

***Bloody Women: A critical-creative examination of
how female protagonists have transformed
contemporary Scottish and Nordic crime fiction***

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Abstract

This study will explore the role of female authors and their female protagonists in contemporary Scottish and Nordic crime fiction. Authors including Val McDermid, Denise Mina, Lin Anderson and Liza Marklund are just a few of the women who have challenged the expectation of gender in the crime fiction genre. By setting their novels in contemporary society, they reflect a range of social and political issues through the lens of a female protagonist. By closely examining the female characters, all journalists, in Val McDermid's Lindsay Gordon series; Denise Mina's Paddy Meehan series; Anna Smith's books about Rosie Gilmour; and Liza Marklund's books about Annika Bengtzon, I explore the issue of gender through these writers' perspectives and also draw parallels between their societies. I document the influence of these writers on my own practice-based research, a novel, *The Invisible Chains*, set in post-Referendum Scotland.

The thesis will examine and define the role of the female protagonist, offer a feminist reading of contemporary crime fiction, and investigate how the rise of human trafficking, the problem of domestic abuse in Scotland and society's changing attitudes and values are reflected in contemporary crime novels, before discussing the narrative structures and techniques employed in the writing of *The Invisible Chains*. This novel allows us to consider the role of women in a contemporary and progressive society where women hold many senior positions in public life and examine whether they manage successfully to challenge traditional patriarchal hierarchies. The narrative is split between journalist Megan Ross, The Girl, a victim of human trafficking, and Trudy, who is being domestically abused, thus pulling together the themes of the critical genesis in the creative work. By focusing on the protagonist, the victims and raising awareness of human trafficking and domestic abuse, *The Invisible Chains*, an original creative work, reflects a contemporary society's changing attitudes, problems and values.

Keywords: women, crime fiction, female protagonists, Scottish, Scandinavian, Val McDermid, Denise Mina, Lin Anderson, Anna Smith, Liza Marklund, domestic abuse, human trafficking, gender, feminism

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Table of Contents

Creative Component

The Invisible Chains 7–258

Critical Component 259–264

- I. Research statement 259
- II. Creative genesis 260-261
- III. Critical genesis 261
- IV. The Post-Referendum Context 261-262
- V. The Scottish-Nordic Pairing 262
- VI. Gender theories and feminist crime fiction 262-263
- VII. Human trafficking and domestic abuse 263
- VIII. Narrative structures and techniques 263
- IX. Conclusions 263 -264

1 The Post-Referendum Context 265–269

- 1.1 Introduction 265
- 1.2 Politics, Society and Gender 265-268
- 1.3 Post-Referendum Context and 268-69
the Nordic Countries
- 1.4 Conclusion 269

2 The Scottish-Nordic Pairing 270-287

- 2.1 Introduction 270
- 2.2 A background to the role of women in crime fiction 271-273
- 2.2 Scottish writers 273-275

2.3 Nordic writers	275-278
2.4 Creative Genesis	278-283
2.5 Conclusion	283-287
3 Gender Theories and Feminist Crime Fiction	288-303
3.1 Introduction	288
3.2 Val McDermid and Lindsay Gordon	288-291
3.3 Denise Mina and Paddy Meehan	291-293
3.4 Anna Smith and Rosie Gilmour	293-294
3.5 Additional key influencers	294-297
3.6 Creative genesis	297-302
3.7 Conclusion	302-303
4 Human Trafficking and Domestic Abuse	304-320
4.1 Introduction	304
4.2 Human trafficking	305-312
4.3 Domestic abuse	312-320
4.4 Conclusion	320
5 Narrative Structures and Techniques	321-335
5.1 Introduction	321-322
5.2 Noir novels	322-323
5.3 Narrative techniques and voice	323-326
5.4 The unreliable narrator	326-327
5.5 The use of flash fiction	328-329
5.6 The use of social media and other communication platforms in the novel	330-334
5.7 Conclusion	335
<i>Appendices</i>	336-344
<i>Bibliography</i>	345-357

The Invisible Chains

Prologue

Daily Post, 2 February, 2016

Police are appealing for the public's help to identify a young woman found dead in the River Clyde. The body was discovered by a member of the public on Monday morning. The death is being treated as unexplained. The teenager or young woman is believed to be of African descent and thought to be aged between 15 and 21. She is 5ft 6in and of slim build. She was wearing black leggings, a black T-shirt and no shoes. A Police Scotland spokeswoman said: "We're currently conducting a number of enquiries as part of our efforts to identify this young woman and trace her family. We're appealing for the public's help and urge anyone who may recognise her description to get in touch with us as soon as possible." The spokeswoman added that an investigation was underway to establish the full circumstances surrounding the woman's death.

