dog enthusiastically flew through the air to land in the boot. Once they were all belted in, Alex set off and within a few minutes he pulled into the Cinema car park one level above the ice rink.

Craig couldn't get out of the car quickly enough. He was keen to meet up with the crowd but was also a bit nervous.

Ten minutes later, he had not returned and they had not heard from him. Alex wanted to check up on him but knew his presence wouldn't be welcome, besides he couldn't leave Andrew or the dog alone in the car and Jake wouldn't be permitted in the shopping centre. He dialled Craig's mobile.

“Yeah, what is it?”

“You were meant to phone or come and tell me if you needed your skates”.

“Oh yeah, no I don't need them, thanks, bye”

Alex gazed at the phone speechless. He was furious at Craig's selfishness and at his rudeness. He wanted to march straight in and confront him but knew in his heart this was not the right time. He thought Craig might be trying to make a display of bravado to make an impression and show off in front of his new friends. Alex didn't like it at all. He was worried in case the boy was becoming spoiled and manipulative. He knew it often happened with children of broken marriages.

He took a few moments to calm down then restarted the car and drove to Calderglen Country Park on the outskirts of the town. After finding a parking space under the trees, he, Andrew and Jake took a pathway through the woods, the dog diving from tree to tree delighting in experiencing new places and

aromas and marking his territory as he went. At one point, Jake spied a squirrel off at a distance. It was like a cartoon. He stood stock still for a moment, one front paw raised and sniffing the air. It was as if he couldn't believe his eyes, or nose. He then took off at amazing speed. Alex clapped his hands as a warning for the squirrel to move as he'd had previous experience of Jake being successful in a hunt. On that occasion he'd caught a furry creature by the scruff of the neck and with one shake it was dead. Thinking of it as a game with a soft toy, the dog had gone on to play with the corpse, throwing it in the air and catching it until Alex had been able to call him off. Since that incident, Alex was in the habit of clapping his hands whenever he saw a squirrel to warn it off. Jake misunderstood and believed this was Alex telling him a squirrel was about. Whenever he clapped his hands, Jake would look all around him to see where the squirrel was and Andrew sometimes teased the dog by clapping just so as he could watch his reaction.

When they returned to the car, the dog was so fatigued he struggled to make the jump back into the boot and, when he did, he promptly lay down, collapsing onto a blanket.

Alex drove back to the shopping centre, worried about having a potential confrontation with Craig if he wasn't ready to be collected. He needn't have worried as his son was standing waiting for him, at the exact spot they'd agreed and he was grinning from ear to ear. He climbed into the car and in one long sentence, lasting about five minutes, he told his brother and father about the fantastic afternoon he'd had. He had been accepted and was now one of the crowd meeting there every Sunday and going to the cinema each Wednesday evening. Alex wanted to raise the subject of Craig's earlier behaviour. He was fearful of starting an argument which may alienate him but knew he couldn't let it go without comment, otherwise he would be condoning it as acceptable behaviour and, worse still, have Andrew see it being accepted. He cautiously raised the subject and was rewarded by Craig's response.

“I'm really sorry, Dad. I was being a bit of a dick, wasn't I? I didn't mean to mess you about, but it was the first time I'd met with the group and I was trying to make a good impression. I should have phoned you, but it was all going so well at the time and I was afraid to spoil it. It won't happen again”

Alex was speechless. He was so pleased at Craig apologising without being pushed into it that he didn't pull him up on his language.

They drove back to the flat and on the way Alex collected some Bakers' Complete for Jake. The dry dog food was his favourite. He then prepared a pot of piping hot Italian beef stew. He served the delicious concoction of beef, tomatoes, shallots, garlic and spices on a bed of basmati rice. Although he'd been

fed first, the dog was walking around the kitchen, sniffing the air and salivating and the boys were following in his wake. Alex was an enthusiastic cook but now, living alone, he rarely had the opportunity to indulge his skills. When he had free time he would cook up large cauldrons of food and then he'd separate them into meal size portions for the freezer. Despite his long and irregular hours, he was still able to enjoy home cooked food, as long as he remembered to lift out and defrost something each morning. This weekend, because of the busy schedule, he didn't expect to have much time to cook and had instead lifted out several containers to have ready.

Alex hadn't heard from Sandra all day and he was desperate to know what progress had been made. A number of times through the day he'd lifted his mobile to call her but thought better of it. If he was needed then she would have called him and he had limited time with Craig and Andrew so he needed to make the most of it. Stevenson was dead and that wouldn't change. Everything else could wait and be caught up on later, after he'd taken the boys home.

As previously arranged, they all arrived back at the bungalow by eight o'clock. Jake made straight for his bed and the boys went to their rooms to sort through their homework in preparation for school the next day. Colin wasn't at home, and to Alex's surprise, Helen asked him in for a coffee. He accepted and briefed her on Craig's new group of friends before going home to his flat to check progress on the investigation.

Chapter 9

Sunday morning and the profusion of heavy clouds prevented any discernable difference in the light as night turned to morning. Having enjoyed only a few hours of restless sleep, Sandra made her way into the office and started work. Donny wasn't too far behind her and was unusually bright and cheery.

“You look like you've won the lottery.”

“As good as, just about,” he replied. “My son and his wife came over to see us last night with the two bairns. It gave me a chance to spoil the grandkids. The great thing with grandchildren is you get to play with them and get them all excited and then you hand them back before they start getting too tired and acting up. Their poor parents then have the problem of settling them back down again. It gives me the chance to get my own back on my kids for the years of trauma they caused me when they were young.”

“Spoken as if you were the one who had to deal with them.”

“Well, me and the wife. Wait for this though, I even gave them toy harmonicas to take home with them. Can you imagine how long it will take before their parents manage to accidentally lose them?”

“You're a wicked, wicked man Donald McAvoy.”

Donny answered with a Dick Dastardly-style snigger.

“Okay, on with today. Sanjay and I have an appointment fixed up for this evening, but as far as we're concerned, Findlay's been instructed to come in here for interview at ten o'clock. He wasn't too happy about it but he's agreed. Then at one we've an appointment out in Milngavie to see a Mr Ballantyne, one of the punters. He owns a biotech company out at Maryhill Science Park.”

“Is that Dr Ballantyne as in Martyn Ballantyne, the entrepreneur?”

“Yes, you're right, it is Dr Ballantyne. I'll try not to make that mistake when I see him. He sounded rather arrogant. When I asked to make an appointment, he said to see him at his house even though I told him it was a private and discreet matter. He didn't even ask any questions.”

Much to Sandra's annoyance, Finlay arrived nearly thirty minutes late. He was taken to an interview room not too different from the one in Dumbarton Road, except perhaps a little bit less stale.

“Right, Mr Findlay, I'll remind you that you are still under caution,” Donny stated clearly for the recording.

“What's this all about? I've already told you all I know, and where's the big man?”

“No, that's not quite true is it, Stuart?” Sandra replied, ignoring his question.

“What do you mean? I was there for hours on Thursday. I told you what had happened. I told you over and over. You were there,” he said looking accusingly at McAvoy.

“Yes, but you didn't tell us everything, did you?” Sandra shot back.

Findlay looked perplexed, “I don't know what you mean.”

“Tell us about the phone call,” Sandra prompted.

“What? You mean after I found the body? Aye, I called '999.' ”

“That's what you told us. The first time you said you called from the shop. Then later you said you left the shop and used your mobile.”

“So? I must have made a mistake, it hardly matters.”

“It matters very much,” McAvoy cut in gruffly. “You did call '999' from the shop. We checked. But you also made a call from your mobile, didn't you?”

“What right do you have to check my phone?” Findlay replied, now starting to look more unsettled.

“We have every right in the world,” McAvoy assertively answered. “Surely we don't have to remind you that this is a murder enquiry? If you withhold information from us, you can be charged with obstruction of justice, maybe even as an accessory to the murder.”

Findlay's show of bravado collapsed and his whole demeanour changed. “What do you want to know?” he asked, meekly.

“Let's start with the phone call you made immediately after you called '999.' ”

“I called Gordon, Gordon Black,” the sudden shock of realising his predicament cleared his head, as he carefully considered everything he was saying. “I first met Gordon when I started Uni. It was in Freshers' Week and we met in the beer bar. He was from Inverness. We were both new and from out of town and we got on okay. He was studying computer science so we didn't see too much of each other after that but we'd sometimes have a pint together. A few months back, I bumped into him again in the Union and he told me he might be able to get me a job. He said he'd been doing some work with an antique dealer who wanted a part-time worker for his shop and he introduced me to Stevenson. That's how I ended up working there. That's all there was too it.”

“That's not the whole truth, is it? Why did you call him then?” Sandra took over the questioning.

“It was because he knew Stevenson and he'd introduced us. I thought I owed it to him to tell him.”

“So you told him you found Stevenson dead. Did you tell him what killed

him?”

“I can't remember. I was really panicked and I don't know what I said.”

“Have you spoken to him again since?”

“No, that was the only time. I tried calling a couple of other times but his phone was switched off.”

“You said Black had been 'doing work with Stevenson.' Now, what precisely was he doing?”

“I don't know for sure. It was something on the internet. At first I thought he was looking after his computers or building a website for the shop but he very rarely came in. It was something on the web though.”

“Did you ever hear them talking about anyone or mentioning any names?”

“I can't really think. It wasn't often that Gordon came into the shop. He phoned sometimes but I didn't hear what they were saying. I seem to remember the name Mandy being mentioned one time, or it may have been Marcy or something like that. I'm sorry I can't really help.”

“You'd better not be flannelling us. If we find out you've been holding anything back, we'll come down on you like a ton of bricks,” McAvoy interceded.

“I heard them once talking about blogging and chat rooms, but I'm not into computers and it didn't mean very much to me. So really I don't know any more.”

“Could it have been Black that Stevenson was meeting on Thursday?”

“No, I'm sure it wasn't. He'd have had no reason to not let me know if it was.”

“What did Black say after you told him about Stevenson?”

“Nothing really, I think he just said thanks for letting him know. That was all.”

“So it doesn't sound like he was too surprised. Where does Black live?”

“He comes from near Inverness but I don't know where. When he first came to Glasgow he was staying in the student halls of residence, but he moved out in his second term. He was sharing a flat with a couple of other guys. I think it was in Otago Street, just off Woodlands Road. I don't know the number and I was never there. I don't know for sure but I think I heard that he moved out to his own place. I know recently he seemed to have a bit more money.”

“What do you mean by recently, and what do you mean about the money?”

“Must be the last few months now. He wasn't really flash or anything. He just wasn't moaning like the rest of us about how short he was. He also seemed to be able to afford new clothes and to go to gigs and be able to eat out sometimes.”

“Right, now I want you to give me a full description of what he looks like.”

“Let me think. He must be about five foot ten, quite slim, probably about ten or eleven stone, short ginger hair, narrow face, clean shaven, pale complexion with freckles and blue eyes.”

“Sounds pretty precise, I forgot you were an art student. We'll check the University for a photo, but if we can't get a good one, we may come back and ask you to sit with an artist.”

“That would be really interesting,” Findlay replied, showing real enthusiasm for the first time.

“Okay, we'll leave it at that and get your amended statement written up,” Sandra said. “If anything else comes to mind, I want you to let us know. It doesn't matter how insignificant it may sound, I want you to tell us. Now here's my card and I'll call you if I need you back for the artist.”

Findlay left the room a lot less self-assured than when he had arrived.

“Well, we took the wind out of his sails, but are we really much further forward?” Donny grumbled.

“That's a bit negative. We've really quite a lot more to work on.” Sandra held up her hand and counted off items on her fingers. “One, we now know that Findlay phoned Gordon Black. Two, we know Black seems to be Stevenson's accomplice, probably working some scam on the net. Three, Black discussed girls with Stevenson, he probably knew about the prostitution and or blackmail. Four, Black may have gone on the run as his phone's been switched off, or dumped, but we've got leads to find him. We know where he comes from and we know what he's been studying. We've a fair idea where he's been staying and we know what he looks like. That sounds pretty good progress to me.”

“Okay, fair enough, but how does that tie in with Stevenson's murder?”

“We don't know that yet, but I'm sure it has to. Maybe Black was involved in the blackmail business and if we find him, he'll be able to tell us who the victims were. They have to be our prime suspects, and whoever we don't have a photo of is first in the frame, if you'll excuse the pun.”

“What, photo? Frame? Oh, right, very funny.”

“As Findlay turned up late, we're running a bit behind. Gonna' give Ballantyne a ring and tell him we're on our way. I'll go and bring the car round and meet you at the front door.” Sandra wanted to make sure she was driving as she was not comfortable when McAvoy was behind the wheel. She found him too slow and deliberate.

A few minutes later they were heading back out to the West End. Being still Sunday morning, the roads were comparatively quiet and Sandra raced along the broad carriageway of Great Western Road paying little heed to the speed limit.

She traversed a sequence of green traffic lights and she hardly even slowed as she turned off at the Anniesland interchange. She sped up even more on the dual carriageway and McAvoy was nervously clinging to his seat when they came down the Switchback at Canniesburn Toll.

While driving, Sandra enquired what they already knew about Ballantyne. Without waiting for a response, she then ran through the results of their research with barely a whimper from McAvoy, as his attention was more focussed on their survival. “He started out as a boffin then started a biotech business. He opened up his company in the science park then expanded with satellite offices. It was very successful and he took it public, selling half the shares for millions. He then started a string of other companies in medical research and testing, most of which have been very successful. He does a lot of work for the NHS and for the pharmaceutical industry and his testing labs are frequently used by our people as well. He's named in the Sunday Times 'Rich List' and he's reckoned to be in the top ten in Scotland. He's got no criminal record, not even a parking ticket, but that's no surprise.” She turned to see McAvoy's response but only saw his fearful eyes and chalk white face.

“For Christ's sake, Sandra, slow down. I know Canniesburn has the best plastic surgery unit in the country but I'd rather not be making use of their services.”

“Wimp,” Sandra exclaimed, but nevertheless she slowed down as they drove through Bearsden and out towards Milngavie. The narrower roads and increased volume of traffic may also have contributed, together with Sandra no longer being confident she knew where she was going. With the assistance of the satnav and with Sandra's earlier rally-style driving, they arrived at Ballantyne's house only a few minutes later than their originally arranged schedule.

They drove up a long, winding driveway passing well cared for lawns and immaculately presented flower beds on each side. Surprisingly for this time of year, where most trees and bushes were bare, they found a plethora of colour and hardly a leaf out of place. They stopped in front a large stone house. The property was cottage-style and stone built with whitewashed walls and a slate roof but it was too large to be described as a cottage. The front of the house was symmetrically laid out with eight ground floor windows, four on each side of a substantial timber doorway. It looked as if the house had originally been single storey but the lines of slates were now interrupted by large Velux windows. Beyond and off to the side of the house, sitting slightly behind was a large outhouse. It looked as if it might have once been a barn but had now been converted into a large garage, enough to hold half a dozen vehicles or more. Two vehicles sat in front of the building. Sandra immediately recognised one as a

Porsche Cayenne Turbo and the other was a classic Bentley which she judged to be from the 1950's. McAvoy released a low, admiring whistle as he surveyed the scene. The whole roof of the garage was covered with solar panels. To supplement the owner's environmentalist credentials there was a modest-sized wind turbine immediately behind the garage. Perhaps he was seeking to compensate for the CO2 emissions from his fleet of vehicles, Sandra conjectured.

Bracing themselves against the icy breeze, they approached the entranceway and Donny had pressed the doorbell before noticing Sandra indicating the security camera above the door.

After a few seconds they heard a series of clicks and clunks and the door was pulled open. A drift of warm air assaulted them through the opening and they were greeted by a rather small but very dynamic looking man. He was only about five foot six tall with a slight build and receding hairline but he had a presence, an aura that belied his small stature. He appeared to be dressed for summer in lightweight clothes, a bright blue Ralf Lauren Polo, open-necked, short sleeved shirt, beige chinos and comfortable looking loafers. What hair he had on his head was tightly cropped and his neatly manicured beard and moustache did little to camouflage his strong prominent chin. His bright green eyes had an unbelievable depth and intensity, giving the impression of being able to penetrate any covering and see you with x-ray vision. His real presence came from his confident air. Whether because of his wealth, his power or his experience, his persona gave him the ability to dominate his environment. They displayed their identification and he showed them into the house, crossing the hallway where they practically had to wade through the deep pile, wool carpet. After braving the cold outside, the very warm, temperature controlled hallway felt oppressive, and Sandra and Donny both quickly shed their outer garments and carried them over their arms.

The walls were very smooth and golden in colour giving the appearance of being painted with gold leaf and they were further adorned by classically styled paintings in expensive frames. Sandra was disappointed not to have been accompanied by Alex as she was confident he would have recognised and been able to give her commentary on the artists. They passed a huge glass display cabinet which held a large number of ivory carvings. Seeing her gazing through the glass, Ballantyne advised her that his wife collected a range of oriental works, antiques and antiquities and what they were looking at was her collection of netsukes and okimonos. The terminology meant nothing to her but she took careful note to check on what he had said and wondered at the coincidence of Ballantyne's wife collecting antiques, with a special interest in ivory, given

Stevenson's profession and the way he had been killed. They walked past other display cases which held ancient looking pottery and figures. There were several standing figures of people or horses and a large cocoon-shaped jar. Some of the figures were terracotta coloured while others were painted and the jar was grey with some faded painted symbols on the outside. Sandra gazed through the glass, enthralled. She remembered seeing similar items when she had visited the Burrell Galleries at Pollock Park. Ballantyne explained they were Chinese and of different ages, the large jar dated back to 200 BC and the Han dynasty, the figures were less than half as old being from the Tang and Ming dynasties.

“Are they real? Shouldn't they be in a museum?” Sandra enquired. “They must be worth a fortune. Aren't you concerned to keep such old and valuable items in your house?”

Ballantyne answered the questions in turn, “They are real and although valuable, not excessively so. Antiques of one or two hundred years of age are very often worth more than these ancient pieces. They are worth a few hundred or a few thousand pounds each. There are quite a lot of them around, although it's rare to find them in such good condition as in China sometimes they're searched for using an excavator. Very often museums show broken pieces because they don't think visitors would believe that the complete ones are real. Your reaction confirms the point.”

“A couple of years ago, I went on a tour of China and I visited the Great Wall and saw the terracotta warriors and some of these figures look like miniature versions.”

“You're right,” Ballantyne answered. “Many of these are funerary pieces...”

“Ahem!” McAvoy interrupted. “This is all very interesting but we have some urgent business to deal with which I think we need to attend to first.”

If looks could have killed then McAvoy's wife would have been immediately able to claim her widow's pension as Sandra glared at him while she struggled to contain her fury at his outburst. She knew he was right but felt quite affronted to be interrupted in this way and particularly by a subordinate officer. “I'd love to talk about this some more but my colleague is right and we'd better deal with business first.”

They walked further along the hallway and through to the back then out to a modern glass extension which was filled with exotic plants and classically styled, cane, conservatory furniture. He bade them to sit.

“Now what's this all about?” Ballantyne enquired once they had settled.

“We're investigating the death of Scott Stevenson,” Sandra replied. “We want you to tell us everything you know about him.”

“Scott Stevenson? I don't think I know that name.”

McAvoy showed him a photograph. "This man."

Ballantyne's face froze for a fraction of a second and then he blinked a couple of times and replied, "No, I don't think I've seen him before."

"Not the sort of face, you'd forget," McAvoy probed.

"No indeed. He looks a little bit familiar, but I can't place him. No, I'm sure I'd have remembered. I don't think I know him."

"Let's see if I can help," McAvoy tried again. "He's an antique dealer with a shop near the University, just off Great Western Road?"

"Ah, maybe that's it. Margaret, my wife takes me around all the antique shops, looking for her precious finds. I must have seen him in one of them."

McAvoy was really enjoying baiting the man. He couldn't hide his smile as he placed three more photographs in front of Ballantyne. "This might also help your memory. We believe Stevenson was responsible for these photographs and that he was using them to blackmail you." The photographs were very explicit and showed Ballantyne indulging in sexual activity with a young looking girl. In the first he was partially clothed, his trousers and underpants pulled down below his knees and the girl holding his erect penis in front of her open mouth. In the second and third pictures, Ballantyne and the girl were both completely naked and engaged in coitus, one was with Ballantyne on top of the girl and in the other she was sitting astride him. There could be no ambiguity about Ballantyne being the one photographed or about what was going on. It was the same girl in all three photos. She was pretty and looked to be aged about twenty with long dark hair and a very attractive figure.

Ballantyne looked at the photos for a few seconds and then looked down at the floor. His commanding presence betrayed him and for the first time he gave the impression of being small and frail, his shoulders slumped and turned in and his hands shook.

"It's not what you think," he said in little more than a whisper.

"It seldom is, or so we're told," McAvoy was clearly enjoying himself.

"No, you don't understand. I can't deny that's me, and yes, it was stupid but I was never blackmailed. I was approached but it never came to anything."

"Okay, I think you need to explain,"

"Right, I met the girl and spent the night with her. We had a good time together. It wasn't just sex. She's an intelligent girl and we enjoyed talking together. It was all consensual, nothing illegal. We were even talking about meeting up again and going to the theatre. Then your man Stevenson turned up. I didn't know his name. He came to my office and told my secretary he needed to see me. He claimed he had a special delivery package which was for addressee only. He came in and showed me the photos. He said he wanted money. I

refused. He said he'd go to the papers, the gutter press. I told him to do his worst. He said I was a public figure and he'd find someone to pay. He claimed he would damage my business and destroy my marriage unless I paid up so I'd better do what he said. I told him to 'sod off,' because he couldn't harm my business. I'm the majority shareholder so I couldn't be ousted and there was no basis for it anyway. The worst that could be claimed was that I cheated on my wife. I told him Margaret and I have an open marriage and he couldn't harm that. The only thing he could do was cause a bit of embarrassment and that didn't warrant me paying him a ransom. He said we'd see and then walked out, leaving me copies of the photos and said he'd contact me again later. That was four months ago and I never heard from him again."

"Why didn't you report this to the police?"

"I thought about it but what could you have done? I didn't have any evidence and, as I said, it could have been embarrassing if word got out. I wasn't completely bluffing but maybe I did overplay my hand a little. I didn't want everyone to know I'd been so stupid. I told Margaret what had happened, I had to warn her, in case there was a story in the newspapers, but he never did anything. She wasn't too happy as you can imagine, but life goes on and we're still together. Stevenson never came back, maybe he was saving it, wanting to make me sweat, to come back and try again later, but it never happened. What's going to happen now? Will it all become public?"

"We can't make any promises but we've no plans to say anything. Mind you, you did withhold evidence which you had a duty to tell us. If we'd known, we'd have been able to crack down on Stevenson and maybe have saved some other victims."

"So he's being doing this to others?"

"We can't comment on that. Now what can you tell us about the girl? What was her name? And how did you meet her?"

"Her name's Sophie. Sophie Baxter. She's twenty-one and in her honours year studying biochemistry. That's what she told me and it sounded credible. She knew what she was talking about when it came to Science."

"You still haven't told us how you met?"

"That's a little bit more embarrassing. I sometimes get a bit lonely. It sounds strange when I've been so successful and I'm wealthy but sometimes it's hard to find someone to talk to. I mean someone to have intelligent conversation with. Quite often I go on the net. I use it for business of course but sometimes I just use it for relaxation, just to talk to people on blogs or in chat-rooms, occasionally through the day, but more often in the middle of the night.

"Anyway, here's the sad part. I logged into a site called 'Alone in Glasgow.'

I'd been on it a few times but this time, a few months ago, I got speaking to someone who turned out to be Sophie. We got chatting and we just seemed to hit it off. She knew I was older right from the start, but she didn't care and I sure as hell wasn't complaining. She talked about often being attracted to older men, an Electra complex maybe? I suppose I thought it was more likely an attraction to my money and my power, it's happened before. And while I'm not proud of it, I suppose I find it quite flattering, a pretty young thing like her wanting to talk to me and even spend time with me. It was all on the internet and the relationship developed, if I can call it a relationship. The conversation started getting quite risqué and then we exchanged photos and even spoke to each other with webcams. It was like having an affair without ever meeting. Then we took the next step. We arranged to meet, just for a coffee, at the Costa in Sauchiehall Street. It was only for an hour or so but we got on like a house on fire. She leaned across the table and touched my hand. It was like an electric shock, I was like a teenager again. I was all pins and needles. She was wearing a light fruity perfume and she had the smell of fresh soap, I could almost taste it. I wanted to be with her. I wanted to have her. I needed it. She said she felt the same way. I suggested that I could get us a hotel room but she refused. She said it was too clichéd, too sordid. She said she had a friend with a flat and she'd arrange to borrow it and she'd get the keys. We arranged it for the following night. I was thrilled, like a schoolboy, as I said. We met at seven in the evening and she'd prepared us a light supper and we drank sparkling wine. You know the rest, you've seen the photos. We spent the night together and I left in the morning. We were meant to meet again the following week but it never happened. Instead I had the meeting with Stevenson.

“At first I was angry. I wondered what he'd done with Sophie but he just laughed at me and told me he wanted money to stay quiet. Then it made sense. I felt such a fool. I'd been set up. I'd been groomed into the relationship to set me up for blackmail. I was still angry, but more at myself for my stupidity and for letting myself fall into their trap. My own vanity lured me into it.” Tears of frustration were welling up in Ballantyne's eyes.

“When did all this happen?” Sandra asked.

“It was over the course of about three or four weeks and it ended about the end of May. I'm sure it was in early June Stevenson came to see me. I know it was just before I was due to present at a seminar in Southampton, because I was tempted to cancel, but in the end I didn't.”

“Where was the flat you met at?” McAvoy enquired.

“It was one of the new flats at the Glasgow Harbour development, just off South Street. I remember being quite impressed that Sophie was able to borrow

one of those flats for the night. Of course it makes more sense now.”

“Was this the address?” Sandra asked, handing Ballantyne a piece of paper showing the address of the flat which Stevenson owned.

“Yes, that's it, Sophie phoned me with the address and I went there and she buzzed me in. I went up in the lift and she was there waiting for me.”

“This flat was owned by Scott Stevenson.”

“That adds up now.”

“Mr Ballantyne, can you please tell us where you were between the hours of twelve and six pm on Thursday the third of November?”

“I was working from home. I have an office next door, I can show you. I'd been working on an NHS tender that was due in on Friday.”

“Have you anyone who can vouch for your whereabouts?”

“I'm not certain. I think Margaret was in part of the day and you can check that I submitted the tender on Friday.”

“Were you at home the whole time?” McAvoy probed.

“Nearly, I ran a couple of errands. I went to the post office at one point and in the late afternoon, I drove out to Edinburgh to hand-deliver the document before the deadline.”

“Is there anything else you might want to tell us?” Sandra enquired.

“No, I think that's it,” Ballantyne replied.

“Okay, Mr Ballantyne, thank you for all your assistance, you have been most helpful. We may need to come back to check out some more details but that will do us for now.”

A rather contrite Martyn Ballantyne walked Sandra and Donny to the front door and out to their car. “If this can be kept out of the public eye, I'd be most grateful. Although she already knows about it, I'd like to avoid Margaret suffering as a result of my indiscretions. I don't mind incurring the humiliation. Well, I do mind but I can stand it. I'd rather that she didn't have to.” He shook hands with them both and turned back into the house.

“Will I need my travel sick pills again or are you a bit more relaxed for the journey back?” Donny enquired as they turned back onto the road.

Sandra did not reply for a few seconds until she had manoeuvred the vehicle round the first bend of the driveway and then floored the brake pedal. “You impertinent bastard! I'll give you something more to worry about. Don't you ever speak to a superior officer the way you did to me back there in the house. Do you understand me? You may not be far off your retirement but any more of that and it could happen a lot sooner than you want and without your full pension. I was just putting Ballantyne at his ease, letting him talk casually about what interested him so he'd be more likely to open up when interviewed and you

bloody jump in with both feet.” Sandra was bluffing, she knew she'd been allowing her pre-interview chat to ramble because she was interested to find out more about the antiquities but she was furious at McAvoy's impudence. She was aware of his prejudices and knew he would never have acted that way with a male officer. She wanted to place a marker to ensure he knew it was unacceptable and so he didn't think he could get away with bullying her.

“Sorry, Sarg,” he muttered, not very convincingly.

“We've got enough to contend with without you being unhelpful. Now let's think about work.” Sandra started to summarise, “We know a lot more now. We know how Stevenson worked his little operation. Next, we want access to the flat to see what we can find, and we want to get more information on that website and see how he's done it. There was nothing found on Stevenson's computers so he must have been using another one or getting Gordon Black to do it for him. That's quite likely as it was Black's specialism.”

“I'm not so sure Ballantyne is completely in the clear either,” Donny interrupted. “Too much of a coincidence his wife collects antiques, and ivory in particular, and then Stevenson happens to pick on him as a victim. Maybe they had a run in at some time and Stevenson targeted Ballantyne to get revenge. Maybe Ballantyne didn't like that and did away with him. Ballantyne is a scientist. He knows all about forensics, he'd have known how to cover up so as not to leave evidence.”

“Your imagination's having a bit of a stretch there, isn't it? You're right, to keep an open mind, but really? Sure he had motive, he doesn't have an alibi so there could be opportunity, but look at the actual killing. Ballantyne is a puny little rat, his feet certainly wouldn't be a size eleven and he could never have wielded the tusk with the power that was used. God, I'm stronger than him.”

“You're stronger and more scary than half the men I know,” Donny replied with a bit of a sneer.

The words could have been accepted as a compliment but Sandra knew they weren't intended to be taken in that way. She had an uncomfortable working relationship with McAvoy. She knew he was narrow and still lived in a past when coppers were nearly all men and the few women making up numbers were never taken seriously. His chauvinism was reluctant to accept women working in any responsible positions. Having to work with women was bad enough, but following Sandra's promotion, he often had to work for her and the atmosphere could be uncomfortable.

She knew better than to let him get away with his jibes and quietly responded to his quip, “You'd better believe it.”

Much of the remainder of the afternoon was a frustrating waste of time as

they tried to find people who could give them access to the records of the University and the halls of residence, hoping to track down photos of Gordon Black. Being Sunday, no one they needed was at their offices and they had no luck tracking them down at home. They tried on the off chance of finding him at the Otago Street address, but they were no more fortunate there. They spent some time writing up their files and following a sequence of dead-end leads. Before he could leave for the night, Sandra gave Donny the task of sending an email to Alex to bring him up to date. Then she herself left to meet up with Sanjay.

Although Sanjay Guptar was about the same age as Sandra, he joined the police force two years later, having first worked in his family's restaurant business, before convincing his father that his aptitudes would be better served elsewhere. He was clever and resourceful, and with his experience through his family's business, he had sound commercial understanding. Although marginally taller than Sandra, no one would have guessed as her wedge heels made up the difference. Besides, he always carried his shoulders in a slight slouch, his arms bent inwards and his head low and looking down. He had a pleasant round face with dark brown, smiling eyes hidden behind thick-framed spectacles and he had short cropped jet black hair.

Sandra's arrangement was to meet Shirley McCann at six o'clock at her flat in the Collegelands building. It was situated on Bell Street, a period listed property, converted from a warehouse at an early stage of the city's regeneration. In preparation for the interview, Sandra met Sanjay at Glasgow Cross fifteen minutes before the appointment with the councillor. From where they were standing, they could see the last of the Sunday shoppers wandering along Trongate, making their way out of town or returning along Gallowgate from the Barras market. Although dark and cold, they found a bench to sit on in the small grassy square just across High Street from the clock tower, so Sandra could bring Sanjay up to date on the investigation before the interview was due to start.

They walked around the corner and keyed in her door number on the security entry intercom. McCann buzzed them in and told them to make their way to the second floor. She came out to the stairway to meet them and after checking their IDs, they shook hands. Shirley McCann was attractive, confident and welcoming. She was of medium height and had a slim figure, with blonde shoulder length hair. She had piercing, sapphire-blue eyes that seemed never to blink and the steady, unemotional stare associated with poker players, ideal for a career in politics. She led them along a broad corridor which had very high ceilings, past an internal security door, and into her flat. Once inside they walked through a small hallway and into a spacious lounge. The room felt warm and

comfortable, and all the more so after the cold and damp from sitting outside. A thick, Persian carpet partly covered a polished oak floor and the walls were adorned with rich, flock wallpaper interrupted by a series of framed photographs showing McCann in the company of senior politicians or celebrities. A deep window ledge held a number of small, silver-framed photographs, one showing her wedding and others accompanied by the same man and with young children. Two large couches, positioned in an 'L' shape took up most of the bottom half of the room, with a low level coffee table completing a square.

“Take a seat and tell me what this is all about. You were very secretive on the phone. The only thing you said was that it was urgent you spoke to me soon and that it was a very private matter.”

They sat and Sanjay lifted a notebook and pen from his pocket.

“That's right,” Sandra replied. “Are we alone?”

“Yes, my husband is with some friends and I don't expect him home until late and the children are having a sleepover at my sister's house.”

Sanjay held a small portable recording device. “We'd like to tape this conversation for our records”

“Is that really necessary?”

“We're investigating the murder of Scott Stevenson and it would be better if we can have a complete record of this conversation,” Sandra began.

“The name doesn't mean anything to me, should it?” McCann replied abruptly.

“Maybe this picture will help,” Sandra continued. “We're fairly certain that you know this man.”

As McCann picked up the photo, her hands began to tremble and the colour drained from her face. “He's dead, you say?”

“He was murdered in his shop on Thursday. Didn't you see it on the news?”

“I've not had time to watch any television recently. No, I didn't know.” Tears were welling in her eyes and Sandra suspected it wasn't out of sympathy for the bereaved.

“Please tell us how you came to know him?” Sandra asked.

“How much do you know?”

“I think we've pieced most of it together, but if you don't mind we will ask the questions. Start from the beginning and don't leave anything out. You should know that we have the photographs so there's no point trying to hold anything back.”

“Oh my God,” was all McCann could reply and the tears now rolled down her cheeks. She placed Stevenson's photo on the table and clenched her hands together sitting upright and tried to compose herself. With a final flurry of

determination she blurted out, “Why should I tell you anything? Particularly if you think you already know it all? I don't need to talk to you at all without a solicitor.”

“You're right of course, you don't need to talk to us now, but do you really think that will help? We know you're qualified as a lawyer yourself and you are entitled to wait so you can have your solicitor present. But we can insist on interviewing you at the station, and that could end up a lot more public. We think it would be much simpler and quicker if we could talk now. We know Stevenson was behind a blackmail ring and we believe you may have been a victim. Our main objective, at the moment, is to tie up the loose ends and to solve the murder.”

There was silence for a few seconds which was only interrupted by McCann's deep intakes of breath as she considered her options. “Okay, I'll tell you what I know,” she whispered.

McCann started a monologue which required very little help or encouragement to extract the information they needed. She started very quietly and slowly, speaking only a few words at a time before pausing. But gradually she regained her strength and was able to tell her story.

Shirley met her husband, John, while they were both at university. Both of them were law students and both had a passion for politics as well as for each other. He was a sports star and represented the university, both for swimming and middle distance running, reaching national competitive level. She was the star of the debating society. They were a golden couple and they were both active members of the university's Labour Party society. They graduated with honours, Shirley achieving a double first while John scraped through with a pass.

After graduating, they married while undertaking their legal training. Shirley was given a place in a prestigious commercial practice and John in a small firm specialising in conveyancing. In addition to keeping house and progressing at work, she gave birth to two daughters within the first three years of their marriage.

Her interest in politics and debating continued and Shirley was highly rated in the local Labour party where she was given a safe Council seat to contend and quickly became a highly influential and respected member on the Glasgow City Council, with many predicting bigger and better opportunities. Sadly, John's sporting career was brought to a premature end as a result of a hamstring injury.

At first John enjoyed his role at Shirley's side as she became more popular and successful, but gradually he became disenchanted and resentful and he sought solace in alcohol, sometimes at functions where he was accompanying her. Their relationship became increasingly strained, but they were still just

about hanging on, partly because of the threat that a divorce might stifle her political ambitions but also as a result of Shirley's strict Catholic upbringing where a divorce could not be contemplated. In spite of all her political success, and arguably because of it, Shirley had become very lonely, as well as being sexually frustrated. Innocently seeking company, she had come across the website and she'd been drawn in. As the grooming progressed, the attraction of sexual encounters in private and with no commitment proved too much of a lure for her. She had gone to the Glasgow Harbour flat on three separate occasions before being confronted by Stevenson and she'd been devastated by his demands. This was worsened as she had no one in whom she could confide. She daren't tell anyone within the Party and she'd long ago lost the ability to take comfort from her religion. In addition, she'd not wanted to confess her infidelity to John as he could no longer be trusted or relied on to stay silent once he'd had a drink.

Sandra was particularly sympathetic realising there were some parallels with her own failed relationship and she was grateful that she'd had the strength to end hers when she did. Sandra felt that she would never have allowed herself to be caught up in the way Shirley had, but also recognised her circumstances were different and she couldn't really judge how she might have reacted in the same position.

Shirley had a sound alibi for the time when Stevenson was killed as she'd been in session in the Council with countless witnesses

Chapter 10

Music was playing very loudly and he had the feeling of being at the centre of a hive with countless people swarming around him like bees, no, less benign, more like demented wasps. Then Alex was standing in the open air and the sun was shining brightly, the aroma of diesel and hot burning sugar in the air. The noise still continued and intensified as the music was accompanied by screeches and loud bangs. He held his hands over his ears to try to block out the cacophony of sound. It was so loud and so bright and everywhere there was movement, it was difficult to focus. Gradually there was more clarity. Small car-like vehicles were moving in front of him in a very erratic way. They were open-topped and held only one or two people in each one. With further clarity, Alex realised he was standing at an open-air fun fair watching the dodgems. There, in front of him were Craig and Andrew being chased and bashed by a car driven by two pretty young girls. They might have been the ones from the swimming pool. They reached a corner and the cars turned and now it was Craig chasing the girls and Andrew had disappeared. Another car came into view and Helen was driving with Andrew beside her. How did he manage to change cars? Helen was chasing Craig and shouting when suddenly she flew sideways as the car was struck broadside at full force by Sandra's Ford Mondeo. There was a sudden splash of blood and away in the distance Alex could see Stevenson standing, a large bloody patch on his chest. A loud ringing replaced the music and the vehicles all slowed down. It must be the end of their turn. All the other noises faded away leaving only the loud ringing. The fairground faded away as well. Still not fully awake, Alex reached out for the telephone.

Alex thought he must still be dreaming as the voice from the other side of the phone reported in a broad Scottish accent, "There's been a murder," as if play acting a scene from *Taggart*. As his eyes caught a glimpse of his bedside radio alarm, he interpreted the numbers to read five forty-five in the morning.

"Is this some sort of joke?" Alex enquired, now awakened and his mind becoming sharper by the second.

"This is Strathclyde Police control centre. I'd like to speak to DCI Warren?"

"This is Warren. What's this all about?"

"I'm sorry, sir, and sorry to call you at this hour. I've been asked to phone and tell you that two bodies have been found in a tenement flat at the West End.

There are circumstances which indicate they've been murdered.”

“Did you really start off this call saying 'There's been a murder'?”

“Yes, sir. I'm really sorry, sir. I shouldn't have done that. I'm a civilian admin assistant and I've been drafted into the control centre on a temporary basis to help out as they're short staffed. I've always wanted to be able to say that, and when I got the chance of it happening for real, I couldn't help myself. It was really stupid, but I was just doing it for a laugh.”

“The first thing you have to learn is that murder is no laughing matter, and unless you can understand that then your job will be very temporary.” By now Alex was struggling to keep a straight face.

“Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again.”

“I won't report you on this occasion but you'd better watch your step. Now you'd better give me all the information you have on this incident.”

“The original report came from a top floor flat in White Street, just off Byres Road. The call came from a Mr Singh regarding his neighbour a Mr Kerr, David Kerr. Kerr was working a night shift and finished at five. When he arrived home he found his wife lying dead in the entranceway of his front door. He didn't go in fortunately, but he just broke down wailing and cradling his wife's body. The neighbours woke up wondering what was going on and they found him like that. They phoned into emergency services and persuaded Mr Kerr to come into their house to comfort him. We sent a squad car out and they found the wife as described but also found his son dead in the bedroom. Sergeant Guptar was on duty and went straight out there and asked me to call you.”

“Okay fine, give me the address and then call Guptar and tell him I'm on my way. Another thing, wait until seven-thirty and then call Sergeant McKinnon and inform her where I am and that I won't be able to see her as arranged. Another thing, ask her to arrange for someone else to see to the bank.”

Alex quickly shaved and showered before leaving the flat. He was surprised, even at this early hour, to find a moderate flow of traffic heading towards the city, but was nevertheless outside the crime scene within fifteen minutes. It took him almost as long to find a parking space. Much of the housing in this area had been built in Victorian times with narrow and twisting roadways and no anticipation of the parking requirements of the twenty-first century. After circling the block twice, he eventually chose to leave his car parked on a double yellow line on Byres Road and then walk back. As he approached the building, he could see it was similar in construction to his own flat. It was one of the traditional terraces of flats, so common in Glasgow, built over a century ago using thick blocks of red sandstone which had been locally quarried. In nearly all of the flats in this terrace, the large sash windows had been replaced by modern

and energy efficient uPVC double glazed units. There was a solid timber entry door and a security entry keypad to the side. The system had been deactivated as the door had been left propped open.

Guptar met him as he started walking up the stairs towards the entrance then led him out to the privacy of the back court to brief him.

“Hi, Alex, I don't see you out at this time very often. I hope you didn't mind me calling you, but I thought you'd want to see this one while it was still fresh.”

“That's okay, Sanjay, you did the right thing. Now fill me in.”

“It happened in flat 3/2, up at the top. It's a big flat, three bedrooms, lounge and dining kitchen, owned by the Kerr family. They've stayed here for about ten years, I believe.

“Mr Kerr came home from his nightshift and found his wife, Agnes, lying half way through the doorway. She's been stabbed through the heart and must have died almost immediately. Inside, nothing much looks disturbed until you get to the second bedroom. That's a bloody mess, quite literally. The room's been turned over and the son's body is lying face down on the bed. His name was David, same as his father. He's had his throat cut and must have bled to death. Everything's covered. Not only that, but the body's been mutilated. There's an instrument, looks like a pallet knife and it's been driven up his bum.”

“What, you mean it's been a sexual assault?”

“I didn't say that. We don't know yet what actually happened. We'll need to see what the scene of crime boys have to say, but the indications are that it was done after he was killed, to leave some sort of message so to speak. The lad was fully clothed but his trousers were slashed and the knife has been forced in him through his anus.”

“Sounds a strange sort of weapon, not very sharp.”

“The boy was a student at the art school so there are a lot of canvasses and paint brushes and the likes all around the room. I guess it was just convenient.”

“Christ that's all we need, a ritualistic killer. That'll bring the press out in force if they get wind of it.”

“So far, no one knows, just our people and they know better than to say anything. Obviously the M.E. will find out but the same rule applies. The father and the neighbours never saw the body as far as we can tell. The father wanted to come in when he heard, but he was already in shock and we arranged for his GP to come round and sedate him. He's still in with the neighbour. I had a word with him before, but you'll not get any sense from him for the time being.”

“Was there any sign that either of the bodies were interfered with?”

“Other than what I already told you, no. Kerr had cradled his wife's body and was covered in her blood but she seemed to be untouched in any other way,

all her clothes were intact. The boy was in a worse state, but as far as we could tell, nobody else had been in the room. Steve Vickers, the lad from the squad car, told me he opened the door, realised what was there and closed it again and radioed in. He's a bright lad that one. There are some bloody footprints on the floor of the bedroom, a line of them coming out the door but nothing beyond so he must have taken his shoes off."

"If so, we're unlikely to find any prints but might pick up some other trace evidence."

"We hope so."

"Scene of crime are in there now. I've got protective gear you can put on if you want a look round."