Chapter 1

Glasgow, April 2016

The pew was hard against the back of Megan's legs, the air cold and slightly sour. Sitting alone at the front of the crematorium, she watched the light from the morning sunshine trickle through the A-frame window overlooking the Garden of Remembrance. It was strewn with Cellophane wrappers and dead flowers. Glancing at her watch, she shivered and pulled her coat tighter around her shoulders. Megan had been to enough paupers' funerals to know this wouldn't take long. She was desperate for a caffeine fix. She exhaled a whoosh of air and let her shoulders sag. Closing her eyes, she tried to savour the peace and stillness of the crematorium chapel and of death. Her brain ached at the jumble of thoughts racing through it. She became aware of soft footsteps walking down the aisle. It was probably someone from the council, or someone like her, there to show support for the poor friendless soul about to be sent into the furnace. She stretched her neck slowly from side to side, then heard a rasping cough behind her. Someone was sitting there, lurking. A heavy hand pressed down on her shoulder.

'No need to move, darlin',' said a familiar voice.

Megan shook her head, trying to place it.

'Fancy seeing you here.'

'Sam Martin.' Megan bristled and turned to look at the small man sitting behind her. His hair was thinning, he had a wispy moustache and he wore a black leather coat. 'Bloody hell. You gave me some fright there. See you're still wearing that bloody jacket.'

'Lovely to see you too,' he said, smiling.

'What are you doing here?'

'The same thing as you.'

'Old tricks never die, eh? Pauper's funerals. You never know what you might find.'

'Aye,' agreed Sam. 'Old friends for a start. I did hear you were back. I've been waiting for your call.'

'Shh,' said Megan as the minister and a couple of other well-wishers filed down the aisle. 'I'll fill you in later.' She turned to face the front, shaking her head in amazement and tracing her fingers over the Bible in front of her. What were the chances of her bumping into him at that crematorium at that particular time? Unless he'd been following her. She wouldn't put it past him. They'd been at college together in Edinburgh. Sam had gone into tabloid journalism while Megan had opted for the broadsheets. He was fearless, obnoxious and arrogant, which had made him an ideal reporter.

When the service finished, Megan stood up. Sam followed her out into the car park, watching as the next contingent of mourners circled in their cars looking for a space.

'Well,' said Megan, 'I think you and I were the only ones who took that particular bit of advice from college.'

'Aye. It's given me some good stories over the years though,' said Sam, stroking his moustache. 'Not today though.'

Megan glanced at her watch.

'You in a hurry?'

'Yes, I am actually,' she said, pulling out her phone. 'I wanted to go and see the First Minister's press conference. Just going to call a cab.'

'Where is it?'

'Concert Hall. Have you got your car?'

'Sure do,' he said, pointing at a white Honda at the far side of the car park. 'Lucky that, eh? Come on. I'll give you a lift. We can catch up on the way.'

'Thanks.'

'So, it's true then?' said Sam, reversing at speed.

'What's that?' Megan was scrolling through the messages on her phone.

'You're back to head up that magazine?'

'Yip,' said Megan, without looking up.

'Interesting move. It's not a bad rag. So have you had enough of the big smoke?'

'Something like that.' Then, to divert attention away from her, 'Anyway, how are you? Are you still at the *Sunday Tribune*?'

'Aye well . . . no, not any more. I'm freelancing. Doing shifts here and there - you know.'

'Why, what happened?' she asked, pausing. 'Did you get sacked?'

'No.' His eyes were fixed on the road. 'I took voluntary redundancy. All these cutbacks, you know.'

'I know. I don't know many who are still surviving here,' Megan agreed. 'Mind you, it's the same in London. It's getting harder and harder to make a decent living in newspapers.'

'What's new with you then, apart from the job? How are you?'

'I'm good, thanks,' said Megan, shrugging.

'You look well. London obviously agreed with you.'

Megan rolled her eyes. Her long hair was no longer exclusively brown and she had given up on her regular Pilates sessions. Some days she felt about ninety. She glanced over at Sam. He'd also aged since she last saw him; his hair was receding and he'd developed quite the pot-belly. 'You too,' she said.

'Liar.' He laughed. 'Anyway, I'm surprised you didn't end up in the jail. You know how careful you have to be these days if you have too many police contacts.'

Megan was looking out of the window in disbelief at the number of Aldis and Lidl's they had passed. How many supermarkets did one city need? 'Look - it wasn't me who had a reputation for entertaining the cops and putting it on my expenses bill.'

'Ouch,' he said. 'I know. The good old days, eh?'

Megan glanced at the balled-up crisp packet and empty water-bottles on the floor. 'You on a health kick, Sam?' she said, pointing at them.

'Aye, something like that. Decided it was probably a good idea to give up the fizzy juice.' Then, pulling over, 'I'll drop you here. Then I'll park the wagon and see you in there. Wouldn't mind having a wee sniff around. Free coffee at the very least.'

Once again Megan was glad she'd worn her thick coat as she walked up Buchanan Street towards Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall. Didn't matter that it was spring, it was still freezing. She gazed at the grey chewing-gum studding the rose-coloured pavement slabs, then looked up at the buildings around her. It had been a few years since she'd been here and, for as long as she could remember, ugly scaffolding had been a constant fixture. But now the metal structures were finally

gone, the architecture was on show. As she passed the statue of Donald Dewar, Scotland's first First Minister and the architect of devolution, she stifled a laugh. Someone had wrapped a Partick Thistle football scarf around his neck. Music blared into the empty street from Topshop and there was a dull hum from the buses trundling down West Nile Street. Walking up the steps to the Concert Hall, which reminded her of the tiers of a wedding cake, she began to mentally scroll through her to-do list. Pulling open the heavy door, she headed over to the registration table and decided the matter of caffeine was most pressing.

The floppy-fringed man behind the table greeted her with a nod. 'Name and publication?'

'Megan Ross. *Enquiry* magazine.'

He casually flicked a finger over his tablet, glanced up and frowned. 'Is that the new one?'

'Yes.'

'Right. Well, I hope it goes well. Here you are, Ms Ross.' He handed her a laminated badge and a press pack. 'If you just go through to the restaurant area, coffee and pastries are being served.'

She strode across the lobby towards the waiter who stood beside a table draped with a thick white cloth. Pouring her a cup from a cafetiere, he offered her a platter of mini croissants.

'Thank you,' she said, popping one in her mouth. She surveyed the small assembled group of hacks. Taking a sip from her cup, she tried to make eye contact with anyone who was willing, but they were all glued to their phones. Hunched shoulders and dipped heads, furiously tapping and swiping. A lot had happened to Megan since she'd swapped Scotland for London four years ago. She'd managed to reinvent herself, and being back now felt alien. A sliver of doubt crept into her head.

'At least you bring up the average age in here quite significantly,' said Sam, appearing at her side.

'Do you know, there was me thinking it was actually quite nice to see you,' retorted Megan. There had been plenty of times when she would have happily emptied her cup over his head.

'Aye,' he said, taking a drink. 'Look- I'm sorry about all that business back then.'

'Don't worry about it,' she said, flicking her hand. 'It's all over and forgotten about.'

He shrugged. 'You still haven't told me why you wanted to come back to the motherland.'

'It seemed like a good idea. Richard asked and I fancied a change. Mind you,' she added, with a shiver, 'it's a bit chilly.'

'You turned into a soft southerner?' teased Sam.

'Something like that. Looks like it's time for the First Minister. Come on,' she ordered, walking towards the auditorium.

'By the way, how's your sister?'

Megan focused on moving towards the seats at the front, staring at the stage which Rachel Thompson was about to walk onto. She took a few deep breaths and then turned around. 'She's great. Thanks.'

'It was a shame what happened to that lad of hers,' said Sam.

Megan sat down and stared numbly ahead.