"It's not what I want but I'd better have a look. What about the neighbours? Have you checked out the close?"

"We've been to every door. Woken up the whole close, so we weren't too popular. Nobody saw or heard a thing."

Halfway up the stairs, Sanjay and Alex caught up with the wheezing, elderly figure of Dr Duffie, struggling to make it up the three flights.

"Can I get you a drink of water, Doctor?"

"That would be most kind but I'd better wait until I reach the top first."

Alex let Duffie go ahead before he had a careful look over the crime scene. A partially glass panelled door gave access to the flat and opened onto a square hallway with doors off to each of the other rooms. Alex could see the blood stains on the floor just as he crossed the threshold. Inside in the hallway, Dr Duffie was examining the body of Agnes Kerr. Alex moved on quickly so as not to be in the way. The flat looked comfortable and lived in without showing any signs of opulence. The floors were nearly all covered in cheap click-style laminate boards designed to give the impression of solid oak timber. The walls were painted magnolia in colour with their plainness interrupted at regular intervals by family photographs. If Alex correctly interpreted them, David was the youngest of three siblings and the two older sisters were each married with their own young children. Someone would need to inform them. The rooms all had high ceilings and big windows, the lounge and master bedroom each having large bays. The furnishings showed signs of wear and looked modern but inexpensive, Scandinavian in style, quite possibly from IKEA. The lounge had a deep cushioned couch with two matching armchairs and a large coffee table. Sitting on a unit, there was a large Sony flat screen television which looked about ten years old, the old generation of heavy televisions with deep tubes from before LCD and Plasma screens took over the market. There was a freeview box and DVD player in the unit and a number of DVD cases. Alex smiled ironically

at the sight of a line of cases showing they contained a series of *Taggart* episodes. Walking on, the kitchen was furnished with white melamine-covered wall and base units interspersed with a cooker, fridge freezer and washing machine. In the centre, there was a large pine table with six chairs and a cherry red Roman blind, still closed, covered the window. The master bedroom was cavernous in size and was the only room with carpeting on the floor. A double bed sat against the wall facing the windows with a pine coloured bedside cabinet on either side. Two tall, matching, four-door wardrobes sat on each of the side walls and there was also a matching five-level chest of drawers. A door on one side wall opened onto a deep walk-in cupboard. The second bedroom was a hive of activity and Alex by-passed it temporarily to check out the third bedroom and bathroom. Nothing there seemed untoward. He returned to the doorway of the second bedroom and looked in. Scene of crime officers were scurrying about, collecting samples and taking measurements. From what Alex could see, the room had been trashed, not dissimilarly to Stevenson's house. The bed was intact other than a long slash mark down the mattress enabling a lot of the foam filling to ooze out. The base of the divan had been similarly slashed. On top of the bed lay the prostrate figure of a young man, face down, arms by his side. His head was turned to the side allowing Alex to see the end of what must have been a deep gash to his neck. All the bedding below him from half way up his chest to the top of the bed was saturated in blood with pools of it lying in places. The colours varied from a bright red in places through a deeper red to black where it had coagulated. The headboard and wall behind it were also liberally splattered. Once again he was overcome by the smell of blood and he had to fight back a growing nausea. Looking at Kerr from behind, other than what had seeped up from the bedclothes, his clothes seemed strangely unaffected with the exception of the rip in his trousers. There was a tear along the seam with some blood at the edges of the ragged material and the protrusion of the handle from a pallet knife rising from his anus like a flagpole. There seemed to be little blood from the wound and the staining at the edge of the adjacent fabric suggested the tear had been made by an already bloodied knife. Alex wanted to hear from the technicians to be more certain but his first impression was that the victim was slashed across his neck, probably severing a carotid artery. He would have fallen forward across the bed and bled out. The mutilation to his rear would have been carried out as he was dying or shortly thereafter and the body was otherwise undisturbed as there wasn't much blood spillage anywhere else in the room. The rest of the room was a shambles with drawers turned out and shelves cleared. An assemblage of clothes, books, CD and DVD cases were intermingled with paints, tubes of oils and pastels, Daler boards, canvasses and frames, some painted but

mostly blank. Sitting half under the bed were the broken remains of a laptop computer. Alex recognised the symbol and realised it was a MacBook Pro with a broken screen and the back cover torn away. Next to the computer was an open shoe box containing a wad of twenty pound notes held together by a rubber band. Judging by the thickness, there must have been over a thousand pounds cash sitting there so it was clear the killer wasn't interested in money.

“Feeling of déjà vu?”

Alex turned to see Connor standing behind him, taking in the same scene. “Not quite the same, is it? But some clear similarities.”

“We're recording and testing everything, as you'd expect, but I'm certain it's the same perp as Stevenson's. The way the place has been methodically trashed and in particular the computer, first removing its storage and then breaking it and going through the DVD's and books as if looking for something. I could see from your look, you thought so too.”

Eyes remaining focussed on the scene, Alex slowly nodded.

“Something else that's worrying,” Connor added. “The killer seems to have developed a real taste for blood. We thought at the shop he must have been covered, but that seemed to have been a spur of the moment crime. I'm afraid it's given him a buzz. It's clear with this one that he's not cared about splashing blood about and probably getting covered in it. When he slashed the carotid, it must have sprayed everywhere before he collapsed and the perp would have been standing in front of him. You see the splashes all across the wall,” Connor said pointing. “You can see a blank shape behind where the murderer must have been standing that's been unmarked. If you want my first impression, he slashed Kerr then started ransacking the room, sticking the knife up his arse at some point. I think the mother must have been out for the evening and he was disturbed when he heard her at the door. He's then gone to exit, stabbed her as she's come through the door and made his escape.”

“So he's used a different weapon for both killings?”

“Not necessarily. I think he's had his own blade with him and used it on Kerr. After that he's found and used the pallet knife. I can tell you it wasn't the pallet knife used on his throat. He didn't use the pallet knife on his trousers either. You can see the blood stains on the fabric. They've been from the same blade he used to slash him. So you see he's still had that knife to use on the mother. The murder weapon looks to have been a short sharp blade with no serrations.”

“Thanks, I'll leave you to it now.” Alex stepped back out of the flat, looked at his watch, lifted his mobile and called Sandra, just minutes after she'd received the call from the control room. “You'd better get yourself across here

right away.”

“Good morning to you too, Boss. Thanks for the wake-up call. Nice to see you're back in the driving seat and raring to go.”

“Less of your cheek,” Alex laughed. “I don't know if you've been given the details but we've got a double murder here. The victims are a student by the name of David Kerr and his mother Agnes. All the signs show it's the same killer who did for Stevenson.

“I saw your email last night and my guess is the killer's been trapped the same way Ballantyne was. He's been groomed on a website and had a homosexual relationship with Kerr. Stevenson's had the pictures and used them to blackmail him. The killer has snapped and murdered Stevenson. He's then ransacked Stevenson's house to get any copies of the photos. Now he's come after Kerr and ransacked his room in a similar way. The mother's death was collateral damage. It looks as though he could be out to kill anyone else involved so we need to get to them before he does. Black sounds a prime target.”

“I'm wide awake now and on my way over to you.”

Alex found Guptar and filled him in on everything he knew about the Stevenson investigation. “I want you and McKinnon to work this one between you. I want full cooperation. Now let's go next door and see what else we can find out.”

Alex rapped on the door and Guptar introduced him to the neighbour. Mr Singh was a tall powerful looking man, aged in his late forties. He had broad shoulders and muscular arms but there were signs of a paunch developing where middle aged spread had not been completely avoided. His six feet of height was further exaggerated by a pure white turban. He wore loose fitting white trousers and tunic and he had a heavy silver bangle round one of his wrists. He looked quite distressed, his eyes were downcast and his face was like parchment, almost matching the shade of the turban. He invited them both into his home. Compared with the Kerrs' property, this flat was lavishly furnished and the decoration looked fresh and expensive. The floors were all covered in deep pile carpets.

Mr Singh explained that a doctor had been out and tranquilised Mr Kerr who was now sleeping in his guest room. Guptar thanked him, advising that Kerr's daughter, who lived in Motherwell, had been informed and his son-in-law was on his way over to collect him.

Singh showed them into his lounge and indicated for them to sit on a comfortable moquette covered sofa. Singh sat opposite them in one of the armchairs. The sound was muted but BBC news channel was shining out from a large plasma screen television which was attached to the wall and an oak unit was below housing a Sky decoder and recorder and a Blu-ray player. Matching

bookcases sat to the side, filled with movie boxes.

As soon as they entered the room, Mrs Singh busied herself and left for the kitchen saying she would return shortly with tea. Guptar lifted out a notebook and pen leaving Alex free to ask the questions.

“How long have you known the Kerr family?” Alex enquired.

“We moved in about five years ago and they were already living there.”

“What were they like as neighbours?”

“They were alright. They kept very much to themselves so we didn't really talk very much. We exchanged hellos when we passed in the close. Mrs Kerr was always quite chatty but her husband was quite dour. They have two daughters, Margaret lives down in Luton with her husband and kids and we only ever saw her when she came up to visit at Christmas. The younger one lived here when we first arrived but she got married and moved out to Motherwell a couple of years ago. That'll be the one whose husband is coming. Young David seemed a nice lad, he was very studious and a great artist, we heard. His mother was so proud when he was accepted at Art School. The only problem we had was he loved to play his music and his videos really loud and often late at night, especially when his father wasn't at home. It wouldn't have mattered so much but we run the newsagent shop round the corner and we have to be up really early every morning, seven days a week. My son Vikram has gone to open up this morning. We'd asked a number of times for him to keep it down. He always said he would but it never made any difference.”

“Were you aware of him having any close friends? Boys or girls?”

“Nothing I'm aware of.” Mrs Singh arrived back into the room carrying a silver tea service and a fine bone china tea set. “I was just saying that we weren't aware of young David having any close friends that he brought to the house.”

“No, you're right, I can't think of ever seeing him bringing anyone home. I could hear all you'd said from next door and you're quite right.” Mrs Singh poured the tea and passed cups and saucers to Sanjay and Alex.

Alex handled the crockery tentatively, terrified of crushing the fine porcelain in his meaty hands. He'd have felt far more comfortable with a chunky mug.

“Now if I can ask you about last night, did you see or hear anything unusual?”

“Now you come to mention it, there was some shouting just before midnight. I remember I was thinking about knocking on the door thinking it was David and his videos again. Maybe that's when the trouble started. If only I had gone out to complain, maybe it wouldn't have happened.”

“I wouldn't think like that Mr Singh. If you had gone out maybe you could have ended up injured yourself.”

“What happened next?”

“Nothing really, after a couple of minutes it all went quiet again. I went to sleep and the next I knew was when we heard Mr Kerr crying out. I didn't know what it was. I said to Padma to stay put and I threw on a gown and went to see. He was crouched in the doorway crying and holding his wife's head to his chest. Her chest was all red and there was a lot of blood in the doorway. I wanted to help but there was nothing I could do. I went in and phoned for an ambulance and for the police and then I waited with him until your people arrived. He was very shocked. We were all very shocked. Then the police car came and then the ambulance. We brought him in here waiting for a doctor to arrive. I heard the other policeman tell him his son was dead too. He fought to get back into the flat but the policeman wouldn't let him. Then the doctor came and gave him an injection.”

“And everything's been quiet since then?”

“Yes, Sergeant Guptar spoke to us earlier on and there's been constant noise from people up and down the stairs, but I suppose that's only to be expected.”

“Thank you for all your help and your hospitality. Here's my card if you think of anything else.” Alex stood up followed by Guptar and Mr Singh showed them to the door.

Once outside, Alex looked back into the Kerr residence. He saw Sandra McKinnon surveying the scene. Her jaw was set firm and she was staring in front of her, concentrating with a great intensity. She had the same steely, determined look as when Alex had seen her in his dream, crashing her car into Helen's dodgem car.

Alex gave his head a shake to dislodge the image. He looked again and was impressed that even at this time of the morning and in these horrendous circumstances she was able to look attractive and appealing. He called across to her before discussing their immediate plans with her and Sanjay.

They agreed that Sanjay would stay on site while the technicians finished off. He had been working the night shift and was already over his scheduled hours but would continue as long as required. Alex and Sandra would return to the office to organise investigation squads and integrate these enquiries with their ongoing ones into the Stevenson murder.

Chapter 11

Back at the station, officers were delegated for the routine enquiries and to man another incident caravan, then Alex, Sandra and Donny sat down to prioritise their next steps.

“First we need to track down Black. Where have you got to?” Alex asked Donny.

“It's moving forward, we now have recent photos from the University and local officers are set to interview his family in Inverness. We've confirmed the Otago Street address but he moved out more than three months ago. Apparently, he was in the money and moved out into his own place in Shakespeare Street in Maryhill.”

“That's North Kelvinside, not Maryhill,” Sandra interrupted.

“Don't be picky, what's the difference?” Donny replied, sulkily.

“The difference is only about twenty grand on the value of a property, that's all,” Sandra quipped.

“Now, now, children, don't bicker,” Alex cut in.

“Right, now here's the interesting bit. After I'd heard he'd moved, I phoned round various rental agencies to see if they'd housed him and eventually I found the right one. Prolets rented him the flat in Shakespeare Street, but wait for it, I wasn't the first enquiry. On Saturday they'd had a call from someone claiming to be his father, saying that his son had moved and he'd lost the address and asking for the information. Later I checked and a couple of the other agencies had the same enquiry but Prolets was the one who'd actually rented to him. Fortunately, they'd had the presence of mind to be suspicious. I think they were worried about data protection. Anyway they said leave a phone number and they'd check if it was okay and get back to him, but he just hung up.”

“That's what I was worried about. Black's the next target. We need to find him before the murderer does.”

“I've explained the urgency and I've arranged to meet the agent out at the flat. He'll give me access if Black isn't home and I don't expect he will be. I've just to give him a call when I'm ready to go. Do either of you want to come with?”

“No, I'll leave it to you, but take Phil Morrison with you. Sandra and I have an appointment with a judge. Phil's back from holiday today and should be

raring to go. Two weeks in Florida, if he's anything like the last time he was away he'll be tanned darker than Sanjay. What we need to consider now is whether to go public with Black's photo, see if we can't flush him out. I reckon he'll be on the run and he'll be shit scared. Everything indicates that he was involved in the blackmail scam. He'll have masterminded the IT side. He'll have dealt with the website, probably set up the internet grooming and, most likely, he'll have been behind the photography. There's no way he'll turn himself in, no matter how scared he is. If he suspected the killer might come after him when Stevenson got done, he'll be bloody sure of it when he hears about Kerr. He'll be running scared. He's going to be keeping a low profile so the killer doesn't find him, so he can't lay much lower. I don't see a downside to putting his picture out to help us find him. What do you think?"

"Fair point, just so long as we don't do the murderer's work for him and put Black out in the open," Sandra replied.

"It's a risk we take, but we need to try to find him soon. We want to put out his photo saying he is not a suspect for the murder, but we believe he has information we need to help us, blah blah," Donny suggested.

"That's settled," Alex said.

"Okay, what's set up for McSweeney?"

"The Sheriff knows we're coming out to see him at eleven, he doesn't know what it's about as I've only said we need to discuss the admissibility of some evidence. He probably wonders why it's us and not the fiscal he's seeing, but it's not that unusual. He's not due in court at all today so we're lucky there," Sandra replied.

"Okay, there's no telling how long this will take and Sandra and I will be tied up on it," he continued, looking at Donny. "So after you finish with the flat, I want you and Phil to check out the safe deposit box at the bank and see what you can find. I take it that you've already got the warrant?"

An hour later, Sandra and Alex had to brave driving rain to enter the court building and it was a further fifteen minutes before they were shown in to Sheriff McSweeney's chambers, switching their phones to silent as they went. At least they were able to dry off a little during their wait.

Dispensing with any pleasantries, McSweeney nodded in the direction of the chairs at the front of his desk and continued reading his papers. He was an insignificant looking man, at the upper end of middle age, small in stature with a rotund belly. His round face had the sort of rosy complexion which suggested an overindulgence in red wine. He wore rimless spectacles perched halfway down his nose. The crown of his head was bald but he had long straggles of greyish brown hair at the side which were vainly, carefully combed over the top in a

futile attempt to give a different impression. He wore a plain, grey suit which struggled to contain him as it had been purchased a couple of years earlier when he'd been a couple of stones lighter and a couple of sizes smaller. His shirt followed the same theme, the Tommy designer logo doing nothing to compensate for the straining buttons across his midriff. His collar was undone and was held loosely closed by a striped silk tie which carried some evidence of the soft boiled egg he'd had for breakfast.

Sandra could visually measure Alex's blood pressure rising as seconds and then minutes ticked by and his face became more flushed by anger. McSweeney glanced up occasionally, looking over the top of his glasses, clearly enjoying this petty demonstration of power.

Before seven minutes had passed, Alex had had enough. He stood and opened his briefcase. "I'd like you to look at this evidence."

McSweeney waved him away. "You've asked to see me at short notice. You can just wait until I'm ready. I'm doing you a favour seeing you at all."

Alex was unperturbed and continued lifting out a batch of photographs. "I think you'll find that it's us doing you the favour. We're giving you the first opportunity to see these and not going straight to the Lord President." Alex proceeded to lay out the first few of a series of photos on the Sheriff's desk showing McSweeney 'in flagrante.'

McSweeney jumped to his feet. "Who do you think you are? Don't you know who I am? You have no right to do this. I've a good mind to have you arrested. I'm taking these from you," he spluttered.

"Don't be so bloody naïve, man!" Alex's patience was wearing thin.

McSweeney sank back into his chair and covered his face with his hands, all his confidence and arrogance had dissolved. "What am I going to do?"

"First of all, you're going to tell us everything you know about this."

"But you can't let this information get out. I'll be a laughing stock."

"I think that's the last thing you need to worry about. Now let's get started. How did you meet this girl?" Alex was pointing to the naked young lady in the first photograph.

McSweeney sat for some time, his whole body was trembling and he was trying to compose his thoughts.

"I can't remember exactly. I was on the internet and went into a chat-room I think."

"Can you remember the website?"

"I don't know, I think it was 'Lonely in Glasgow' or 'Alone in Glasgow,' something like that."

"What happened then?"

“We just talked to each other. I really enjoyed it. She was so easy to talk to. Her name was Cynthia, or so she said. She told me she was a law student and liked talking to me because I was so important.” McSweeney paused again before continuing.

“Sometimes she used a webcam and showed me what she was studying. One time it was late at night and she was wearing a skimpy nightie. She looked so beautiful and I told her so. To my amazement, in response, she stood up and lifted the nightie over her head and posed there, stark naked in front of the camera for a few seconds, then put it back on again. I told her how much I'd enjoyed seeing her, and she asked if I'd like to see her for real. I so wanted it to happen. She said she could arrange for us to meet at a friend's flat. We'd be able to have it all to ourselves. I told her that would be amazing. She contacted me to tell me it was all set up and I was to go to Glasgow Harbour the following night. I couldn't wait. I was meant to be playing in a bridge tournament but I cancelled and met her instead. I took a bottle of wine. She'd told me she liked red wine. I took a good bottle, a St Emilion Grand Cru, I wanted to impress her. We met and we enjoyed each other's company. We enjoyed the wine. I'm not going into any details, you've got the photographs and that was all there was to it.”

“From what we've seen in the photographs, you've been a bit adventurous but there was nothing illegal. The girl's young but above the age of consent and what consenting adults do is not a matter for the law.”

“Yes, I know. I do know the law. I don't need you to lecture me. I enjoyed that night but I just didn't want anyone to know. I have a good marriage and I didn't want to lose it. I don't want to lose it! But Cynthia did things and let me do things that I couldn't have at home.”

Alex let the words hang in the air. The pictures had graphically depicted anal penetration, but the wrongdoing by McSweeney was not in his sexual activity, but instead it was the lengths he'd gone to cover it up.

“You've still not told us everything. What happened afterwards?”

“We said we'd talk again and make another arrangement but she never called.”

“No, but someone else did.”

“Yes, I had a visit the following week. A horrible man, he told me he had photographs and showed me an example. He told me that I'd better do what he said or he'd make them public. I couldn't risk that happening and he knew it. I offered him money. He took it, but said he wanted more. He said he'd let me know.” McSweeney stopped talking and drew in his breath.

“And?”

“I heard nothing more for a month or more. I started to convince myself it

had never happened, it was a bad dream and that it was over, but it wasn't." Again, the words hung in the air and this time Alex allowed the Sheriff to take his time before continuing.

"You remember the Lazlo case a few months back? Russian petty criminal who'd been arrested for possession of cocaine and firearms? The preliminary case came before me and I accepted the defence plea to dismiss because of an illegal search." There was another long pause.

"Why didn't you come to us for help?"

"I couldn't. I was in too deep. I should have come to you straight away after I was shown the photos. I should have just chased him and taken my chances. But I was frightened and I didn't want to be a laughing stock. Can you imagine what the papers would have made of it? 'Sheriff caught with his pants down,' most like. My wife would have been appalled. She might, with time, have forgiven the indiscretion, but never the humiliation. I couldn't let that happen."

"What happened with Lazlo?"

"There was a technical anomaly with the search warrant. It was nothing significant and shouldn't have made a real difference. At worst it should only have affected ten percent of the evidence as the follow on documentation was perfect. I chose an extreme interpretation of the regulations, as if to make a point. I threw out all the evidence and the case collapsed." After a slight pause, McSweeney corrected, "I was asked to throw out the evidence."

"Who asked? Was the defence solicitor involved?"

"Not to my knowledge. At least I have no proof. He just presented the petition. The same man, the one with the photos, came to see me and told me the petition would be presented and how I should treat it. I refused at first. I told him I couldn't possibly consider doing that. It was a corruption of everything I represented. He showed me the photographs again. He had more of them this time. The same as the ones you have there. I gave in and did what he wanted. I dismissed the case. I didn't ever speak to the defence solicitor but he knew to make the petition for dismissal and he didn't seem too surprised when I accepted it. Everyone else was."

"Who was the man who spoke to you?"

"I don't know his name for sure but he told me to call him Scott."