The girl had lived in the small village in Edo for all of her sixteen years. She shared a mud-walled house with her mother and two brothers. At night she lay on her mattress too hot to sleep, listening to the wind rattling the corrugated iron sheets on the roof. Sometimes the girl would sell tomatoes at the market. But her younger brothers were growing up fast and she noticed her mother's face was getting thinner, her spine curved. She knew the family needed more money. The girl had been thinking of going to Italy to try to sell tomatoes. Her auntie Angelika had lived there for several years and made a good living. She came back to the village to visit at times and was treated like royalty. One day when she returned from market, Auntie was at her house. The girl ran across and hugged her. She wore a beautiful red dress and smelled of sweet cherries. The girl's mother was slumped on a seat, her hands trembling. Auntie's eyes were shining. She said she had good news. She said a friend had a job for the girl in London: household duties and babysitting in return for a small allowance each week. Mother gasped when Auntie told them how much. You work in England a month. You send your mother more money than you earn a year selling tomatoes at market, said Auntie. That wasn't all. There would be a chance for the girl to go to college. The girl glanced at her mother, but her eyes were fixed on the ground. She looked over at Auntie, who smiled reassuringly. The girl went to her mother and knelt beside her, clasping her wizened hands. She told Mother everything would be fine. The job offer was great news, she said. Gently tilting Mother's head up from the ground, she thought she saw a look flicker across her eyes. Was it regret or fear? It will all be okay, the girl told her mother. This will be good for the family. I can earn a wage for you and the boys and get an education too, she said. A ripple of excitement began to flutter in her stomach. It doesn't need to be forever, she said. Auntie bobbed her head enthusiastically and clapped her hands. She told mother it was for the best and if the girl's father had still been alive he would have agreed. Auntie stared at Mother, long and hard. It was the right thing to do, she said. The flights were booked and she would personally escort the girl to London and make sure she was settled. That seemed to offer Mother a shred of comfort.

That night the girl hummed as she helped Mother prepare the green stew. She felt a glimmer of hope about what lay ahead for her now. She was going to see the world. She was going to earn lots of money for her family. Suddenly she felt very

grown up. It was time for her to leave home. She was going to work and study hard and make her mother proud.

Chapter 2

Later that night Megan sat in a small booth in an Italian restaurant at the foot of Byres Road. Taking a sip of water, avoiding the slice of cucumber floating in her glass, she thought about the events of the morning and Rachel Thompson's hard-hitting initiative to crack down on domestic abuse. Two strikes and the perpetrator of domestic abuse, male or female, would find themselves serving time. Rachel Thompson had perhaps smashed the glass ceiling for aspiring politicians in Scotland, but Megan wondered just how much had really changed. She was already having second thoughts about some of the men she'd met the previous day, who were on the magazine's editorial board. They reminded her of her early days as a trainee when the ageing hacks, with their pot bellies and ruddy cheeks, would sit in conferences pontificating about whether a woman was 'fit' enough to appear in their pages. They'd drop fag ash over the keyboards as they typed. The newsroom was smoky and the background chatter was riddled with expletives. Back then she'd regularly worked twelve-hour shifts, sometimes all-nighters, and there was no additional overtime or hours off in lieu. No equal rights or health and safety concerns. You just got on with it. And for what? Megan was still thinking about that. Why did she do the job? Because, despite everything, she still wanted to make a difference.

'Hey, Megan,' said the man walking towards her. He was six feet tall with a solid, muscular frame and his cropped hair was now sprinkled with grey. She stood up to greet him. 'It's been a long time,' he said, kissing her on both cheeks.

'Hi, Harry. It's true,' she said. 'It does feel as though I've been away for years. You look well,' she added, pointing at his hair. 'You given up the Grecian 2000 though?'

Harry grinned. 'Still as charming as ever, I see.'

Megan poured him a glass of water. 'So what's new with you?' She sneaked a glance at his left hand. It was still ring-free and he was casually dressed in black jeans and a black V-neck sweater. He looked more like a nightclub-owner than a cop.

'It's been busy,' he said, laughing. 'The Commonwealth Games, the Referendum, a couple of big trials . . . that's been about it, I think.'

'So what are you working on now?' she said. 'Or are you not allowed to tell me?'

Harry shrugged. 'As long as you're not claiming this through your expenses.'

'No. I'll pay for it personally.'

'I'm joking, Megan. I'll get it.' He pointed at her glass. 'Are you sticking to water? Or do you want something stronger?'

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand. 'Water's fine just now. Anyway, tell me what you're up to. Still enjoying life in Edinburgh?'

'Aye,' he said. 'It's okay. They don't have much of a sense of humour through there. But it's okay,' he concluded, shrugging.

'You still in serious crime?'

'Nope. Been moved over. Doing trafficking now.'

'Trafficking? What - road stuff or do you mean human trafficking?'

'The human variety. Keeps me busy, you know.' He took a sip of water. 'Makes a nice change from hate crime.' He gave a dry laugh and neither spoke for a moment.

'So trafficking's reached Edinburgh too then?' said Megan.

'Yip. Though not just Edinburgh. It's here in Glasgow. It's all over. You'd be surprised.'

'Probably not,' said Megan. 'I wrote plenty of features about trafficking in London. Interviewed some victims. It was only a matter of time before it spread north.' She exhaled through her mouth. 'Maybe something stronger would be a good idea,' she suggested, noticing the waiter hovering in the corner. 'Wine?'

'Please,' said Harry.

'Could we have a bottle of the house red, please?' she called. 'So, where are they coming from?'

'Eastern Europe. Thailand. China. Nigeria. Everywhere. And it looks like it's spreading to the borders and to the north.' He paused. 'A body was pulled from the Clyde a few months back. A young black girl. We can't identify her. Even through the publicity appeals.'

'I remember reading about that,' said Megan, as the waiter approached the table with the wine. 'Are you ready to order?'

Harry nodded, switching his focus back to the menu.

'So,' she said, after they'd ordered, 'Do you think she was trafficked?'

'Yes. We think she's from somewhere in Africa. We've contacts in the immigrant community here in Glasgow, and at the African Caribbean Centre but nobody has been reported missing locally. Obviously if she's been trafficked into the country then she's a nobody, isn't she?'

'*Somebody* must know who she is,' she said, watching him as he scratched his chin, which was shadowed with several days' worth of stubble.

He shrugged.

'How're things going with your new lady boss?' she said.

He rolled his eyes. 'She's very efficient . . . seems to know her stuff.'

'But?'

'But it's just different,' he said. 'Not like it used to be.'

'What, back in the good old days of Strathclyde Police?' said Megan. 'That's the problem with you old farts. You can't handle change.'

'Less of the old, thanks very much,' he said and laughed.

'What's the problem then? Don't you like having a female boss? I mean surely anyone has got to be an improvement on that last eejit?'

'Aye that's true. She's not bad,' he conceded. 'Just different. He got rid of so many of the guys on the street, ran morale into the ground, and, to be honest, none of us are used to actually being listened to. She's quite touchy-feely, you know, and uses lots of acronyms and lingo.'

Megan snorted. 'Yip. Sounds familiar. Lots of mentions of Key Performance Indicators and targets.'

'What brings you up here then? Thought you were loving the high life in London?'

'I did. But,' she paused for a moment, 'I've left London.'

'Since when?' said Harry. 'When did you move back?'

'A few weeks ago. I was offered a job launching a new magazine and, well, for various reasons, decided to take it.'

'Who's behind it?'

'My old employer, Gibson Group. You know Richard Shaw? He called me and asked me if I fancied it and it just seemed like a good time to come back.'

'Where are you staying?'

'Here. In Glasgow. In a hotel at the moment until I get a flat organised.'

'I see,' he said, holding her gaze for a moment.

The silence between them swelled as an image of Harry flashed into her head. She saw him standing there that day when she left the young offenders' institution with her sister. Harry had tried to draw her to him, comfort her and take away the pain. But she had walked away, her arm hugging her sister and her other hand fumbling for car keys in her jacket pocket. She remembered trying not to look at him in the rear-view mirror of the car as she'd driven away. But she couldn't help herself and she'd glanced at him, standing there alone. Was that really four years ago? Neither of them spoke for a moment.

'And are you happy about it?' said Harry, taking a drink.

'Yes. Things have changed a lot in the past couple of years,' she said, reaching for a piece of bread and dipping it into the yellow pool of olive oil in the dish in front of her.

'For the better?'

'Mmmm,' she said, popping a piece of bread in her mouth. 'Kind of, I guess. Just different.'

'What about your sister? Have you seen much of her?'

She put her fork down. 'No,' she said. 'No, I haven't.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

She shook her head. She didn't want to get into family stuff right now with Harry. Glancing at her watch, she said, 'Listen, I just need to make a quick phone call if you don't mind.'