"Was this the man?" Alex asked, showing a photograph of Stevenson.

"Yes, that's him. Have you caught him for something else?"

"In a way, yes, he is in custody, at least his body is. He was murdered last week. Didn't you see it in the news?"

"No, I've been away for the last few days. I didn't watch television and didn't look at any newspapers. I can't say I'm sorry he's dead, but where does this leave

me?”

“It's not for me to tell you what to do but my report will go straight to the Chief Constable and copies will then go to the procurator fiscal and to the Lord President. I hardly think it appropriate for you to remain on the bench, but that's not my decision. You may wish to jump before you're pushed. There could also be criminal proceedings for 'perverting the course of justice,' you don't need me to tell you. Again, it's not my decision.”

Alex stood, lifted the photographs, and walked out the door, choosing not to offer the customary handshake. Sandra came scuttling along behind.

The rain had abated by the time they left the building, although it looked more like a lull before the next storm and they took advantage to race back to their vehicle.

“That was a bit harsh,” Sandra said as they were making their way, but she immediately regretted her words seeing the thunderous look on Alex's face.

“Harsh?” Alex stopped dead. “I ought to have been a lot tougher on the arrogant, cantankerous, old bastard. Who the fuck does he think he is? Can you just imagine how much time and effort went into catching Lazlo? Not to mention what went into preparing the prosecution. Can you just imagine how many more people have been harmed as a result of him keeping his freedom? All because that stupid bastard can't keep his trousers zipped, and then, when he gets caught, his first priority is to preserve his pride. Harsh? I should have bloody well arrested him there and then, cuffed him and dragged him out screaming. Maybe I should go back and do it now?”

Sandra looked him straight in the eye to see if he was being serious but was unable to judge.

“I'll actually enjoy putting this report together,” Alex continued as he resumed walking to the car. He waited until he was seated with the ignition on, so he could activate the hands free and check his phone. Noting Donny had been trying to contact him, he pressed the speed-dial.

“Donny, how'd you get on?” he enquired.

“Not so good, Boss. We were too late, someone got there before us.”

“How bad was it?”

“Bad enough, the place was trashed. Connor has sent some of his team to check it over but I reckon they're wasting their time, if the other places are anything to go by.”

“You never know your luck. You know as well as me, it just takes one slip up and we'll be able to nail him. Now take it from the start and go through what happened.”

“Morrison and I met the agent as arranged and we went up to the flat. It's on

Shakespeare Street, a second floor so only one above. You know the location, just round the corner from the new Tesco superstore, just off Maryhill Road. The agent went to put the key in the lock but it just pushed open. There were claw marks on the door frame. It looked as if a crowbar was used to force it. The cuts were too large for it to have been a chisel. There had been one Mortise and one Yale holding it but both had been prised open and the wood was splintered on the door. We made the agent stay behind and we had a quick look around inside.

“I'm guessing Black had already made his exit a while ago. There were dirty pots and plates in the sink but they looked as if they'd been there for some time. The milk in the fridge was dated up on Saturday. The place had been ransacked the same as Stevenson's with drawers and shelves emptied and furnishings slashed, but somehow I got the feeling he was just going through his paces, not expecting to find anything.

“Black hadn't been short of money. It was a two-bedroom flat, more than you'd expect a poor student to be able to afford on his own. He'd paid the deposit and first month's rent in cash and subsequent months by bank transfer. The flat had been let unfurnished and judging by the contents he certainly had no shortage of cash to splash. There was a new looking 'Reids' leather suite in the lounge as well as a 'La-Z-Boy' chair. He also had a Samsung fifty-inch 3D telly mounted on the wall. All of that is a good few grand's worth. The kitchen had the best of appliances and a solid oak dining table and chairs. All of them were new looking. Another wall mounted telly in the bedroom and lots of designer labels in the clothes. The second bedroom had been turned into an office, complete with desks and chairs. It had a high speed BT internet connection linked into a couple of powerful looking computer towers but same story as before, the machines had been smashed and the storage removed. There were two big filing cabinets with their contents ripped out and strewn across the floor, but I think all the important stuff will have been removed, either by Black himself, before he ran, or by the intruder. I did see a lot of invoices and receipts lying about and I'm hoping that when we get a chance for a proper look I'll find his internet and website registration details so we can go to the servers and find out what's gone through them.

“Oh, one more thing. There was a 'cardex' system sitting on the desk. Only blank cards were left in it so the contents have been removed. Hopefully it was by Black, before he left, but if it wasn't him it means the murderer has everyone's contact details. It could explain how he found David Kerr but that would also mean the break-in was before today and still gone unreported.”

“Okay, what else have you got for me?”

“A couple of things, this was taking a while so Phil's gone on to the bank

himself along with one of the uniforms. That was some time ago so he'll likely be back at Pitt Street now. I'm just finishing here and I'll be on my way back in a few minutes. Other than that, we're trying to get archive data from the 'Alone in Glasgow' site but nothing's through yet. We have access to the Harbour flat arranged for 2pm. You might want me to take that. And we've also traced one of the girls. Her name's Carol Sneddon and she's a Business Studies student. I've checked, she's in an exam at the moment, but I've arranged for her to be picked up as she leaves the building and brought to the office. It should be about 3pm."

"I'd like Sandra to be the one interviewing the girl as it will seem less threatening. I'll sit in on that. You take the Harbour search. We'll be back in about half an hour so we should see you before you leave, to compare notes. Gonna' refill the filter so it'll be ready when we get in? I could murder a coffee."

"Sure thing, Boss, I've checked in and I'm hoping to have the provisional report from White Street any time now. We're getting some feedback on the house to house checks and I've asked for any CCTV from Byres Road or thereabouts as well."

"Fine, we're on our way."

Chapter 12

The report from White Street was already on Warren's desk along with a freshly poured cup of scalding black coffee. He sat down with Sandra, Donny and Phil Morrison to review what they had.

Alex's prediction had been correct and Phil's skin was a dusky brown colour after his vacation. He didn't even have to sunbathe, it just seemed to happen naturally because he, along with his wife and children, spent many hours walking around sun-drenched theme parks and several more in open-air swimming pools and water parks, none of which provided much shade. Even the high factor sun creams and blocks did little to stop his skin from scorching. Phil wasn't too much younger than Alex and he was clever with an annoyingly sharp sense of humour. He'd graduated with a social sciences degree and worked for several years in human resources management, specialising in engineering training. Then the company he worked for closed down after its German parent company realised it could save labour cost by relocating their manufacturing to Eastern Europe and India. Phil was unable to find another similar job but he wasn't out of work for long. First of all, he took a job as a Community Warden before applying to the police. He progressed quickly and had shown resourcefulness and Alex was pleased to have him in his team. The break from work had been good for Phil. He looked strong and alert. He was smaller and less robust than Alex but was nevertheless fit and muscular, aided by his twice-weekly gym sessions. He had a pleasant round face, smiling brown eyes, slightly unruly brown curls and twin dimples when he smiled, which was often.

“Good to see you back, Phil. I trust from the look of you that you've had a good holiday? You're not too jet lagged?”

“Thanks, Boss. The holiday was terrific although I could do with another week off to recover from all the exercise. The kids loved it and didn't want to leave. I'll tell you all about it later. We flew back in on Saturday morning so I've just about readjusted to the time difference.”

“You've not been enthusiastically telling me how you've already broken the case so I'm guessing you didn't find too much at the bank.”

“Good guess, Boss. All of the staff were helpful enough and gave me access to the vault and showed me how to open the box. The contents are interesting but they don't take us very much further. I catalogued everything and loaded it into

evidence bags for the techies to check out and I've left the bags with them. There was a wad of cash, just short of twenty grand and bank records showing deposits into an offshore account totalling another quarter mill. There was also a box with small clear stones individually packed. I think that they're diamonds, and if they are, the value will be in tens if not hundreds of thousands, but I'm afraid that's the lot."

Donny whistled, hearing the values being discussed but Alex just looked on with a glum expression on his face.

"Pity, the only thing that does is give us an indication of how much money he's being making, but no leads towards the murderer.

"Okay, I want us to touch base, run through what we've got and where we're going. Sandra, you summarise and everyone else cut in where necessary."

"Alright, Boss, first of all this seems to have all been triggered by Stevenson. He's set up a blackmail scam. He's gone after powerful and/or high wealth individuals. He's worked with Black to set up some internet grooming. He's found students looking for extra money rather than using the seasoned professionals and again Black's probably been at the centre of that. He's matched the targets with the girls or boys in his flat and then blackmailed them with the photos. One of the targets has flipped and come after him. He's killed Stevenson then turned over his house looking to remove any evidence against himself. He's then gone after Black and turned over his place too, but it looks as if Black did a runner and he got out on time. He's found out where Kerr lived, gone after him and finished him off then it looks as though Kerr's mother came home at the wrong time so he killed her as well. The killer is ruthless and he's intelligent. He knows a fair bit about forensics and police procedure so he's been able to cover his tracks but he's also brave and arrogant. The murders have been very bloody and messy. He wasn't just killing them, he was punishing them too. He must have been covered in the victim's blood, yet no one has really seen or heard anything. The break-ins too, there's not a trace. He must have been driving because he couldn't have walked through the streets without being seen, so he must have parked close by. At the murders and at the break-ins, he's had the tools he needed, gloves and whatever, so he didn't leave traces and he's removed the evidence he wanted from the scene, so again he must have been parked close by."

"Something else strange," Phil cut in. "With the Stevenson murder, I've seen the photos and the first impression is that it was a spur of the moment thing. You don't plan to kill someone with an elephant tusk. It's hardly a weapon of choice. It must have just been convenient at the time. Stevenson's said or done something and the perp's lost it, he's probably grabbed the first thing to hand that

he could use as a weapon and it was the tusk. He's wielded it at Stevenson, stabbing him in the belly, and rammed it home to kill him. There must have been blood and guts everywhere, yet there's no trace from the murderer, just a few footprints around the body. That means he was already geared up before the killing and that would take away the idea it was an impulse crime, or else he's somehow been able to get away without leaving any traces. To do that he'd have needed to strip off in situ and then get out to his car to get what he needed to clean up the crime scene." Phil paused, "But nobody's seen him, either blood covered or bollock naked. Also if he has gone out to his car, after the murder, he'd have needed to leave the door open or at least unlocked. Anyone could have come in, unless he was parked right at the door."

There was a long pause as they all digested Morrison's conjecturing.

"Here's a possibility," Sandra suggested. "Stevenson sold antiques and I remember seeing some classic clothes hanging on a rail, the sort of things you see in old movies or maybe wear for fancy dress. Maybe the perp stripped off his bloody clothes and took some items off the rail."

"He wouldn't even have had to strip" Alex added. "He could just have put a jacket or a coat over what he was wearing. The one thing against all this is the footprints, his shoes must have been covered in blood and there were bloody prints near the body but nowhere else. If he'd walked to where the clothes were, or gone out the door, we'd have been able to track the footprints, unless he removed his shoes."

"Would that not mean his socks, or his feet, should have left traces?" Sandra enquired.

"Not necessarily," Alex replied, "But we should ask Connor the question. He'd have had to carry the shoes out with him so he'd either be in bare feet or else he must have found shoes in the shop as well as clothes."

"We've had a couple of other reports back too," Donny added. "Inspection of Stevenson's garden has found some spent revolver shells, also there were some marks in his trees where he may have set up targets. Would you believe the stupid fucker's being firing off live ammunition in a garden in one of the city's most prestigious suburbs? It's a wonder no one's complained."

"It's a wonder the crazy bastard's not killed someone," Sandra cut in. "At least now we can rest a bit easier knowing where the gun's been used."

"Only if you rely on that being the only place he's fired it," Alex replied negatively.

"We've also got some feedback on the code book," Donny continued. "From what I can make out from the draft report, it looks like the symbols are likely to tie in with codes for blackmail victims, dates and the amounts collected. They're

still working on a full report and seeing if the amounts tie in at all with bank deposits, but from the sound of it, so far, it's pretty much what we suspected.”

“We're running out of time just now. You two go and check out the Harbour flat, Sandra and I'll work on here, check what we have and chase along what we're waiting for. Then we've got the Sneddon interview. I think we want to have a team meeting early evening, bring Sanjay in for that and we'll then all be up to speed. I take it he's on nights again tonight?”

Donny checked the staff rota and nodded.

Sandra and Alex allocated each other the files with the new information received and took time to peruse them. Sandra took the preliminary M.E. and scene of crime reports from White Street, Alex looked over the updates from enquiries at the shop and house, further photograph analysis, CCTV reviews, telephone use summaries and feedback from the internet service providers.

“Me first, well M.E. first actually,” Sandra claimed. “Taking together what Duffie and Connor have said, David Kerr died from blood loss following the slash to his throat, severing one carotid artery. The wound was most likely caused by a sharp blade, no more than six inches in length with a slight bevel on the edge, no serrations, possibly something like an ornamental knife. The trousers were almost certainly cut using the same knife. The pallet knife was inserted in his rear after he was dead. It cleanly penetrated his anus then ripped through the wall of his rectum and tore into other intestinal walls. The damage from that would have caused him a lifetime of pain and heartache if he hadn't already been dead.”

“Every cloud has a silver lining,” Alex interrupted

“There were no defence wounds or other wounds. No semen or any other interference with the body and no scars or distinguishing marks. From the angle and length of the cut to the neck, Kerr will have been standing facing his attacker not expecting an attack. The assailant will have been taller than him by perhaps six inches and he'll have been right handed. The neck was slashed in an upward stroke from left to right, from the attacker's perspective, almost like a backhand table-tennis flick and just as fast. Kerr had no recent sexual activity but the indications are of previous, not infrequent, anal activity.

“If only we had his photograph sequence to go with the others.”

“Quite so, Boss. Agnes Kerr was most likely killed by the same blade as her son. She had just climbed the stairs, she was perspiring and her coat was open. As she'd opened her front door the assailant plunged the knife into her chest in an upward angle just at the base of her sternum. It punctured her heart and she died almost immediately. No further attacks and no interference to the body or her clothes. Both killings were precisely carried out by someone who knew what

he was aiming at and not afraid to get his hands dirty. They were not impulse killings, certainly not the lad and Mrs Kerr's murder was callous and unnecessary. Even if he didn't want to be seen he didn't need to kill her. It was cruel and he probably enjoyed the experience.”

“That's the most worrying part. If he's enjoyed the experience, he'll probably look for an excuse to do it again.”

“That's me, what have you got?”

“First the telephone reports; Ballantyne claimed he hadn't heard back from Stevenson after the first meeting but I have two more calls made from the shop to his private number, the second one was the day before the murder. I think I might want to have another word with our Mr Ballantyne.

“There were a lot of calls made to what turns out to be Black's flat and also his mobile and a number of other names have been put to the photos as a result of checking the call log. One's Alice Simpson, the millionairess who owns the chain of optician shops. She's been matched to some photos where she's sharing a bed with two young men. But this one's particularly interesting, it's been traced to a Sergeant Patrick Kennedy from Fife constabulary. He's forty-six years old and for some reason he's only on desk work now, but he used to be in CID. We certainly need to talk to him but first we need to get the politics right and clear it through official channels.

“The ISP's been back to say they'll try to help. Someone's already accessed the 'Alone' site and cleared out most of the data, but they can access their backups in their archive if we can give them some time.

“The door to door has taken the greatest resource but it's still coming up with zip. There've been various comments and complaints but nothing meaningful. We've had the usual batch of loonies giving us false leads or confessions and we've tracked down most of the vehicles that Fitzpatrick's given us from the CCTV. So far there've been innocent explanations for all the numbers we've traced. There are a couple of other cars where the numbers weren't clear enough, one's a silver Passat and the other's a red Fiesta. The techies are trying some new technology to see if they can get anything more.

“We've an update from Thomson's squad, nothing much new but there's some more meat on the bones. Details of when properties were purchased, who they're let to, etc. His company share structures, the companies he's invested in, details of bank accounts and transfers. Now, here's a strange coincidence, and you know how I believe in coincidences. The newsagent shop he owns is let out to Mr Singh from White Street, you know, the Kerr's neighbour.

“Finally, the word's going out tonight to see if anyone's spotted Black and that takes us up to date.”

“What kind of connection could there have been between Singh and Stevenson?”

“I just can't imagine. Maybe none, but we'll just need to see what crawls out of the woodwork.”

“Come on, Boss, you're not suggesting Stevenson was a slum landlord as well? It's about the only thing we don't have him down as.”

They both chuckled at the thought, just as Alex's phone rang. He saw it was Morrison's mobile and answered using speakerphone.

“Hi, Phil, I take it you got in then?”

“No problem, Boss. It turns out the main keys from the cash box all fit locks here. One Yale and the Mortise are for the front door and the second Yale for a cupboard. We've still to find the padlock though. Anyway it's quite a flat, really spacious and absolutely stunning. It's on the eighth floor and the views are amazing, the balcony's enormous and you can see right across the city. It's got one really large bedroom, the kitchen's beautiful with all mod cons and its open-plan to the lounge.”

“Forget the estate agent speak and tell me what I need to know.”

“Sorry, Boss, I was just a bit blown away by it. We got to this one on time, it's not been trashed. Is that not a bit strange though because the murderer obviously knew about it? He must have been here before. Maybe that's why he didn't come back, he didn't need to because he knew there was nothing here to incriminate him. Sorry, just thinking aloud.”

“Don't apologise, it's a fair point. Go on”

“The place is like a little palace, it's beautifully decorated and furnished and there's no doubt it's the location where the photos were taken. You can see from what's in the background if you examine the photos closely enough, and you're looking for the right things,” he added with a snigger. “If that wasn't enough, it's rigged out with minute spy cameras, even over the toilet in the bathroom, although most of them are in the bedroom. Some are standard and some are light sensitive, they'll still work in near darkness. It's pretty high tech, they're all the wireless type. Inside a cupboard, off the hall, there's a beast of a computer that collects all the signals and transmits them through the net. There was nothing I could find stored on the computer but there was a USB cable sticking out with nothing at the end so I think, as well as transmitting, it was recording onto an external disk which has been removed. The cupboard was lying open but it has a serious looking locking device on it as well as a Yale that corresponds with the second of the keys found in the shop but, as I said before, it had been left open. I reckon someone's been in and removed the external disk. The transmission was made by streaming onto the net but the recipient data has been removed. We'll

need to get the techies to have a look see if they can find anything hidden or retrievable. You'll like this, Boss, the internet connection's with Virgin Media, would you believe it? They used a Virgin router, a bit ironic don't you think?"

"Anything else?"

"Oh, yes. The wardrobes are empty of normal clothes, except for freshly laundered towels and dressing gowns but there are some quite interesting fancy dress costumes and some rubber and leather gear. The drawers are full of toys. You could open a sex shop. Condoms, vibrators, dildos, creams and lotion, we've got the lot. We've got a cupboard full of bondage stuff as well, handcuffs, ankle straps, collars whips and the like. There are also some suspicious looking pills that I can't identify but I could make a fair guess. It's quite a love nest, there's a big plasma TV on the bedroom wall wired to a DVD player and there's a selection of blue movies there too. Donny's making a listing and a detailed study of them at the moment."

"That's not true," Donny's voice came booming through the loudspeaker.

"It's probably another waste of time, but I'll ask Connor to send someone to check this place over and definitely to check the computer," Alex finished off, ignoring the banter. "Just get finished as quick as you can and get back in time for the team meeting."

Alex clicked off and turned to Sandra, "I should have known better than to let those two out on their own. Phil can really be quite funny, but I daren't offer him any encouragement or he'd become even more insufferable."

Sandra smiled indulgently and just then the call came through to advise that Carol Sneddon had arrived and was being taken to the interview room. They arrived at the room at the same time and Alex busied himself setting up the recording equipment leaving Sandra to make the introductions and lead the questions.

She extended her arm in greeting. "Hello Carol, I'm Sergeant Sandra McKinnon of CID and this is DCI Alex Warren. I'd like to thank you for coming in to see us." The girl standing before them was certainly a looker. She was aged about twenty and was slim and curvaceous, wearing impossible heels which accentuated her five foot eight height. She had long, straight, cherry red hair extending half way down her back. Her oval shaped face had Mediterranean features and olive-coloured skin which was complimented by deep hazel eyes embellished by very long lashes, probably false. She wore very little make up, only a touch of mascara and eye shadow and a hint of lip gloss but the effect was stunning. Her otherwise classy appearance was lost by her couture. Undeterred by the season, underneath her rain jacket she was practically naked. She wore no bra, the points of her nipples were clearly visible while her ample breasts were

hardly restrained by what was little more than a scarf. It was a low-cut, tight-fitting cream coloured, short, wool sweater which left her midriff exposed. Her legs were bare and her black micro skirt might more accurately have been described as a belt. Her only underwear was a gold coloured thong and when she moved the skirt did little to protect this from view.

Carol pushed past Sandra's outstretched hand and strolled into the room, "Why are you thanking me, you didn't leave me any choice. Why the hell have you brought me here? What's this all about anyway?"

"The officers who picked you up must have explained already."

"Those two daft pricks told me nothing. I was just coming out of my exam and your stooges were standing at the door. They asked if I was Carol Sneddon and when I said I was they told me I had to go with them because you wanted me to answer some questions. I was on my way to the Union to celebrate my exam being over and instead I get dragged away here. I'm really pissed off. You've got nothing on me. I don't do dope so I don't know what you want with me. Why don't you let me go? Then I'll still be able to catch my friends before they go on somewhere else."

"Not just yet. As the officers said, we have some questions to ask you. We believe you have some important information to assist us in our enquiries."

"What enquiries are they? Anyway, aren't you meant to read me my rights or something?" Ignoring Sandra, Carol turned and cast an eye over Alex and fluttered her long lashes seductively.

"No, we haven't arrested you." Sandra replied. "We just want you to answer some questions for us."

"In that case, I can just walk out then."

"Yes, you can, but we don't think that would be a very good idea, for us or for you."

"Okay, I'll stay long enough to find out what it's about and then I'll go."

"Fair enough, but when you know what it's about I don't think you'll be in such a hurry."

"Okay, you've got my interest, for a few minutes anyway."

"Take a seat and tell us what you know about Scott Stevenson"

"Who?"

Sandra showed his photo.

"I've never seen him before. I told you this was a waste of time. No wait, is this not the man killed in a shop near the University, I saw this photo on the news, didn't I? What's this got to do with me?"

"Are you telling me you don't know him?"

"I've never met him, I already said."

Sandra placed a couple of other photos on the table. Each showed Carol having sex with a different man.

“What the fuck! Where did you get these?”

“We'll ask the questions”

“No way. I'm leaving now. I'm phoning my dad. He's got clout. He'll have your jobs for this. What sort of fucking country is this if that's all the police are interested in?” Carol's chair screeched across the floor as she jumped to her feet.

“I don't think so,” Alex, speaking for the first time, cut in forcefully speaking in little over a whisper, but the slow and clear intonations gave his words a sombre and threatening effect and captured Carol's full attention. “We didn't take the photos. Those ones, and plenty more like them, were found in Stevenson's house. But you've told us you don't know him. If you're telling us the truth then surely you'll want to know as much as we do who took them and how they've been used. Now you're right, you can walk free if you want, but it'll only be for a short while because if you're not going to help us then we might have to arrest you and charge you with conspiracy to defraud and with blackmail. We might add in soliciting as well, just for good measure.”

“Blackmail? Soliciting?” Carol's demeanour changed. She no longer conveyed the super-confidence she showed before, instead her shoulders sagged and she stared at the floor in resignation. She slumped back into the chair and sank into the seat then lifted her eyes looking at Sandra beseechingly. “I've done nothing wrong, honest. How can I convince you? What do you want?”

“We want you to tell us everything you know about Stevenson and about these men,” she said pointing to the photographs. “How did you become involved? Who introduced you? And how did it happen?”

“I don't know Stevenson, I've never met him and I've never heard his name mentioned. The guys in the photos were just a bit of fun. Sure they're a lot older and they're successful businessmen. I'm not on the game or anything like that. I was just giving them a good time and having some fun myself. There's no law against that, is there?”

“Not until your relationship is used to extort money out of them.”

“But I didn't do anything.”

“Let's go back to the beginning. I want you to tell me everything that happened in the lead up to you meeting them.”

Carol sat quietly and thought for a moment. “I suppose I've been really stupid. I thought it was all harmless fun, but thinking about it now it couldn't have been, could it? It's a long story.”

“Take your time. We're not in any rush.”

“I'm in my second year doing a Business Studies degree. I really wanted to

study music, I play Cello and I sing and I've been told I'm quite good. I wanted to try out for RSAMD, well it's changed its name now but you know where I mean. Daddy said I'd be wasting my time and he wouldn't support me. He said I had good 'Highers' and I should be studying business and maybe become an accountant or something. He said that I could help him run his business and maybe take it over some day. He runs a chain of home improvement stores and it's based in Aberdeen. I didn't want to do it and I thought Mummy would support me but she said nothing. She was born in Spain and her family's culture was to obey what the husband wanted when it came to business. Daddy bribed me and said he'd rent me a flat and give me an allowance so I went along with it because I couldn't have afforded to support myself if I did what I really wanted. Anyway I came to Glasgow and started the course. I was good at it, but I hated what I was doing and I partied hard, just 'cause I could. I was a virgin when I arrived but that didn't last long. I enjoyed sex and although I'd not had any experience before, I made up for lost time. I was game to try anything once at least. A few months ago I was at a party and I got pretty wasted. I met this guy called Gordon and he came back to my flat and stayed the night. We got on really well and met up a few more times. Then one day he said to me that he's involved in a new business and would I be interested in doing some work for them.“

Sandra lifted out her photo of Black and showed it to Carol.

“Yes, that's him. He said they had a number of clients who were lonely old men. Most were wealthy businessmen or professionals who just wanted someone to talk to. He said their business provided an internet chat room so they could help them. They wanted to speak to people who could give them intelligent and stimulating conversation but they wanted people who looked good as well because they sometimes used webcams or sent photos. Gordon told me it could be a good opportunity for me 'cause I'd make a bit of money, but I'd also meet people who could give me career opportunities in the future. At the time I wasn't that interested in working, but the prospect of not being dependant on Daddy really appealed to me so I said I'd give it a try.” As she'd been talking, she seemed to regain her composure and her confidence returned. She was sitting straighter and her voice became stronger telling her story.

“Where did this take place?” Sandra enquired

“To start with it was just a little office in the centre of town. It wasn't much more than a room, and it was quite scabby, no carpet and the paint peeling off the walls. It was above the shops in Gordon Street, funnily enough, just off Union Street. There were a couple of computers and they had mikes and webcams attached but we didn't always use them. There was a big acoustic

screen down the middle of the room so that both machines could be used at the same time and Gordon was always there to keep an eye on things. Most of the time we were working late evening or through the night. It was really quite fun. Gordon usually had some vodka or tequila for us to help ourselves to, and a few nights I went back home with Gordon afterwards. After a while we moved to a bigger place in St Vincent Street. It was quite classy, well by comparison anyway. We had separate private areas for making the calls and there must have been eight of them, maybe more because I think there was a basement as well. We had a kitchen and a shower room there too.”

“Did Gordon tell you what to say?”

“Not really, he left it up to me. He sometimes made some suggestions, saucy remarks and the like. He told me some things that he thought would get the guys more interested or excited but it was never an instruction. When I was using the webcam he suggested I showed a lot of cleavage. Pretty obvious, I suppose. He suggested if the opportunity came up I could show my tits as well. There wasn't any formula to it. I was left to do what I wanted. But I knew the happier the guys were the more I got paid. It wasn't like a pricelist or anything. There was no minimum wage either. Gordon just paid me based on what he thought I'd earned and sometimes he gave me a bonus when he said the client was especially happy.”

“Didn't you feel he was using you?” Alex asked

“Not at all, it was all down to me. A girl's got to use her assets.” As Carol said this, she looked pointedly at Warren, staring deeply into his eyes, placed her hands under her breasts, held them firmly and pushed upwards, giving them a slight jiggle. The areoles were clearly visible and the points of her nipples were practically poking through the fabric of her sweater.

It had been a long time since Alex had intimate relations with a woman and despite his feelings of disgust at the girl's behaviour, he imagined he could almost taste her breasts and he felt the first stirrings of arousal. He quickly looked away from her, choosing this time to check the readings on the recorder. He was grateful to be sitting with his legs below the table so neither Sandra or Carol could detect any embarrassing reaction by him. His face was slightly flushed but he wasn't certain whether it was from a hint of excitement or from anger, more at himself for his weakness than at the girl.

“How did it develop from there?” Sandra asked.

“Well, one night, not that long after we moved office, Gordon told me he had the use of a luxury flat down at Partick and asked me if I'd like to spend the night with him. I was game and it was really amazing. The flat was gorgeous, it was one of the ones off South Street. I think it's called Glasgow Harbour. There was a

conciierge and lifts and everything. It had the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in, not that I did too much sleeping.”

Sandra and Alex had already heard the full details of the flat less than an hour before but they let Carol give her own lavish description as they didn't want to interrupt her flow.

“Anyway, Gordon took me there a couple of times and I really loved it. One time we arrived with a carry-out Chinese and another he actually cooked for me. He was a good cook too and he made pasta with a bolognaise sauce which we washed down with gallons of Chianti.

“A few days after that, he told me that he could swing it for me to use the flat if I ever wanted to meet privately with any of the clients. He said it was only if I wanted to and there was no pressure. I didn't have to do anything I didn't want and the flat itself was really safe. I could just use it to meet the guy or maybe have a meal, it only needed to go further if I wanted and I could stop at any time. He told me that, as with the chat room, there could be more money when a client was happy and that the bonuses could be really high. Gordon knew I enjoyed sex and that I could be quite adventurous. I said I'd give it a try and it worked out. I'd been more used to fucking young guys, around my own age, but being with these older guys was quite fun. It wasn't always the same but they often knew better what a girl wanted. Usually they had more confidence and true they didn't always have the same stamina, but often they'd take more time to make sure I was enjoying myself too. In the flat there were lots of toys and pills and potions which were meant to help the guys stay in the mood. I don't know if they worked, I never tried them very much 'cause I didn't need to.” As Carol was speaking these words, she stared deeply and alluringly into Alex's eyes, fluttering her eyelashes seductively. “I started making lots of money and didn't need to depend on Daddy anymore. I was making lots of useful contacts too. I've been planning to open my own business after I graduate, what with the people I know and the savings I've made, it'll give me a really good start.

“I met with quite a few different clients at different times. There was even one night when we had a group session.”

“We know, we've got the photos,” Sandra replied coldly. “You're quite versatile too, aren't you? Some straight, some oral, some anal, some bondage and sometimes at the same time too, you're really quite a girl.”

Carol looked shocked. “What you mean some bastard was watching and taking photos whenever I was there?”

“The whole place was rigged with webcams. We think it was Gordon Black who organised it as he's an IT specialist. Did you not realise you were being used as a prostitute?”

All the colour drained from Carol's face, "N-n-no! I never thought of it that way, but when you explain it like that, it's so obvious."

"And you're asking us to believe you didn't know you were being whored out and that you were being filmed so the pictures could be used for blackmail?"

Tears ran down Carol's face. "I didn't know, honest I didn't. What am I going to do?"

"We'll need to see about that," Sandra replied disdainfully. "We'll see what else our enquiries come up with and then it's up to the procurator fiscal what action he chooses to take. The money you've been saving has been from an illegal source so I wouldn't rely on keeping it if I were you. I can't see your clients being much help to you in setting up a business so it might be an idea if you didn't turn your back on Daddy just yet."

Tears were now streaming down Carol's cheeks and soaking into her sweater, making the fabric even more transparent than it had been earlier. Alex was experienced enough to tell it wasn't an act and that the girl was just incredibly naïve. Although less sexy, Alex found her vulnerability more appealing and actually felt some sympathy for her.

By contrast, Sandra considered her stupid and weak. "I want details of the addresses of all the premises you used. I want all names and telephone numbers of everyone you met connected with this business. I'm going to run through a lot of the other photos I have and I want a full statement from you telling us everything you know about each and every person in them and whether they're the workers or the punters. Then I want you to tell us about, and give us descriptions of, everyone else you've come across who has anything to do with this business. Then, finally, I want all your bank account details. When we have all of that, and we're satisfied with your answers, then you can go. So you can forget about any plans to meet up with your friends for quite a while."

Chapter 13

The team meeting convened with Sandra giving a précis of their interview with Carol Sneddon. Sandra finished off with a rant and Alex was amazed at her vehemence.

“Stuck up little madam, the way she looks down on everyone else. She criticised her 'Daddy' and I would too because he's created one real spoilt little bitch. She thinks because she's from a privileged background and she's a university student that everyone else is stupid. She thinks the police are stupid and seems to forget that most of us, here anyway, are graduates too. Not that it makes any difference. There are plenty of students and graduates I know who don't have a shred of common sense and she falls right into that category. She's acted no better than a common whore and she expects us to believe she had no idea what was going on. For God's sake, you just need to look at the photos. Christ, even during the interview she was flaunting herself and I thought at one point she was trying to seduce the Boss. Anyhow, we sorted her out okay. I think we scared the crap out of her.”

“Now come on, Sandra, you don't need to be a whore to be free and open in your attitude to sex, not nowadays,” Donny interrupted.

This struck Sandra as a strange attitude for Donny to take and she wondered if he was just trying to wind her up. She just glared at him in response. She was so tempted to enquire if his wife provided him with all the services they'd seen in the photos but realised she'd have been overstretching the bounds of their professional relationship.

Seeing the tension between them and wanting to avoid further conflict, Alex changed the direction of the conversation. “Well, we have a more precise understanding of Black's role now. He wasn't just the IT man, it looks like he found the students and talked them into whoring and then pimped them out. It looks like he could have been the brains behind the whole thing and Stevenson was the money man. Stevenson will have provided any muscle that was needed and fronted the blackmail as well, but Black's the one who's set everything up. It could be that the internet chat room was a real and profitable business in its own right. It would have been legit too, even if a bit near the edge and he then moved it up a gear to the girls meeting the punters so he could develop the blackmail side. The big money's come when he's creamed that off.”

Morrison howled with laughter, "Wish I'd thought to say that one," he managed to blurt out in between guffaws of schoolboy-style laughter.

The others joined in seeing Alex's inadvertent play on words.

"What else do we have on Black?" Sanjay enquired

"I've checked him out as best I could," Morrison replied. "We've confirmed what Findlay told us: he's from Inverness, his family are still there, living in a village just a few miles outside of the town. The local boys have checked, but he's not there. The family claim not to have heard from him for months. They say they had a falling out last Christmas and haven't spoken since. Our lads will keep an eye out in case he turns up. We've had no meaningful response from the press release. The usual batch of cranks and loonies and a few claimed sightings that are being looked into, but none seemed too promising. I've checked his Facebook site and there's been nothing new on it for a week. We're looking at and talking to any friends, but no worthwhile leads so far. Same story on Twitter, we've not heard a tweet."

Much as they tried to ignore Morrison's humour, the others couldn't help but moan.

"Have you got anywhere with Patrick Kennedy?" Alex refocused on business.

"Sure do," Morrison replied. "And you're going to like it too. We had his photo sent down from central records and it matched against one of our punters. We've been given permission to interview him although one of their own people wants to sit in. I've arranged for Donny and I to go there first thing tomorrow, assuming that's okay with you?"

"Sure, go ahead. No, wait, we need to get the politics right when we're going cross-border. Kennedy's a sergeant so it wouldn't be good form for us to send two detective constables to interview him. It wouldn't be showing proper respect for their constabulary. I'm not available as I'm due to give evidence in court tomorrow, so I want Sandra to go instead. She's a sergeant as well, but as she's passed all her exams and interviews, she's considered to be an inspector in waiting. I think Donny should go with her and you keep shop here."

"Don't get too excited about him as a suspect though. He was on duty at the time of Stevenson's murder, although we can't account for him when the Kerrs were done. We'll just have to ask him."

"Okay, that's good work, now anything new in from Connor?"

"Yes," Donnie replied. "It's quite interesting too. Our boy's not been quite so careful at the Kerr's scene. The wound in David's neck had minute traces of leather. Taking that together with the size of the knife it fits the type you'd keep in a leather scabbard, maybe a throwing knife or something ornamental like a

Ghurka knife or a Sgian-Dubh. There was also a fibre found on the floor, it was black and a hundred percent wool. It didn't match against any clothes or fabrics in the house so there's a fair chance it came off the murderer's jacket or trousers. Also, as mentioned before, there was blood all around the bedroom but none outside, but the new information is they've traced smudge marks on the laminate floor in the hall which are consistent with boot covers, the same kind of thing we use at crime scenes. It sounds like he's gone there prepared."

"I've seen your reports from the interviews you carried out last night," Alex said turning to Sanjay." That was good solid work and it couldn't have been easy given the calibre of interviewee."

"There's nothing really to add," Sanjay stated. "It's just more variations on the same theme. We interviewed two, different P.L.C. directors, and the husband of an investment fund manager, looking for some action while his wife was travelling the world on business. We also traced some businessmen who spend their mid weeks in Scotland and their weekends with their families down south, and I'm planning to meet each of them this evening. One thing you can say for Stevenson, he practiced diversity. He didn't care about race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. He'd go after anyone, as long as they had money or influence."

"I've also arranged to see David Kerr, Senior, tonight. That's likely to be pretty bleak and it's hardly likely that he'll know very much but it's another loose end that needs to be tied up."

They spent a further hour sifting through all updated information and bringing each other up to speed and then allocating priority tasks for each of them to pursue.

Sanjay and his partner were just starting their nightshift but the others decided to adjourn to a pub to unwind after a long, tough day's work.

It was cold, dark and windy and the rain was being blown almost horizontally at them as they made their way, walking uphill to Sauchiehall Street. Phil took the opportunity to tell the others about his holiday and the wonders of Florida, Disneyworld and Universal Studios. He described the humidity, the oppressive heat and the warm tropical rainfall and it made them all overtly aware of the stark contrast to their typical Glasgow, November evening. When they arrived, Alex offered to buy the first round. The pub was running a promotion on a selection of real ales and both Donnie and Phil thought they'd give it a try. Unable to resist the name, they both opted for a pint of one called 'Bitter and Twisted.' Sandra had a liking for Czech beers and asked for a bottle of Budvar; Alex came back with a pint of soda water with lime for himself.

"What's this, Boss? You're not on the wagon are you?" Donny enquired.

"Not at all, but I have the car in with me today. I was up at the crack of dawn

and I've been to the West End and then out to Paisley. I've not had a moment to drop it home so I'm still driving. The good news for you guys is having a designated driver means you'll have a free lift home."

"That's awfully good of you, Boss," Phil said, mimicking an English public school accent, then followed up with, "but surely you could manage one or two and it wouldn't affect your driving?"

"I probably could and I know I could definitely have one without going over the permitted limit, but that's not the point. Irrespective of legalities I feel very strongly about drink driving. I've seen too many accidents caused by or affected by drink. Between the incidents I've attended and the reports I've read it's convinced me. There have been countless fatalities, but some of the most horrific accidents were the ones where the person affected didn't die. There was one I attended when I was working traffic as a constable when some stupid bastard ploughed his Mercedes into a school bus at four o'clock in the afternoon. He was more than three times over the limit at that time, having consumed a long liquid lunch. No one died but two wee lassies each needed to have a leg amputated. They were only ten years old with their whole lives ahead of them and because of some stupid arse their whole future was ruined."

Although tempted, Phil showed an unusual restraint and refrained from uttering his first thought, describing the driver as being legless as well.

"The other one that sticks in my mind was a young man driving to work at eight-thirty in the morning when he was hit by a truck. The truck driver was still carrying the effects of his binge the night before. The poor lad wasn't too badly affected physically but banged his head so bad he was left with brain damage, giving him the attention span of a butterfly and unable to feed himself, go to the toilet or do anything. He was only twenty-seven and he was going to need professional carers to look after his most basic needs for the rest of his life. He, himself probably wouldn't have known anything about it, but he had a two-year-old kid and his wife was six months pregnant. They were the ones who would suffer the most. It would have been kinder to them if he hadn't survived.

"That's why I feel so strongly about it and why I don't drink and drive."

"Point well made, Boss. I don't feel too far differently myself," Phil stated. "But there's plenty who don't see it that way and, I'm sorry to say this, but there are other officers who are amongst the worst culprits."

"Let's move on to a lighter topic," Donny interrupted. "I've just noticed there's a pub quiz on this evening. It starts in twenty minutes. Should we have a go? It might be a bit of fun."

"I'm up for it," Sandra replied enthusiastically.

They spent the next twenty minutes arguing over the choice of a team name.

They discarded 'the detectives,' 'the pit bulls,' and 'lawn order' before settling on 'wheel ask the questions,' which the quizmaster later abbreviated to the 'Wheels.'

There were seven other teams competing, mostly made up of students or young professionals. The others seemed familiar with the set up where an independent question master took every opportunity to poke humour at the contestants and the brighter ones reciprocated. The 'Wheels' were at a disadvantage as most of the teams had six members, all of whom seemed experienced and knew the routine. Despite this they were determined to make a good showing.

Alex's team got off to a flying start in the first round which was on music. They benefited from this being Phil's obsession and he had an encyclopaedic knowledge, answering questions with answers as diverse as Rachmaninov and Audioslave. They scored nine out of a possible ten and had a genuine reason to dispute the one they were marked down on as the question was ambiguous. They reluctantly accepted the quizmaster's authority before realising that they shared the lead with two other teams.

Round two was about celebrities and, as it seemed to be based mainly on current television personalities and programmes, which the 'Wheels' never had much chance to watch, they performed poorly, scoring only four.

Round three was a picture round and the 'Wheels' regained some momentum, utilising their combined experience and observation skills.

Round four was sport and, to their amazement, Sandra proved a great asset, knowing the years of Jim Clark's Formula 1 championship wins, Bobby McGregor's Olympic silver in freestyle swimming and John Newcombe's Wimbledon win, all of which took place long before she was born. Inexplicably, the more beer they consumed the easier the answers came to them.

'Films' was the subject of the final round and Alex surprised them and himself by recollecting obscure details to answer questions on 'rom-coms.' Phil's recent visit to Universal and Disney/MGM studios also proved beneficial.

Donny failed to answer a single question that the others didn't already know, but they all enjoyed the evening, producing a creditable performance and finishing third.

In the course of the evening, they'd consumed four rounds of drinks and were rather merry. Although he hadn't partaken of any alcohol, Alex felt a lightness having benefited from the company and camaraderie. He shepherded the others back down the road and into his car, Sandra climbing into the passenger seat with Donny and Phil scrambling into the back.

Without conscious thought he set off south across the river towards McAvoy's house. They declined his invitation to come in for a coffee and instead

travelled further east to drop Phil at his home, a recently built, terraced villa near Cambuslang.

Alex knew Sandra lived with her parents in a detached bungalow in Bishopbriggs, a good quality suburb to the north of the city. He started driving in that direction.

“I'm really sorry to take you so far out of your way, Boss.”

“It's not a problem and I've said to you before to call me Alex except when we're in the office.”

“Okay, Alex, but I'm taking you in the opposite direction from your home.”

“I told you it's not a problem. But listen, I'm feeling a bit hungry. I'm planning to pick up a burger. Do you fancy joining me?”

“You really know how to treat a girl, don't you?”

Alex turned the car into a McDonald's car park, pulled into a parking space and switched off the ignition. “Would you rather go in or should we pick up something from the drive through?”

Sandra unclipped her belt. “It's not food I'm hungry for,” she said and leaned across kissing him on the lips.

Alex was stunned but not in a bad way. He returned her embrace and delighted in the sweetness of her lips contrasting with the sour taste of the beer off her breath. She unclipped his belt to give them greater freedom. Moving her body closer, letting his arms envelope her, she whispered, “I've wanted to do that for a long time.” She pushed his jacket aside and pressed her body against his, each relishing the warmth from the other.

“I'm so glad you did.”

An elderly man walking past the car rapped on the side window. “Away and get a room, move on or I'll call the Polis.”