He watched as Megan wiped her mouth with her napkin, then slipped from her seat clutching her handbag. Heading towards the front door, she went out onto the street where she stood with her back to the restaurant. Clamping the phone to her ear she waited for the other end to pick up and then said, 'Hello, sweetie. How are you?' She paused. 'Have you had a nice day?' Nodding her head, she smiled. 'Oh, that does sound fun.' Nodding again, she sighed. 'Okay, darling. I love you. Yes, I'll be home soon. Very soon. I promise.' She cleared her throat and said goodbye.

The day before leaving for London, the girl was taken to the village priest. Auntie said it was important for her to go. The priest would invoke the protection of her guardian spirit. It would keep her safe in London. His room was dark and cool. The girl began trembling when he told her to remove all her clothes. Auntie told her to do as she was told, then left the room. The girl peeled off her pink cotton sundress and white pants, leaving them neatly folded on top of her sandals. She felt a knot in her stomach, but she knew she had to do this. She gulped when the priest raised his hand and she saw a glint of steel. Pulling her to him, she flinched as the itchy material of his cloak scratched against her skin. She stared down at his feet. He wore bright blue Nike trainers. The priest spoke slowly in a clipped voice, using words she didn't recognise. Then he started cutting into her. Small, stinging incisions in her breasts, then her stomach, then her buttocks. Her torso began to burn but she knew she had to fight through the pain. It was all part of the experience. It was for her own good. The priest moved down her legs and then onto her feet, cutting between her toes. Then she watched as he tipped chalky dust from a small dish and rubbed it into all the cuts he'd just made.

He walked towards a table in the corner of the room where a chicken was lying. It gave a final flutter, then the priest cuts its throat and blood poured out, sticking to its feathers. The girl felt the bile rise from her stomach as she watched him cut out its heart. He cradled the sticky, glistening red sac of veins and arteries in his hands then put it on the table and began to slice into it. Walking towards the girl, with a piece of it in his hand, he held it out and told her to eat.

Forcing the gristly tissue into her mouth, she tried to chew. It felt fatty and oily in her mouth. He handed her a glass of liquid which she sloshed into her mouth, not caring that it had a foul taste. She just wanted her mouth to be empty and clean of the rubbery flesh. Wiping her mouth, she watched as the priest came towards her with scissors. He grabbed her hands and cut her fingernails. Then he knelt down in front of her to clip at her smattering of pubic hair. He tipped the cuttings into a clay pot then took it over to the collection of dishes and pots in the corner of the room. The girl flicked her gaze up and saw the shrine. She shivered, desperate now to put her clothes back on and go back out into the warm sunshine.

The priest stared at her and spoke slowly. 'The gods know who you are. They know your name. They will know if you disobey.'

Chapter 3

Tucking the phone into her bag, Megan wiped a stray tear away from her face and then went back into the restaurant heading straight to the Ladies'. She splashed some cold water over her face, flushed by too much red wine, and rummaged in her handbag for a lipstick. Taking a few deep breaths, she returned to the table.

'You okay?' said Harry.

'Fine.' Pausing for a moment, she flicked away the trail of crumbs the baguette had deposited on her lap. 'Just hungry.'

The waiter appeared with two bowls of pasta which he set down on the table. Steam billowed from the food. Neither of them spoke as their dishes were sprinkled with black pepper and parmesan.

'This is a permanent move then?' asked Harry, picking up his fork and twirling the pasta ribbons around it.

'Yes,' said Megan and frowned. 'It'll feel more permanent though when I'm in my own place and - well, when everything's just a bit more settled.'

'Is your sister still in Glasgow?' he asked.

'Unless she's done a moonlit flit,' she said and gave a small smile. 'I haven't actually been to see her yet.'

Harry raised an eyebrow but Megan dismissed him with a raised hand. 'This body. Nobody's reported anyone missing? And nobody's coming forward to claim her?'

'That's right,' he said. 'Appears to be a total mystery.'

'Do you know how she died?'

He nodded but then gestured at her food. 'Yes, but I'll save it for later. I don't want to put you off your food.'

Megan ate quickly.

'You'll give yourself indigestion if you shovel it down like that,' he said.