Both of them burst out laughing until Sandra grasped Alex's hand, looked intently into his eyes and said, “I want to be with you tonight. He was right. We do need to get a room. We can't go back to my place as my parents will be there. Could we go to yours?”

“Are you sure you want this? It's not just the alcohol talking?”

“If it is, it's telling me what I want to hear. I've wanted this for a long time. I've just not felt able to tell you. After seeing that slut playing up to you this afternoon, I decided I shouldn't leave it any longer.”

Alex pulled her head closer and kissed her deeply and hungrily. “It's what I want too.” He pulled back, smiled and turned on the car's ignition.

Just as they pulled out of the parking area, turning back in the direction of Shawlands, Alex's phone rang. He looked quizzically at the screen when he saw Helen's name displayed.

“I'm not answering that,” he said and pressed the cancel button. A few seconds later it rang again showing a voicemail had been received. Again Alex cancelled. Within less than a minute there was a third ringing indicating a text.

“Don't you think you'd better check it?” Sandra suggested

Alex exhaled resignedly and pulled the car into the side of the road.

He pulled the handset out of his pocket. “Fuck!” he exclaimed after reading the screen, “Emergency, phone back as soon as you get this, Craig has gone,” Alex read aloud.

“Oh Christ, you'd better call and see what you can do.”

Alex's mind was in an emotional turmoil with contrasting and contradictory thoughts flashing through at an alarming pace. His feelings of elation from only a few seconds ago were doused, replaced by anger at Helen, maybe at Craig too, for spoiling his evening and heightened by a physical frustration. This was overtaken as he felt a concern for the boy's wellbeing, a fear maybe. What if he'd been abducted? What if Stevenson's murderer had got to him to stop Alex in his tracks? His reaction was to snap a response.

“No, I'll drop you home then I'll call.”

“But I could come with. I can help you find him.”

“No, I don't think that would be a good idea.”

Alex made a U-turn on the road, and within a few minutes he deposited Sandra at her house.

“Please call me as soon as you know. Let me know what's happened. I'll help any way I can.”

Alex grunted an incoherent response as he sped off. He didn't phone back but covered the ten miles across town in record time, driving on autopilot with no awareness or recollection of the journey.

He arrived at the Clarkston house, raced up the pathway and hammered on the door.

Helen ran to answer the door, her eyes red and face tearstained. “Where have you been? I've been trying to call you and you never called back.” The only welcome he received was from Jake and under these circumstances Alex had no time for the dog and pushed him aside. He knew he ought to have called back but was annoyed at Helen's audacity in questioning him. Nevertheless, he realised it was probably caused by her own feelings of worry and insecurity.

“Never mind that, tell me what happened.”

“It started earlier this evening, Craig was being annoying and he'd been winding up Andrew. I thought it was just the normal teenager nonsense. He was talking about his new friends and how he was planning to meet them at the cinema on Wednesday. It was only after he'd been talking for a while that I

realised he was talking about going to a late show and I think it was an eighteen certificate as well. I should have known better than to jump at the bait, but I told him I didn't consider it suitable and there was no way I would let him stay out that late on a school night. Anyway, I thought that was the end of it and went into the kitchen to make some tea when I heard shouting and doors slamming. I went back in and Craig wasn't there, Andrew was giggling and Colin was looking shocked. He told me that Craig had started a rant and was calling me for all the names. He'd told him off and said he shouldn't speak about his mother that way. Craig had then turned on him and Colin told him he was grounded. Craig then came out with a mouthful. His words were, 'You can't fucking tell me what to do. You're not my dad and never can be so don't try and fucking act like it.' He'd then run out and slammed the door.

“I ran after him, but I didn't know where he'd gone. I got my keys and drove about looking for him, but I couldn't find him anywhere.”

Although still deeply concerned and wanting to bring Craig home, Alex was considerably relieved. There was still a problem to solve but it sounded as though his worst fears were unfounded.

Helen continued, “When I came back I argued with Colin. It wasn't really his fault, but I blamed him. He was angry and accused me of being too soft and spoiling the boys. He said it was my fault they were as selfish and uncaring as they were. I was already upset and I told him if that's how he felt then he could get out too. He wasn't wanted anymore. I didn't expect him to go, but he did. He took a sports bag, threw in a few items, and he went. He said he'd collect the rest of his things at the weekend. I couldn't go after him or look for Craig because Andrew would have been left alone. Then I got even more upset when I couldn't get hold of you.”

Alex realised it was the closest to an apology that he would get from her. “Oh, Alex, what have I done? What am I going to do?”

“Don't worry about Colin, he'll be back when he calms down. We need to find out what's happened to Craig though.”

“I know. That's why I'm so worried.”

“What have you done? Who have you spoken to?”

“I asked Andrew if he knew anything and I called a couple of Craig's classmates, but they couldn't tell me anything.”

“I take it Andrew's in bed, but I'm going to talk to him.”

“There's no point, I've already asked him”

“Just give me the benefit of the doubt.”

“Okay, I'll come up with you.”

“No, I'm better doing this alone.”

Andrew and Craig each had their own bedrooms, constructed as proper rooms in the attic, where the hitherto sloping ceiling had been enlarged by the installation of dormer windows to give full head height to most of the room.

As Alex climbed the stairs he heard the click of Andrew's lamp being switched off.

When he went in, the room was in darkness and Andrew appeared to be sleeping soundly. Alex touched the light-bulb to confirm his suspicions and it was red hot. "Good evening," he started.

Andrew drowsily opened his eyes and yawned and then welcomed his father.

Alex sat at the bedside and they talked about what had happened with Craig earlier on. They chatted amiably for several minutes before Alex started asking more probing questions. Alex was a skilled interviewer and before he left the room he knew the names of several of Craig's new friends and, more significantly, that two of them were a couple of years older and lived in Busby, about two miles away.

Alex came downstairs and told Helen what he had found.

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"Don't feel bad, I've got years of experience in knowing how to ask." Alex made a few phone calls and before long he had traced the home addresses and phone numbers for the other boys. He phoned the first and hit the jackpot straight off, speaking with Jamie's mum. When Craig had left home, he had phoned Jamie and then gone straight to his house. They had then met up with Tony and had taken the bus together to East Kilbride where they were going to a late evening showing of a movie the boys wanted to see. Jamie's mum routinely allowed him to stay out till midnight and tonight she was allowing him to be even later. Craig had asked if he could stay over, saying he'd had a fight at home and needed to give it a day before going back. She hadn't been happy about it, but didn't know how to contact Craig's house and he wouldn't give her any information other than to say his mum knew he'd be staying out overnight and was okay about it. Jamie's mum hadn't been convinced but thought it better to allow the boy to stay as he'd at least be safe. Before finishing the call, Alex knew which film they had gone to and the finishing time. He checked his watch and realised it would be coming out in less than ten minutes. He had time to get there or, failing that, at least to the bus station before the boys left. Helen had been listening to Alex's side of the call and he advised what he'd found as he made for the front door. He confirmed that she needn't worry as he'd traced Craig and was racing out to get him.

After some more adventurous driving, Alex was standing at the exit to the cinema as the boys came out. Choosing not to embarrass Craig in front of his

friends, he announced that he'd been in the area and thought he'd drop by to give them a lift. Craig looked quite fearful and didn't risk arguing with his father. The boys piled into the Santa Fe, grateful to avoid having to wait out in the cold and wet for their bus.

After Alex dropped off Jamie and Tony, he drove the car round the corner from their house and stopped. He gave Craig a severe lecture about his inconsiderate behaviour and how it would not be tolerated.

"I hope that was a good film you saw and it was worth it because it's the last you'll see for some time; you've got a debt to repay. We'll sort out a suitable punishment later, but as soon as you get home I want you to apologise to your mum and then go straight to bed. You've got school tomorrow."

"Okay, Dad," he replied sulkily. "What about Colin? Do I have to apologise to him to?"

"The way you spoke to him, yes, you most certainly do. You apologise to him when you get to see him."

Craig thought the answer was strangely worded but didn't feel able to question it and merely agreed.

Alex parked outside the house and led Craig up the path. Helen opened the door when they were only half way and Jake enthusiastically greeted them both. Craig rubbed the dog's head, walked up to his mother and pecked her on the cheek while saying, "Sorry Mum, I shouldn't have behaved like that."

Helen didn't know whether to be more relieved or angry. Her face was flushed and she looked ready to start yelling when she spotted Alex looking stern and shaking his head while holding his finger to his lips as a warning for her to stay quiet.

"I really am sorry, but I'm awfully tired, can we talk about it tomorrow?" Craig said and without waiting for an answer he ran up the stairs to his room.

Alex took Helen's hand and led her back into the lounge. She looked a mess. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying and her makeup had run down her face giving her the colouring of a panda.

"I was so frightened," she said. "I'm still shaking, please hold me." She put her arms round Alex's neck and leaned against him. His arms gently held her, lowering her head to his shoulder.

"I'm so glad you found him and brought him home, but I don't know if I can cope. I don't know what I can do with him. What's happened to us? How did we become this way?" she asked more to herself. "I've made such a mess of things." Great sobs racked her body.

Alex held her close helping her to calm down. He could feel the warmth of her body next to his with her chest heaving close to his.

“I feel so panicked and so alone, please don't leave.”

Alex interpreted her as meaning she needed company for a bit longer and replied, “It's okay, I'm not in any hurry.”

She lifted her head and nuzzled his neck then pulled his head towards her for their lips to meet. She kissed him and nibbled on his lower lip, thrusting her body against his and rubbing against him. He kissed her back, his body reactively hardening. Detecting his arousal, she leaned backwards towards the couch pulling him with her. She lay flat and he was lying over her. “Please stay with me tonight,” she whispered.

Alex was reacting instinctively, his lips parted, his tongue probing Helen's mouth. His hands roamed freely over her torso, pushing aside the thin fabric of her sweater and bra to access her breasts. She was gasping and whispering encouragement. A couple of layers of fabric and the hardness between his legs were all that separated their union. Although exhausted after his long and difficult day, Alex felt strong. It had been some considerable time since he had enjoyed intimate relations with a woman, but today he was being deluged. Images of his day passed before him. Carol Sneddon practically exposed her breasts in a come-on, his passionate embrace with Sandra and the prospect of more if only he hadn't been interrupted by Helen's call and now Helen seeking his physical attentions. He was reminded of the cliché of waiting a long time for a bus and then three come along at once. He really wanted to have sex, he felt a physical need almost. He wanted to have sex with Sandra. He looked down and saw Helen's face, blotchy from her makeup running but nevertheless still beautiful, but it wasn't Sandra. Much as his body was responding reflexively, he knew this was wrong. He didn't want this to happen and certainly not under these circumstances. He visualised Sandra and knew he wanted this to be happening with her and not Helen. His erection faded and he raised himself back to a sitting position.

Helen looked at him. “What's wrong? Are you feeling okay? Let me help you” she said and placed a hand between his legs wanting to stimulate him back into action.

“I'm fine,” he replied, lifting her hand and holding it in his. “I just think I need to go home. Let's not do something we'll regret later,” he replied, not wanting to seem unkind in his rejection.

“You should phone Colin and tell him you want him back. No, better still, send him a text. That way he'll get the message and there won't be scope for discussion or argument.”

Although Alex had never liked Colin, he knew he had a stabilising influence in the house and it was better for the boys to have him here.

Helen sat up on the couch next him and stared down at the floor. "I'm sorry, I don't know what you must think of me. Colin was hardly out the door and here's me trying to drag you into my bed. I was sad and lonely and was just looking for some comfort." Her initial feeling of contrition was overtaken by irritation at her rejection. "I should have known better. You always did take the moral high ground. That's the difference between us. I react to my emotions. You don't have any. That's why we're not together anymore."

The last thing Alex wanted was to get involved in an argument. With a parting comment of "Think what you like, I'm out of here," he made his way towards the door. He could sense Helen's distress before he turned round to see it. Although he was desperate to get away, not wanting further interaction, he still cared deeply for her. After fourteen years of marriage, he couldn't turn his back. He could see how bitterly upset she was and he sat her back down on the couch, speaking gently to her until she regained her composure. Once satisfied she was back in control, he left and drove home, arriving back at the flat shortly before two am.

He sat on the couch, switched on his stereo to a barely audible level and poured himself a large whisky, rejecting his core principle of not drinking to avoid problems. He convinced himself it wasn't to forget, merely to relax. To support his argument he sipped the drink slowly while thinking about Sandra and the evening it could have been. He remembered she'd asked him to call to let her know Craig was okay but felt it was now too late. Instead he sent a brief text stating, 'Craig home and okay, see you in morning.' He'd been awake and constantly active since the rude wake-up call twenty-one hours before. Maybe it was tiredness, maybe relief or possibly the effect of the alcohol working, but in any event, with the glass still in his hand and half full, he drifted off to sleep fully clothed.

Chapter 14

Alex opened his eyes groggily. He blinked a few times until his watch came into focus, then realised he'd overslept, the first time in years. He often didn't bother with an alarm as he normally woke up early without any assistance. Today, he'd meant to set one to ensure he was ready with plenty of time to spare so he could be in the office to prepare for court. Coming home so late and tired, he'd completely forgotten. He jumped to his feet and dashed to the bathroom. Realising he couldn't take time to shave or have his normal, leisurely shower, he quickly splashed cold water onto his face to help revive him and then he cleaned his teeth. He spotted his whisky glass from the night before sitting on the occasional table beside the couch. He couldn't remember putting it there but it still held a sizable measure of Glenlivet, its warm golden glow enhanced by the sparkling Edinburgh Crystal tumbler. He picked up the glass hesitantly, not wishing to waste it, then ruefully poured it down the sink, but not before warming his lungs by inhaling its rich pungent aroma. He grabbed a bag and threw in a clean shirt, underwear and his travel shaving kit, thinking he could take a few minutes to clean up and change once he arrived in the office. As an afterthought he threw an apple in the bag too. Alex suddenly felt very hungry. He ate a sandwich for lunch the day before, but he'd eaten no solid food since, if you didn't count the couple of peanuts he'd munched in the pub. He didn't want to take his car knowing he wouldn't need it today and parking could be a problem, so he walked briskly to Kilmarnock Road and was lucky to pick up a taxi right away. He'd devoured his apple before they'd travelled more than a mile. Alex took time to flick open his phone and saw two texts from Sandra. The first was from hours ago, timed only seconds after the one he'd sent her. It said, "SO GLAD HES OKAY. BEEN WAITING TO HEAR. WILL I COME OVER. I CAN CALL A CAB." The second merely asked if he was okay. Alex took a moment to reply, "SO SO SORRY, SLEPT IN, JUST GOT YOUR MESSAGES." His finger hovered over the buttons for a few seconds more then he typed, "LOVE ALEX." He stared at the message for several more seconds before whispering to himself "fuck it" then he pressed send.

Arriving at Pitt Street, Alex took the stairs two at a time and raced towards his office. Phil caught sight of him and called across, "Is there something I need to know? First Sandra comes in looking like shit and a face like thunder and now

you arrive wearing the same clothes you were in last night and looking like you've been up all night. Just what happened after you two left us last night? Pray tell?"

Alex was in no mood for Phil's banter. "Don't push your luck and remember your lowlife position," he retorted as he retreated into the gents' toilet. He returned less than ten minutes later looking considerably more presentable. He was clean shaven, not as neatly as normal but his facial shadow had now gone. He had washed and he was wearing a fresh, crisply ironed shirt. His suit still looked rather creased and while he fell considerably short of his normal exacting standards, for anyone who didn't know what to expect from him, his look was quite acceptable.

He raced through to his office and packed a number of reports into his briefcase. Alex knew he could be kept waiting at the court for ages and wanted to make best use of the time. He thought he could review his case notes for the trial as well as catching up on developments in the Stevenson, Kerr and other cases he was managing.

Alex was a great believer in teamwork and he prided himself in practicing effective communication with his subordinate officers. He realised his brief dialogue with Morrison fell short and he was more placatory on his return to the office. "Come in here, Phil, for a quick update. Before we start, I shouldn't have snapped at you. Yes, I was up all night. My ex-wife called to say my eldest had gone walkabout and I was up half the night getting him back home and settled. Sandra knew about it and was on standby as she offered to help if needed, but thankfully it wasn't necessary. Now we've got that out the way I need you to tell me what's new before I leave. The car's coming for me in five minutes to take me to the court."

"I'm really sorry, Boss. I hadn't realised and I shouldn't have tried to make fun. You know what I'm like, always the joker? There was no harm intended. Is Craig okay?"

"He's fine. I don't have time to talk about it now so let's get on."

"Sandra and Donny have been in and out. They're on their way to Fife. Sanjay's been busy though, he's been studying some of the property paperwork and he may have come up with something useful. The title deeds for the newsagent shop in the West End show that it has a lock-up out the back, at the other side of a lane. Nothing strange about that, but there's no mention of it in the lease to Mr Singh. I've already spoken with Singh and he knows nothing about it, but he said that he sometimes saw someone coming and going. He particularly remembers seeing a young man. I've sent young Frankie Bruce round to see him with some photos, Findlay and Black amongst them, to see if he recognises them

and I've also put in an application for a search warrant so we can see what's in there. Who knows, we may have discovered the use of the other key we found in the safe."

"Sanjay's done really well there and that's good work from you too. Now I'd better be on my way. You know how much I respect Sheriffs, particularly after yesterday."

"One last thing, we've received the profiler's report. You might want to have a read. Here's a copy to take with you."

* * *

Sandra and Donny arrived at Dunfermline Police Station and were immediately shown into an interview room. There they were met by Inspector Griffiths, who introduced himself and explained he would sit in on the discussion. "I've sent someone to the control room to relieve Pat and send him down here. As instructed, he has not been informed you were coming and has no knowledge that you've even been in contact. I gather this has something to do with a murder inquiry?"

"Yes, that's right," Sandra replied, cautious not to reveal anything unnecessarily.

They sat in silence for a couple of more minutes and then there was a knock on the door. "You wanted to see me?"

"Come in, Pat, take a seat. These two officers are from Strathclyde CID and they've asked to have a word with you. They think you may have some information which can help them. This is Detective Sergeant Sandra McKinnon and Detective Constable Donald McAvoy. Officers, for the record, this is Sergeant Patrick Kennedy."

From the advance checking they did, they knew Kennedy was in his mid-forties but he looked much older. He was of medium height and quite rotund. He had a round, pudgy face with short, grey wisps of hair at his temples and to the back of his head which was otherwise sparse for hair. Sandra had the impression that he had only recently put on a lot of weight as his uniform looked fairly new but its buttons were straining to contain his girth. He reached out his arm to exchange greetings but didn't quite complete the move as his face crumpled and he collapsed into a chair.

"I've known this was coming," he mumbled. "I take it you're here about Stevenson?"

"Yes, that's right," Sandra replied, relieved that Kennedy was seeking to

unburden himself and she wouldn't have to prise information from him.

Kennedy's eyes were downcast, staring at the floor, he couldn't meet their gaze. "Stevenson was a real bastard. He spent his life looking for people's weaknesses. He'd create temptations for them then slice open their souls and pile salt into the wound. He was the worst type of scum you could ever hope not to come across. I'm glad he's dead. I'd like to thank whoever did it, shake their hand and say thank you."

"We know all about Stevenson. We've come here to find out about your involvement."

"There's not much to tell as far as he's concerned, but it's a long story how I came to this."

"Let's just start at the beginning. We've come to hear what you have to tell us and we're not in any hurry."

Kennedy took a deep breath and then he started, "I grew up in Glasgow. I come from Cessnock, next to Ibrox. My mother still lives there in a flat on Paisley Road and I visit her once or twice a month. I met my Peggy twenty years ago and after we were married we moved out to Dunfermline 'cause that's where her family hailed from. I joined the police and loved the job. I moved over to CID. I did well and I was promoted to Sergeant. Then ten years ago Peggy took ill. It took a while before she was properly diagnosed, until they realised it was multiple sclerosis. At first it didn't affect her too much, but her mobility was impaired and her dexterity. She stopped working and went for all sorts of treatments. Her condition advanced over time. It wasn't quick, it seemed to happen in stages, there was no rhyme or reason to it, but it's just been getting worse and worse.

"A couple of years ago now, I took a transfer back to uniform so I could work a desk job with more predictable hours. That way I've been able to be available a lot more to help and care for her. The chiefs have been great and made allowances for my needs, letting me plan my shifts well ahead so I could arrange for carers.

"I try to be there for her as much as I can and I love her as much now as on the day we were married, if anything more. But physically, it's not been the same." Kennedy was leaning forward in his seat, focusing on a spot on the floor between his feet. His head didn't move and tears were running down his cheeks. He swiped them away with his fists, first one side then the other. "This is really difficult to talk about."

"We know, but we need to hear it all," Sandra gently coaxed.

"Peggy and I haven't had sex for some time, and much as I'm happy being with her, she needs a lot of rest and sometimes I just felt that I needed company.

I started using my computer to meet people to talk to. Often they were on the other side of the world and it didn't seem to matter 'cause I was only looking for the company and to have someone to talk to. But then I found a website that was based in Glasgow. At first I'd go on to talk about anything, the news, politics, sport, just about anything. After a while I started chatting to a girl called Linda and we just seemed to click so I looked for her whenever I logged on. We would talk about anything and everything. I told her about Peggy and she was very sympathetic and understanding. Sometimes the conversation got very saucy, even erotic. I used to sign into the site whenever I had the chance, it was like a drug and I became almost addicted. Sometimes, we'd have these very strange conversations like fantasising about being together. Then she suggested we could set up webcams. When I saw her I got such a surprise, she was beautiful and she was young too and she didn't seem to mind that I was older and well, you know? When she suggested we could meet up in Glasgow, I couldn't wait. I told Peggy I'd had a call from an old school friend and was going to Glasgow for a reunion and would stay overnight at my Mum's. I arranged for carers to be with Peggy.

“I met up with Linda. I thought we were only going to have dinner together, but she invited me to stay and I wasn't going to say no. The evening was like a dream. We went to bed together and it was just so amazing. I'd never cheated on Peggy before and I never thought I would, but it was like a release of years of pent up tension. I felt guilty afterwards, but I wasn't sorry. Linda and I spoke afterwards on the website and talked about what had happened and about getting together again, but it never happened.