She smirked. 'I want to know more,' she said, lining up her fork and spoon together on the plate.

Harry pushed his plate away and nodded wearily.

'Let me guess . . . asphyxiation?'

He shook his head.

'Stabbed?'

'No, Megan. I'm not sure you want to know,' he said in a clipped voice.

Megan noticed the dark circles, beneath his eyes. 'It's okay, I'm sure I've heard it all before,' she said.

'Mmm, I wouldn't count on it,' he said, rubbing his eyes. 'She died of a heart attack.'

Megan frowned. 'A heart attack? A young girl? That's pretty unusual, isn't it?'

He nodded. 'Aye. She was covered in bruises. All over. All the signs of sexual abuse were there. Forensics are wondering if she had the heart attack in sheer terror of what was happening to her.'

Megan covered her mouth. 'Poor kid.'

Harry didn't speak for a minute. 'I know. There's not much that shocks me, you know. But this has. Her body was mangled.'

Megan watched Harry as he took a gulp of wine. It must have been bad. Harry had identified his fair share of victims over the years, including his own wife who had died in a car accident.

'I just want to get the bastards who did this,' he said, his voice thick and hoarse, 'before it happens again. She was just a young girl.'

They were interrupted by the waiter offering them coffee or a dessert.

'No thanks,' said Megan. 'Just the bill, please.'

Harry looked at his watch. 'Sorry, Megan, I didn't mean to end the night on such a horrible note.'

Megan stared at him. 'Don't be daft. Anyway, who said anything about ending the night? Time for a nightcap before you get the last train?'

'Sure.'

At Megan's suggestion, the taxi dropped them off at a pub by the station and near her hotel. They weaved their way through the throng of bodies towards the bar.

'What are you having?' Harry asked.

Megan scanned the row of whisky bottles. 'I'll have an Arran malt, please.'

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'With ice?'

'No, neat please.' She perched on a bar stool and automatically pulled her phone from her pocket to check for missed calls. There were none, so she put it down on the bar.

'Well, *slàinte*,' said Harry, holding his glass out to Megan.

'Cheers.' Megan's stomach clenched. Seeing Harry again was harder than she thought it would be. Being with him felt so familiar yet unsettling.

'So when were you going to tell me?' he asked.

'Tell you what?' She took a sip of the pale malt.

'When were you going to tell me about the baby?'

Megan felt the colour rising to her neck and cheeks. How did he know? She took a deep breath. 'I was going to tell you.'

'When? Is it a secret?' His voice was low and steady and there was a look of concern on his face.

Megan brushed the hair from her forehead. 'It's not what you're thinking, Harry. If that is what you're thinking.'

'When did you have the baby?' he asked.

'Almost two years ago. And it's not yours.'

Harry sighed and she wasn't sure if it was in relief or disappointment.

'What's his name?'

'Matthew . . . George Ross.'

'What about his dad?'

'What about him?' Megan gripped her glass and took a swig.

He coughed. 'Are you together?'

'No,' she said.

'Okay. I take it you don't want to talk about this either?'

She looked straight ahead. 'No.'

He brushed his hand against hers. 'Where is he?'

'In London at the moment. With his dad. Just until I get things sorted up here.'

'I see. And does your sister know?'

'Yes. She hasn't met him yet though. I didn't want to rub her face in it.'

A heaviness descended over them as they sat beside each other. There was so much Megan wanted to say but was unable to.

He glanced at his watch. 'I'd better get going.'

'Of course. Your train.'

'Let me know if you fancy catching up again.'

'Sure. I'll let you know if I'm in your neck of the woods.'

'Hopefully it won't be another four years before I see you again,' he said and chuckled.

'Okay.' She paused. 'How did you know?'

He pointed at her phone. 'The picture on your screensaver was a giveaway.'

Megan glanced down at it and smiled.

Harry reached over and hugged her. 'Congratulations on the birth of your boy. I'm sure you're a great mum.' Then he kissed her and left.

Later when she went to bed, she lay awake for a while thinking about what that phrase actually meant. What did it mean to be a great mum? She knew she wasn't a great mum as she hardly saw her son. What about the mum of the girl in the river? The girl with no name. Had her mother been a good parent? Perhaps her sister was the best example of a great mum. Joanna had done everything for her son. Risked everything and always put him first - and yet look at what had happened. She stretched her body out, alone in the bed, pointing her toes, and frowned. A great mum. It meant nothing. There were no rewards for being a great mum.