“Instead I got a call from someone insisting they needed to see me. It turned out to be Stevenson and he showed me the pictures he had, pictures of Linda and me. He told me he wanted money or he'd show them to Peggy. I should have reported it and let him do his worst, but I didn't want Peggy upset. I gave him what money I could, just a few hundred, as I couldn't come up with any more. I don't have much to spare as there's a lot of costs involved in Peggy's care and they're not all paid by the NHS or the Social. Stevenson came back and asked for more, and when I told him there wasn't any, he said he'd find another way for me to pay him. I asked what he meant, but I already knew. He said he'd maybe want me to do a favour or two for him.

“I told him that would never happen and he just said we'd see. I kept waiting to see what he'd want, but he never approached me again. I'd made up my mind I'd report him when he came back and maybe try and set him up, but you've only got my word for that as he never came back. I kept thanking God every day I didn't hear from him because it was another day that Peggy didn't have to suffer knowing I'd betrayed her. I suppose it will all come out now?”

“I'm sorry, I can't answer that as it's not my decision,” Sandra replied honestly.

“There's a couple more formalities we need to check with you,” Donny interrupted. “Can you tell me where you were between the hours of twelve noon and two pm last Thursday 3rd November?”

“I was on duty here in the control room. I had a meal break for about half an hour but was here for the rest of it. The inspector here can confirm that, and if you want, you can check the control room logs.” Griffiths nodded his agreement.

“One more thing,” McAvoy added. “Can you tell me your whereabouts on Sunday night the 6th November?”

“I was home with Peggy, just the two of us.”

“Nobody came round or called?”

“I never saw anybody, but Peggy's sister called and I spoke with her. Probably about nine pm.”

“I think that's all we need for now. Thank you for all your help and for being so candid in your responses. We'll need to have your statement written up and signed.” Sandra was satisfied she had everything they needed and didn't want to prolong the agony. Kennedy hadn't contributed anything that they hadn't already known, but she hadn't really expected him to. She'd had to go through the motions all the same. It would be up to Fife constabulary how they wanted to deal with Kennedy.

* * *

Alex's day was going from bad to worse. After oversleeping and having to race about to arrive in court on time, the rest of the morning went from dead slow to stop. On arrival, he managed to pick up a tuna baguette from the cafeteria to further abate his hunger, but in his rush to eat it, a large dollop of mayonnaise covered fish dropped from the end and landed on his lapel. He immediately wiped it off but a large dark stain remained on the light grey material and his vain attempts to clean it only made the stain worse. He didn't know if it was real or his imagination but Alex worried that the fishy smell was still there as well. Alex, who always took a pride in his appearance, was mortified at the prospect of appearing to be slovenly on the witness stand. The court building was warm so he removed his jacket and carried it over his arm, thereby mitigating the problem.

Alex checked today's run of business for the court and realised there was going to be a long wait before he would be called. He took the opportunity to

talk to some of the procurator fiscal's staff and receive updates on different cases being heard which he had an involvement in, before going to the witness waiting room to read through his papers. The case he was attending today related to a series of break-ins. A team working under Alex's command had been successful in tracking down and apprehending the three brothers who were responsible for the crimes. There was no credible defence as they were caught in possession of stolen goods and a search of their garage found considerably more. Nevertheless, their lawyer, supported by Legal Aid, had encouraged them to plead 'not guilty' and several months after being caught the brothers had finally found their way to court.

Alex had a clear recollection of what had happened and of the evidence he would be expected to give but he diligently re-read his case notes to ensure he wouldn't forget anything important. Satisfied that he was up to speed, he put the notes away and instead picked up the papers Phil had handed him on the way out of the office.

Turning his full attention to the Stevenson/Kerr cases, he read through the profiler's appraisal and wasn't surprised to see his own assumptions being confirmed. The assailant was clearly intelligent and probably middle class with a reasonable or good understanding of police and forensics procedures. He was likely to be middle-aged, above average height, healthy and possibly athletic or a fitness enthusiast. There had been a show of strength and arrogance in his acts suggesting he was used to wielding power. The post mortem attack on Kerr indicated he was very likely to be a closet gay or possibly bisexual and he was seeking to punish Kerr for enticing him. To cover his back, the profiler also made a disclaimer statement that as the assailant was very intelligent, he could be trying to lead them in the wrong direction by providing false clues.

Alex exhaled loudly, tossing the notes back into his bag and, just at that point in time, the fiscal's assistant came through the door to advise him that one of the brother's had not turned up. He had given an excuse claiming he had broken his arm and the Sheriff had granted a continuance.

"Shit, what a bloody waste of time," Alex exclaimed as he collected his jacket and brief case and made his way out the door, calling for a car to pick him up as he walked.

For the second time that day, Alex ran up the stairs to his office, taking them two at a time, and arrived at eleven, only moments before Sandra and Donny returned.

"What's been happening?" he asked Phil.

"Two minutes, Boss, and I'll only need to say it once. Here's Sandra."

"What in God's name's happened to you?" Donny exclaimed eyeing Alex's

weary looking face and badly creased and stained jacket.

“Long story, save it for another time,” he replied, but couldn't help noting the serious concern showing in Sandra's eyes.

“I'm fine,” he followed up. “Now has that warrant come through yet?”

“That's only the start,” Phil replied. “It's just come in and we're ready to go as soon as you are. I've arranged with Connor to have a couple of his lads come in with us to save time. But I've got some even better news, we've also had a sighting of Black and it's been confirmed. He's in Birmingham, staying at the Britannia in the city centre. He'd been trying to disguise himself, grown a beard and dyed his hair, but it's him all right. There's no doubt. We've got enough on him now to put out an arrest warrant. To hell with protecting him, we can just bring him in. If it's okay with you, Boss, we can give the boys from Brum the go ahead and have Black lifted and we can have him up here later today or at worst by morning.”

“Go for it,” Alex confirmed. “Now let's see that lock-up. Phil, Donny, get it set up for thirty minutes time. Sandra, I want to see you in my office now. I want you to give me a debriefing on this morning.”

Alex strode through followed by Sandra, the door closing behind her. His eyes were all over her, absorbing her, looking for some sign, praying almost, that their interaction of the previous night hadn't just been a drunken fumble.

He needn't have worried, “I was hoping more for another sort of debriefing,” she whispered.

He couldn't keep his hands off her; he grabbed her shoulders and drew her to him, their mouths meeting firmly, almost desperately. His hands found their way down her back and over her buttocks pulling her body to his, enveloping her.

It was several seconds before either of them surfaced from their embrace, both gasping for breath but still holding tightly, their cheeks touching and their bodies inseparable.

“This isn't the time or the place, but I want you,” Sandra said.

Alex stood slightly away. “I don't think you need me to tell you my feelings on the matter. I'm so sorry about last night.”

“We'll have other times,” she answered, “maybe even tonight. But what happened after you left? You haven't told me yet.”

Alex ran through the details of his search for Craig, bringing him home and Helen being so upset and needing comforting, carefully missing out her attempts at seduction. He explained about not getting home until very late and falling asleep once he'd sent her the text.

“I don't think I slept at all last night,” she replied, “first waiting to hear what had happened and then hoping you'd call back. Maybe tonight's not a good idea,

we want to both be awake for our first night together.”

Alex laughed, a tight bitter laugh. “You're right of course. I suppose there'll always be problems though, but we want to give ourselves a decent chance.”

“I'd prefer an indecent one if we're going to have a chance.”

“God, with jokes like that you must have been spending too much time with Phil. And talking about Phil, we'd better get moving for this search. Before we go, you'd better fill me in on Fife.”

“And you can tell me about your morning, or maybe better not,” she said looking at his stained and crumpled jacket.

The four of them, accompanied by two of Connor's technicians and a couple of regular officers, made their way out to the West End and the small lane which housed the lock up. Mr Singh and his son came out of their shop to see what was going on and were chased away. The uniformed officers set up a cordon to afford them some privacy.

For what appeared to be no more than a single garage, the locking system was sophisticated. The padlock key from the safe wasn't usable here either, but that wasn't a problem as it only took them a few minutes to disable the locks and lift the roll-up shutter door. Inside the garage, their disappointment was almost palpable when they found the space stacked high with good quality brown wood furniture and object d'art. At first they thought their efforts to suit up to avoid contamination were wasted until crawling through the jumble of collectables, Sandra found two medium-sized safes hidden against the back wall.

Although not raining heavily, there was a clawing smur of dampness in the air and they were wary of exposing the furniture to the open air unprotected. They found a solution by having the scene of crime officers check for any evidence from a number of the largest items nearest the door then moving them outside covered by a tarpaulin. The space this created enabled them to juggle the contents within to establish what was there. It was fortunate so many of them were in attendance as it became a complicated logistical task to move the assemblage of heavy items without causing damage or losing potential evidence. The main focus of their attention was the two safes. Alex didn't recognise the makes or design. Each was light grey in colour and stood the size of a domestic under-counter fridge. They each had an electronic keypad and a key lock. Although they were desperate to gain access, they were wary as the technician warned he hadn't seen this particular design but had come across an eastern European make which was vaguely similar and incorporated a device to damage or destroy the contents if the door was improperly opened. The same technician used his mobile to photograph the safe and send the picture back to Connor for advice. Connor came back within a few minutes to tell them an expert was on his

way but it would take a couple of hours to have him there.

Alex realised there wasn't enough time to usefully go away and return and decided instead to make use of the hiatus by taking the team round to Byres Road for a bite of lunch. The uniforms were left to guard the lock-up while they were away.

The high street was very busy, filled with shoppers and students alike, many milling around, browsing charity shops or just seeking a break in the middle of a damp, dreich Tuesday. They looked in several shops, restaurants and pubs before finding a sandwich bar with a spare table large enough to take them. They gorged on filled ciabatta rolls and doughnuts.

Sandra's fatigued appearance and Alex's dishevelled one gave cause to a few exchanged glances from the others, but Phil, normally the lead in such matters refrained from comment. However, Donny couldn't help himself and, showing unusual bravery, asked Alex if he'd be leaving his jacket at Oxfam on their way out. Alex sportingly accepted the criticism and replied he couldn't as it wasn't good enough for them.

They were on their third round of tea when the call came in to advise them that the lock expert had arrived. Alex quickly settled the bill and they rushed back to the lock-up.

Five minutes of technical wizardry and both doors slid open exposing their contents with no ill effects.

Rather like traditional council employees attending road workings where one man digs while four stand supervising, Alex, Sandra, Donny and Phil oversaw the technicians carefully removing, and labelling the contents of the two safes.

The stash from the first one looked like a pirate's hoard. There were stacks of banknotes and bags containing gold coins, each safely encased in a small plastic sleeve with a stick-on label identifying the coin's type, description and age. There were boxes of jewellery and watches and there was a small velvet bag containing a dozen or more diamonds, each of respectable size and more than one carat.

The second safe was practically empty but its potential value to their investigation by far surpassed the first. There were four, identical, small, plastic boxes, approximately four inches by three by three-quarters of an inch and each carried a small identification plate stating "HD My Passport," the identification tag for a Western Digital external hard drive for use with a computer, either for additional storage or for security back-ups.

"These could be gold dust," Phil stated, vocalising what they were all thinking.

"I'll keep hold of these," the technician stated. "One of our people will need

to try them first to check that they're virus free and that they've not been booby-trapped.”

“I don't know about that,” Alex replied. “This is my investigation and I'm not letting them out of my sight.”

A discussion ensued and it was decided the technician would hold on to the discs but travel back in Alex's car. This was given top priority and the two of them left straight away while the others finished checking over and cataloguing the contents of the lock-up, safely packaging what they wanted to take away before re-sealing the building and applying new police locks.

Once back in Pitt Street, specialist computer experts were summoned to take custody of the disks and check their accessibility. It didn't take them long to report back that they had no problems opening the disks but all the data on them was encrypted and locked behind secure access codes. The next stage would be to try to break the codes and the encryption system, and that was unlikely to be a quick job.

Alex stressed the urgency and then resignedly left them to it, returning to his own office.

Sandra and the lads had not yet returned, so seeing his phone blinking, his first task was to check his voicemails.

The first few messages were fairly routine advising or confirming arrangements for meetings, training courses and the like. There was a courtesy call from Bill Forbes, following up on their chance meeting at 'La Brava' and suggesting a coffee together and then a call from Charlie Hunter saying he had something really interesting to tell him.

Alex dialled through. “Hi, Charlie, I just got your message and you've got me intrigued.”

“I'm glad you've come back. I just wanted to tell you we followed up on your lead to check out Geoff Thomson and it proved most interesting, quite amusing actually, if it wasn't so serious. If you've got a few minutes, drop in and I'll tell you all about it.”

“How can I resist an invitation like that? I'll be straight over.”

“Good, I'll have the coffee ready.”

Only a few minutes later, Alex knocked on the door then stepped into Hunter's office and, true to his word, there was a fresh cafetiere of filter coffee sitting on the table along with a couple of mugs, sugar, milk and a dish piled high with shortbread fingers and chocolate biscuits.

“Is this how you normally live or is it a special occasion.”

“Well, it's not too often we manage to lure you along here, but in truth there's some compensations come with this rank, at least in this office, so enjoy.”

Having hardly eaten the day before, Alex had already compensated today starting with a healthy apple but then descending to the tuna baguette, mostly eaten although he'd worn some, a ham and cheese ciabatta and a large jam doughnut. Alex didn't usually eat sweets and cakes, and although it was some time ago, he could still taste the doughnut's sickly sweetness. However, he was grateful for the hospitality and camaraderie and didn't want to appear ungrateful so he nibbled on a shortbread biscuit while relishing the nutty richness of the freshly brewed beverage.

“Much as I enjoy your company, are you going to tell me what's happened?”

“You always were impatient, Alex. You need to learn to relax and appreciate the better things in life and, let me tell you, this is one of them.”

Alex looked up expectantly.

“You'll remember our conversation on Sunday? Well, I decided to give a try to what we were talking about. I told Thomson we were short-listing a few candidates to work in his department and we'd like him to interview them as we'd be particularly interested in his opinion. He sounded quite chuffed, especially when we told him he'd be carrying out the interviews himself. We never made any promises to transfer who he wanted but there was a fairly strong inference.

“Anyway, we set him up with five candidates. Two were men who had very good credentials, experienced officers with good to excellent computer skills and sound financial understanding, one aged late twenties and the other in his thirties. Three were women. The first was aged in her forties and married with three kids, rather plain looking but impeccable experience, the job description could have been written for her. She's an experienced officer with a degree in psychology and a diploma in accounting. She's had experience working in our data control department and even had a three-month secondment with the serious fraud office. The second one is aged late twenties and again seems fairly plain looking, a little bit plump although not really fat, no bust but quite a pleasant looking face actually, and she's deliberately made herself up not to make the best of herself. Now for the third one, it's no doubt wrong for me to describe her like this but she's a real dolly bird, could have been a model, a real looker. She's twenty-six years old. Both of the younger women have okay experience but nothing to compare with the other three.

“It's actually genuine that we're looking for more staff to transfer to this department and all five of them applied along with a few others. We briefed the five of them and the last girl in particular as to what this is all about.

“As we spoke about, we set up the interviews in one of our rooms and had video and sound recording switched on. We have signs all round the room

stating that video recording is used in the room so he can have no complaints. It's like we expected. After a few minutes he forgot about the cameras and just acted his normal self, or maybe it would be more accurate to say abnormal self.

“The first three interviews went as we might have wanted and expected. He'd designed a series of questions and he'd asked the same ones to each of them and took notes of their answers. He'd then gone on to ask some more open questions and tried to draw out how keen each of them were and what their main interest was and their reason for applying. It was quite professional and impressive, to be fair, except that judging by his notes and his probing he seemed to take a negative approach to the older woman and she'd been the best sounding candidate. In summary, that may have looked a wee bit suspicious but nothing untoward. Everybody forms their own natural prejudices and, while we may not like it, we can't legislate against it.

“The second female candidate, however, was a bit different. He was clearly much easier in his questioning and formed some very positive notes which didn't really have much justification. On that one, we had clear justification to call his judgement into question and perhaps restrict his seniority or even his continuance on the project. We could have given some confidential feedback to Marwick's but it wouldn't have gone any further than that.

“The final candidate however was the 'piece de resistance.' There can be no question he was influenced by her appearance and completely altered his approach to the interview. Rather than try and describe it, would you like to see the recording?”

“Yeah, that would be interesting.”

Charlie turned down the office lighting and switched on the television and DVD player. Alex could see the inside of a smallish office set out with a small wooden table and four lightly cushioned upright chairs. A young man was sitting with his back to the camera, reading through some files and jotting down notes. He heard a knock on the door and the man called out, “Come in.” The door opened and a very pretty young lady stepped in. Charlie had been accurate in his assessment. She must have been about five nine tall with a cute round face with sparkling blue eyes framed by flowing blonde curls that bounced off her shoulders as she walked. It looked like the start of a shampoo commercial. She was wearing a tight fitting white blouse and neat black skirt which rested half way down her thighs. The outline of her white frilly bra could be plainly seen through her blouse's thin fabric and her clothes did nothing to disguise her shapely form.

Thomson jumped to his feet and moved towards the door to greet her, his arm outstretched. “Hi, I'm Geoff Thomson, you must be Adele Simpson. Please

come in and make yourself at home.” He grabbed her hand and closed his second hand round it in a friendly greeting, one not afforded the other candidates, Charlie advised him. He also held on to her hand a little bit too long for comfort as he guided her towards a chair and sat down in the adjacent chair and not across from her.

“I understand you'd be interested in coming to work with me in the new pilot financial investigations unit. Please tell me about yourself and your education and experience.”

Adele took a few minutes to answer the question providing a competent but not exceptional presentation. Alex watched as Thomson then asked a couple of his standard questions on technical issues, but while observing this, Charlie advised him that what he asked was far fewer and less rigorous questions than asked to the other candidates. Alex also noted the failings in his interview technique where he was often answering his own questions. He remarked on this and Charlie confirmed he had not done the same in the other interviews.

“Why are you interested in coming to work in this department?”

“It's really my dream job,” Adele answered. “I've always wanted to get into this type of work. I'm interested in accounts and in computers and I've been with the police now for three years. I'd be able to put all my interests together, and I'm sure I'd love it.”

“Do you think you're cut out for this type of work? You know, being mainly based in an office all day?” As he asked the question, Thomson stood up and paced around the room.

“Oh yes, it's my dream job. I'd give anything to get it.”

“Oh yes.” Thomson walked up behind her and stood close. He wrapped his hands around her shoulders and gently squeezed. “You know I could help you. I'm the supervisor of the department and I might be able to help you get this job.”

Adele gave a slight shudder at the contact but replied, “I'd like to be in a job like this and maybe try for some qualifications at the same time.”

“We thought of going in and breaking it up at that point but Adele seemed to be handling herself okay, she didn't appear distressed and knew we were there if she needed us so we held back a little.”

“I could help you. If you were in the job and working for me then I could help you with getting qualifications too. I've got influence with the Institute of Chartered Accountants.” As he spoke, he ran his hands from her shoulders down her arms and then across her chest, lightly touching and massaging her breasts in the process.

Adele lifted his hands free of her and held them in her own hands. As she

did she replied, “Mr Thomson, I hardly know you. I do want the job, though,” and she looked appealingly at him.

“We'll just need to see what we can do then,” he replied huskily, displaying a beaming smile. He was clearly aroused from their exchange.

“We waited for his review and sure enough he recommended employing Adele. He 'justified' his choice on the basis she showed more enthusiasm than the other candidates and was more free to work the hours required than officers with the responsibility of children. A lot of other guff as well, but he said nothing which had any credence.

“We've spoken with Marwick's and told them he can't continue working with us and we've already taken him out of the job. When they heard the reason, they confirmed he has no future with them either. The only question is whether we should pursue him for sexual assault or just take him aside and scare the shit out of him. We've spoken about it with Adele and she's prepared to go the prosecution route, but she's not keen. We think we might take Thomson aside and explain a few things to him. Try a bluff and make him the offer not to pursue, providing he agrees to seek professional help and be listed on the sexual offenders register. That way he could retain his family life. He'd need to find another job but he'd be able to stay in his profession. He'd get the help he needs and we'd have the justification to keep a close eye on him. We think he might go for it and it'd be a win-win if he does.”

“It sounds good to me. Can I tell Sandra as she's the one who gave us the information to start the ball rolling?”

“I don't see a problem as long as she knows it has to be kept confidential.”

Chapter 15

Alex was jubilant as he returned to his office. The others had all returned and were looking through the inventory of what had been found in the safes. Alex explained they were still awaiting news on the contents of the discs. Although it could be available anytime, it was more likely to not come through until the next day. He took Sandra to one side and discreetly shared the news about Thomson.

The techies hadn't got any further with the registrations on the Passat or the Fiesta so Alex suggested getting Fitzpatrick back to study footage taken from cameras that may have captured the journey anywhere between the West End and South Side in the hope of getting a better image. It would be another difficult job for him, but far less onerous than the previous one, as they knew positions and times before and after and they could greatly narrow down the field of study.

Midway through the afternoon, to their dismay, they received a report from Birmingham police advising that Black had slipped their net. He must have somehow realised they were closing in on him and made a runner just in time. When they went to his hotel room, he wasn't there although he'd left various belongings behind. He hadn't checked out of his room yet but as he'd paid cash in advance the hotel wasn't too concerned. All the local police forces had been alerted, although their chances of finding him were slim as New Street station was only a stone's throw away from the Britannia and Black could have gone in any direction from there.

Alex suddenly felt very weary. It was already late afternoon and it had been a very heavy day. He suspected tomorrow could be even more intense so he advised the others he had some other business to attend to and was leaving early, with the rider to call him immediately if anything new was found.

Sandra followed him outside and caught up with him in the corridor, grabbing his arm. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine, just run a bit ragged and I want to recharge my batteries before the next onslaught."

"I've been on duty since first thing, as I needed to be through in Fife early. I've already completed a full shift. How about I sign out too and we go back to your place?" She gave a wicked smile and squeezed his arm affectionately.

Alex scanned the corridor to ensure they couldn't be seen or heard. "I'd like

that very much, if you're really sure.”

“It'll take me a few minutes to clear away everything I need to and then I'll be ready. I've left my car in the multi-storey in Elderslie Street. It's on the second floor, near the lift. Take my keys and wait for me. If it's okay with you, I'll swing past home first and pick up an overnight bag.” She pressed the key chain into his hand and disappeared back into the office. Alex walked towards the car park with a new spring in his step and he tried to remember what state he'd left his flat in this morning. Had he even made up the bed and then with relief he recollected it was okay as he hadn't used it the previous night because he'd fallen asleep on the sofa.

Less than an hour later they'd completed their journey out to Bishopbriggs and then back to Shawlands. Alex opened the door of his flat and they stepped in, but before he even had time to close the door, Sandra had wrapped her arms around him, practically smothering him with her embrace. Kicking the door shut, they staggered interlocked with each other until they collapsed on the bed urgently fumbling with each other's buttons to access bare skin to touch and caress.

Alex's shirt was undone and his belt was loose with his trousers unclipped and his fly down while Sandra's blouse was wide open and her bra undone when once again they were interrupted by a phone ringing, this time it was the flat's landline. Neither paid much heed while it rang six times followed by the outgoing message from the voicemail.

Their attention was however caught when the sharp buzz was followed by Helen's frantic yell, “Alex, what the hell are you playing at? What are you doing making arrangements for the kids without telling me? I really think it's a bit off sending Bill Forbes to pick up Andrew from school without letting me know first. I was sitting waiting for him, with his dinner all ready, and he didn't turn up. It was only when I phoned his wee friend Ahmed that I found out about it. He said someone had driven up and told Andrew he was taking you and him to the Clyde game tonight. For goodness sake, it's a school night. Is this some weird way of yours to teach Craig a lesson? If it is, you might have at least let me know first,” and the line went dead.

In a panic, Alex was across the room in two strides and phoned Helen back. “Tell me exactly what happened.” he instructed.

“Alex, what's this about? You're frightening me.”

“I'll tell you after, just stay calm and tell me exactly what you know and how you found out.”

“I told you already, in the phone message. Andrew didn't arrive home from school and I went to phone round his friends. I called Ahmed first because I

knew they often walked home together.”

“You said Bill Forbes picked him up, how did you know?”

“I quizzed Ahmed about what he was saying and I asked him to tell me what had happened, word for word. See I've learned something from your job. He said a silver car stopped next to them and a man called over to Andrew by name. He said, 'Remember me? I'm Bill Forbes. I saw you on Saturday with your Dad at the restaurant. I'm a friend of your Dad's and we work together.' He said he'd got tickets for tonight's Clyde versus Alloa match at Broadwood. He said he was taking you and him to the game so you'd have a chance to see a real game of football, even if it was third division. That's what Ahmed told me he'd said. Are you now telling me you didn't set this up? Oh my God! What can we do?”

“Stay calm, leave it to me, I'll sort it out,” Alex said, feeling anything but calm himself.

He quickly reassembled his clothing, noticing that Sandra had already done the same. He grabbed his leather jacket on his way out of the bedroom.

“I guess this just isn't meant to happen,” he ventured as he ran through the hallway.

“I'm coming with you,” she called. She was only one step behind and clearly not taking 'no' for an answer.

Alex didn't have time or energy to argue. He picked up his car keys and mobile before pulling the door closed. They were down the stairs in seconds and lunged towards his car, racing out of the parking space with a screech of tyres and leaving behind a smell of burning rubber. “I'm sure I remember where Forbes lives. He has a villa in behind the Old Mearns Road on the way out to Mearnskirck.”

As Alex manoeuvred at speed along the narrow side streets, his mobile rang, the screen showed it was Phil. He nodded to Sandra and she reached across and pressed the receive button on the 'Parrot.'

“Hi, Boss, I was just about to call it a night when Fitzpatrick gave us a result on the cars. I'm afraid it wasn't much use though, but something else to write off. The Fiesta's driver was a nurse and has a good alibi and you won't believe who had the Passat.”

“I think I just might, Phil. It wouldn't be our very own ACC William Forbes would it? The owner of a silver Passat?”

“How on earth did you know that? Anyway that cancels out one line of enquiry.”

“On the contrary, I'd bet a pound to a penny you might also find a few nice photos of him and David Kerr when you finally get into the storage disks.”

“You can't be serious?”

“I'm sorry to say I am. What's more he's abducted my son. I need to find him and find him fast. I want every unit and patrol mobilised. I want him apprehended now. Find out everything you can about what he has: houses, cars, and the like, anything that might help me trace him. I'm heading for his home right now.”

“How can I put out an arrest warrant for an ACC?”

“I don't care how, just do it!” Alex bellowed. He thought for a second and then continued, “Say I've instructed it and point any flack in my direction. Maybe try calling Charlie Hunter, he owes me a favour. But whatever happens, just do it and do it quick!”

Alex returned his full attention to his driving, racing up Langside Road and left onto Muirend Road. There was a long tailback of traffic at the lights on the T- junction with Clarkston Road. Alex switched on his hazard lights and, to a cacophony of horns, drove up the wrong side of the road forcing a couple of cars onto the pavement. Seeing the steady flow of traffic on Clarkston Road, he avoided the junction, instead using a rat-run he knew by turning sharply right into the residential area, first down Windlaw Gardens then up through the Ormondes before forcing his way back out, turning right onto Clarkston Road from just opposite the La Brava restaurant where he had been only a few days before. Advancing along the busy main road, Alex knew to expect another tailback at the Clarkston Toll roundabout and turned off for a second rat-run at the Stamperland shops turning left then right and following parallel to the main road, ignoring the 'twenties plenty' speed limit and emerging at the other side of the roundabout. Alex followed another back road to emerge onto the Old Mearns Road and progressed southbound along the trunk road. After a mile or two, he was just preparing to turn off towards the up market housing estate where he remembered Forbes lived when he saw the silver Passat emerge with Forbes driving.

Alex floored the pedal even harder causing a jab of pain to spring through his leg from the constant pressure and tension. There were two other cars between Alex and the Passat, and despite Alex's lights flashing and horn sounding, they would not move across.

The phone rang, Phil calling again.

Again Sandra pressed the accept button and Phil confirmed, “You were right, Boss. We've got into some of the photos and there are three different sets of David Kerr with different men and ACC Forbes is definitely one of them. I've called Superintendent Hunter as you suggested and he said he'd arrange the warrant.”

“Good, now I need some backup as quickly as possible. I'm driving south on

the Old Mearns Road and Forbes is a few cars ahead of me. I need support and I need it now.

“I’ll get right on to it, Boss.”

One of the cars turned into a side street and there was now only one car between Alex and Forbes, and this one was indicating right to turn onto the Eaglesham Road. There were no vehicles in front of Forbes now and he sped forward and turned left onto the open countryside of the Humbie Road with Alex in rapid pursuit. There was only a glimmer of light from the sky on this very cloudy evening, and with little traffic to obstruct them, they flew down the narrow winding road like half-blind, rally car drivers, side spinning at corners. Alex’s confidence grew when he caught sight of a slow moving tractor in the distance coming towards them and taking up a large part of the road. He knew Forbes would have to slow down. However, Forbes must have spotted it too because he turned off onto a farm track and headed up towards the hills. Alex switched his Santa Fe to constant four-wheel drive and with the extra traction was quickly able to gain ground, spraying up a wall of mud and earth behind him as the vehicle accelerated over the countryside terrain. Forbes struggled to keep control of his vehicle travelling at speed through the dark muddy track with open fields to either side. The Santa Fe was almost touching the rear bumper when Forbes skidded on a corner, slid to the side and the offside wheel hit a tree stump and fractured its axle. Alex skidded to a halt beside it and he was out of the car in a second, but still not quickly enough.

Forbes was out the car before him and dragged something out of the back seat to stand beside him.

It was a few seconds before Alex realised it was Andrew standing next to Forbes. He could see that his wrists had been handcuffed behind his back, a scarf was tied round his head covering his eyes and a handkerchief was stuffed in his mouth as a makeshift gag, making his restricted breathing come in loud snorts. He could hardly stand as his whole body was shivering so much. The cold night air might well have chilled the boy, but that was not the cause. Even in the limited light provided by the watery moon, supplemented by sideways illumination from the vehicles’ headlights, Alex could see Andrew’s pale complexion, terror ravaged face and tear-stained cheeks and knew he was shivering from fear. Forbes was standing behind him, almost using him as a shield with one hand gripping his shoulder to prevent him from bolting.

“I think we need to talk, Alex.” Forbes called across. He was holding something in his right hand which reflected light and Alex was fearful of it being a knife.

“Let the boy go then we can talk.”

“I don't think so, Alex, young Andrew's my insurance policy. That's why I took the time to collect him in the first place, as a bargaining tool if I was stopped.”

“He can't help you, Bill. I can't do anything to change things, it's not up to me anymore. Everyone knows it's you we've been looking for. They've got copies of the photos. Stevenson kept backup files in a lock-up off Byres Road. Let the boy go, he's done nothing to you and he can't help you.”

“Well, I'll need you to do something to help me then, and I'll be keeping Andrew to make sure you do what I want. You owe me, Alex, and it's payback time.”

“What do you mean? How do I owe you?”

“I saved you from Stevenson, he really didn't like you. He told me you beat up on him. He wanted me to set you up and I refused.”

“That hardly means I owe you. Your logic is a bit flawed there. Are you saying because you didn't do something bad to me that I owe you? Most of the planet have never done anything bad to me, do you think I owe all of them too?”

“That's not the point. Stevenson had it in for you and said he'd let me off if I screwed it up for you. I refused to do it for him and that's why you owe me. He told me you beat him up. Is that true?”

“I've had my run-ins with him and some weren't too pleasant, but I wouldn't say I beat up on him,” Alex lied.

“Stevenson said you did. He said you beat him and stole from him.”

“That's ridiculous. Anyway, this isn't about me, Bill. I want to try and help you but I don't understand how all this came about. Tell me how you got involved.” Alex wanted to play for time knowing reinforcements would be on their way.

While this confrontation was going on, Sandra had slipped out of the passenger door. Unseen because of the relative darkness, and using the SUV as a shield, she carefully made her way round behind where Forbes was standing. She realised she had the small recording device in her pocket which she always carried for impromptu interviews and she switched it on.

“You must know most of it already. It all started when the baby died and everything went downhill. Anna and I fell out of love and I had no thoughts of being with another woman. The idea repulsed me for some reason. I was away down south for a training course and I had a free evening and found my way into a bar and it turned out to be a gay bar. I wasn't looking for it, it wasn't intentional, it just happened by accident. I got talking with this young lad and we enjoyed each other's company. I can't even remember his name now. Anyway, I ended up back at his place. Events took their course and afterwards I felt

released, I felt free after months of loneliness. It wasn't real, of course, but it gave me some satisfaction. Nothing else happened for ages after that, but a couple of months after Anna's accident, I went back looking for him. He wasn't there but I found someone else and then again every few months. It couldn't be more often because I had to be well away from Glasgow where no one knew me."

"Why, Bill? There's no stigma in being gay nowadays."

"Don't be naïve Alex. Being a senior police officer in Glasgow? Can you imagine? Do you think I'd ever have made ACC if it had been known? Besides all the work I do with children's charities. Can you imagine the stories?"

"It shouldn't have made any difference."

"It shouldn't, but it would have. It does. Anyway, sitting alone almost every evening, I started using the internet for company. I found Stevenson's site by chance and I got suckered in. I've been watching how your investigation's been going so I realise that you already know how it worked. I've been able to follow your progress and I could tell you were closing in on me."

"The investigation's been kept under wraps"

"Alex, for God's sake man, I'm in the command corridor, you can see just about everything that's happening from there. Anyhow, you know how Stevenson worked and this lad, Black. I was groomed, that's the only word for it, and I didn't have a clue. I met up with Kerr and I was so drawn in by the thought of having someone local I could see in private and more often than once every few months. Then I heard from Stevenson and it was like being hit by a hammer. My whole world imploded. He said he'd keep the photos under wraps if I took care of you. He said he hated you and wanted me to set something up to destroy you. I told him I wouldn't and he could do what he liked with me. He backed down and said he'd sort you himself and asked me for money instead. I'm not short, so I agreed. I shouldn't have because he knew he had me then. His demands started getting bigger and more often. I went to see him last week and we met at his shop. He demanded thousands and I told him I didn't have it. He said he knew I was treasurer of the Children's Cancer Charity and I was holding their money. He said he wanted it and it was up to me to cover it up, stage a robbery or something. I just totally lost it. I was prepared to give him what I had, the money meant nothing. But then he asked for the charity's money. It was the one really good thing I've been doing with my life and he wanted to ruin it. When I said no, he laughed at me and talked about how he'd ruin me and where would the charity be then. I completely saw red. I lifted the first thing that came to hand and drove it into him. It was sheer rage. I didn't know what I was doing until I'd done it. When I realised, I tried to cover up. I tried to clear away any

evidence that I'd been there and I checked to ensure he didn't have anything in the shop which would have given me away. I disabled his security and removed the recording then I stripped his computer and cleaned up his office so I didn't leave any traces.”

“Clear up one mystery for me, please. How did you get out without being spotted and without spreading blood?”

“That would have been a problem if Stevenson didn't have a rack of vintage clothes. There was a lot of blood near the body and I didn't want it spread any further in case it could be seen from outside the shop, at least not until after I'd got away. I also didn't want to be seen leaving the shop covered in blood. I found some large-sized nineteen-sixties gear that fitted over my clothes and I changed shoes as well. If it hadn't been the West End, I'd probably have looked a bit out of place, but around there anything goes, and besides, my car was close by.

“When I got out, I drove for a bit and then smeared mud on my number plates before heading over to Stevenson's house and I checked and cleared out anything incriminating I could find there.”

“So much for Stevenson, why did you go after Kerr?”

“I really don't know. I found Stevenson's indexing system in Black's house so I knew where to find Kerr. I suppose I wanted to be sure he'd keep quiet or maybe I just wanted to see him. I don't really know. It was after the charity dinner on Sunday night. I drove up and waited outside his door just to check him out. I saw him going into the flat and went to speak to him. He invited me in and said no one was at home. He led me towards his room and I followed. He told me he wanted money too. He didn't try to blackmail, me, not directly, but said he needed the money he'd been earning from Black to survive. He said he wanted me to make it up and maybe he'd be nice to me. He didn't state a threat, but I thought this is starting all over again. I couldn't stand the idea and it just happened. I was in my dress kilt outfit and I have an old Sgian-Dubh. It's the real thing, not one of these plastic replicas. It's sharp as a razor, passed down through my family for generations. I was so angry. I don't even remember it happening and then I saw he was dead in front of me.”

“You mutilated the body?”

“I don't remember anything about that.”

“You cleared up any traces of being there?”

“Yes, I remember being covered in blood. I've got rid of the whole outfit, burned it.”

“Yes, but you had gloves and bootees.”

“I had them in my Sporrán.”

“So you knew something was going to happen?”

“I didn't know. I just went prepared. You know me, always the boy-scout.”

“What about Mrs Kerr? She'd done nothing to you.”

“No, I'm so sorry about her. She wasn't meant to be there. I thought the house was empty, but she opened the door just as I was getting ready to leave. She saw who I was and she'd have remembered. I hadn't intended to hurt her but she'd seen me and would have recognised me again. I couldn't just let her go.”

“It's all over now. Let the boy go. I'll try and help you all that I can.”

“No, he stays with me. He's my passport out of here. I'll get down to Stranraer and take the ferry to Ireland. I'll let him go unharmed once I get there. Now give me your keys, and your phone. I won't hurt him if you do what I say.”

Just at that point, Andrew's knees gave way, and despite Forbes grip on his shoulder, he slipped towards the ground.

“I can't do that, Bill.” Alex stepped forward attempting to scoop up the child, but in an instant the blade flashed through the air slashing downwards. It narrowly missed his neck but caught his shoulder and cut through his jacket slicing into his chest and also catching his arm. If it hadn't been for the deflection off the leather, the force of the blow would very probably have reached his throat. Alex dropped to his knees, alongside his son, blood pouring from his wound.

“I'm sorry, Alex, I didn't want to do that. Now give me the keys.”

Bill's full attention was on Alex so he didn't see Sandra creep around behind him. Only seconds after he lunged at Alex, she released a karate kick to the rear of his thigh causing his leg to collapse and she immediately followed this by spinning round and delivering a straight arm jab directly to the centre of his face, instantly breaking his nose and rendering him unconscious. Sandra took a moment to check he was incapacitated and to retrieve the Sgian-Dubh before checking on Alex. To her relief, his injury didn't look life threatening, but he was bleeding profusely. She quickly removed her coat, stripped off her blouse and ripped it apart as a temporary dressing to stem the flow. As she tried to tend his wound, he pushed her away telling her to check on Andrew instead.

She lifted Andrew to his feet and spoke softly, reassuring the boy as she walked him round the car to avoid him seeing the carnage while she removed the gag and blindfold. Andrew was unharmed although rather distressed from hearing but not seeing what had been going on.

“Is Dad okay?” He cried in a very frightened whisper.

“He's fine. He has a bad cut but it's not serious. I'll take you to see him in a minute.” Sandra sat him into the back seat of the Santa Fe and told him to stay there. Then, leaving him alone, she went back to Forbes to look for the keys for the cuffs, which she found in his pocket. She next checked on Alex. He wanted

to stand and asked for her assistance, but she persuaded him to stay put, although helped him to sit up, leaning against Forbes' car, with his jacket covering his wound. She returned and undid the cuffs and told Andrew to sit still for a moment longer. Then she went back to secure them on Forbes' wrists, while he was still unconscious. She kept her promise and collected Andrew, bringing him round to see his father. Before she could stop him, Andrew threw himself forward wrapping his arms round his father's neck and she saw Alex wince trying to suppress a yelp. She pulled Andrew back and was about to phone for an ambulance when she heard the sirens announcing the imminent arrival of two police cars. So instead, she returned her attention to again check and tend Alex's injuries.

“That's the second bloody jacket I've ruined in a day,” he complained as she neared him.

The newly arrived police car had a first aid kit which was used to make a better dressing for his wound. Then the two officers manhandled Forbes and threw him into the back of their vehicle.

They assisted Sandra in getting Alex to his feet and into the passenger seat of the Hyundai. Sandra made for the driver's seat and sped them across to Hairmyres Hospital, only a ten minute journey away. On the way, she phoned Helen to say that Andrew was fine and she should meet them at the hospital. Helen was relieved but worried at the same time.

One hour later, Alex had received emergency treatment to stitch his wounds, and as the blade had scraped the wall of his lung, he had been admitted overnight as a precautionary measure. He was given a private, side room. Being a senior police officer had certain advantages.

Andrew was thoroughly checked over and pronounced to be physically fit so he was released. His spirits made a remarkably quick recovery and he appeared to be not at all troubled by his earlier ordeal. He was more worried about his father, but once he'd confirmed that Alex was okay, his biggest issue was having missed attending the Clyde football match which Bill Forbes had enthused about and promised him. To make matters worse, he suffered further disappointment when he heard that yet again, Clyde had lost at home.

Helen had been distraught on hearing about Alex's injury and what a close call both he and Andrew had had. She'd been unable to reach Craig and not wanting to panic him had left a text for him to call her, but hadn't yet received a reply. She'd have liked to have stayed longer with Alex at the hospital, but knew her first priority was to get Andrew safely home and settled and to inform Craig what had happened. She'd eyed Sandra with some suspicion. She seemed unconvinced about how Sandra happened to be there with Alex and available to

help rescue Andrew. She nevertheless, was very grateful.

Several other police officers came by to check on Alex and hear what had happened and it was some time before the room cleared, leaving Alex and Sandra alone.

They were both elated that in the space of only a few days, they had solved three murders, apprehended the assailant, and in the process they had also broken a blackmail crime-ring bringing to light a series of other offences involving some very senior figures. Thinking more on a personal level, he looked up and smiled at her. “It seems every time we try to go back to my place some emergency comes between us. Maybe someone's trying to tell us something?”

“I think they're telling us we need to meet somewhere else,” she replied as she closed the privacy curtain around the bed, opened her rain jacket and leaned over to kiss Alex on the lips.

In the distance a phone rang, summoning someone else to another emergency.

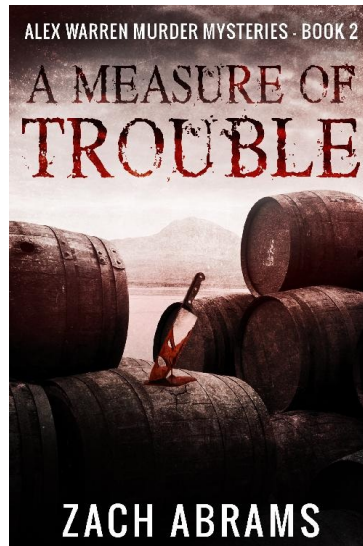
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Author Note

Thank you for reading *Made a Killing*, I hope you enjoyed it. If so, I would be very grateful if you'd leave me a rating and review of the book.

Next in the Series

A Measure of Trouble



A cold February morning in Scotland begins with the discovery of a body, as Hector Mathewson is found dead within the cask room of his own distillery.

While directing the hunt for the murderer, D.C.I. Alex Warren needs to balance his own turbulent personal life. Their plentiful suspects have motives ranging from greed and nationalism to adultery and revenge.

A Measure of Trouble is a gripping tartan noir thriller set in Glasgow. This is a standalone mystery and can be enjoyed even if you haven't read other books in the series.

[**A Measure of Trouble**](#)

About the Author



In his successful career in commerce and finance, Zach Abrams spent many years writing reports, letters and presentations, and it's only fairly recently when he started writing novels. "It's a more honourable type of fiction," he declares.

Zach lives in Scotland, but spends much of the year in the Languedoc region of France.

* * *

To learn more about Zach Abrams, visit his [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).