On her last night at home, the girl packed her belongings into the small suitcase Auntie had given her. She'd told the girl not to pack too much as they would be able to buy new, more suitable clothes in London. The girl knew it was cold there and often wet. As she folded her favourite blanket to put in the case, she idly wondered what kind of clothes she would wear. Her brothers started to play catch with her hairbrush and cheekily asked if they could come to London with her. The girl laughed and shooed them away. They were annoying, but she would miss them.

She hummed to herself as she thought about what to take. She packed some underwear, a few dresses, her sandals, her hairbrush, her toothbrush and Bingo, her favourite teddy. Mother clutched the girl to her chest, then insisted she take the beads from round her neck. The girl refused. She knew how important they were to her mother. They'd been a gift from her father. But her mother insisted. The girl wrapped them around her hand, feeling the smooth sensation of the beads, then tucked them in at the back of her suitcase.

Auntie had arranged for a car to take them to the airport in Lagos in the morning. She couldn't believe she was leaving her village for the very first time. And she was going to England! She wondered if she would miss the hot sun at home and the dust which stuck to her tongue. What would another country, a city, be like? She was excited but nervous about going on a plane, but Auntie kept reassuring her and telling her not to worry. Everything was going to be okay, she said. She just had to remember what the priest had said and to never, ever forget the oath she had sworn. The girl smiled and nodded her head. She shuddered as she remembered the priest in his deep red robes. She would never forget what he had said.

When she lay in her bed for the final time she thought about her next room. What would it be like? Would the bed be the same? Would there be a window with a view over Big Ben? Auntie said the family she was going to were nice. They lived in a big house in London near the Queen.

Mother was quiet and concentrated on clearing the supper dishes away. The girl knew her mother would miss her. But it wouldn't be forever.

Chapter 4

Megan grew increasingly anxious as she approached Hyndland Road in the West End of the city. Pressing her trembling hands together, she tried to focus on the red blur of the traffic lights, through the taxi's rain-lashed windscreen. She searched for something to say to the driver, anything at all, but her mind felt like a mass of wool. In his compartment, the driver chuckled to himself as he listened to the radio. He must have been the only cabbie in Glasgow who didn't want to talk to his passenger. Maybe she could ask him to turn round and drop her back at the hotel, where she could soak in a hot bath and call room service. Then she could just return to London and get on with what she had become used to there. Get on with work and being a mum. The rhythm of the windscreen-wipers had a hypnotic effect. For a moment she allowed her mind to drift and think about Matthew. Was it really just two days ago that she'd sat cradling him and reading his favourite story, *Peepo*, to him? She could still feel his warm body pressed against hers, smell the top of his head and see his chubby little fingers grasping the pages. Then she'd lowered him into his cot and tucked him in before leaving for the airport.

Her phone started to ring at the bottom of her bag and she rooted around to find it, amongst a collection of tissues, scattered raisins and a baby wipe. The number was withheld.

'Hello,' she said, her voice cautious.

'Megan, it's Natasha Campbell.'

'Natasha, how are you? Long time no speak,' said Megan, smiling.

'I'm very well, thank you. But how are you? A wee birdie told me you're back in town.'

'Indeed I am,' said Megan.

'Listen, when are you free to meet up? It's just that I'd love to talk to you. I've a proposition for you.'

She could feel anticipation start to swirl in her stomach. 'Um, how urgent is it, Natasha? I'm still trying to finalise this week's issue and organise somewhere to stay.'

'It can wait. Though not for too long,' said Natasha. 'We're working on a draft bill and I want to run some of it by you. Thought it might make a good investigation in your magazine . . . Sorry Megan, hold on a minute.'

Megan listened as she heard Natasha's hand fumbling over the phone, and could picture her sitting there in her swivel chair with her feet on the desk. Natasha was a special advisor to the Justice Minister, though Megan knew she probably ran the entire department.

'Sorry about that. Bloody civil servants. Another meeting to go to.'

'What's the bill you're working on?'

'I'll tell you when I see you,' said Natasha. 'Better to keep you guessing, otherwise you might stand me up.'

'As if I'd do that,' said Megan, now intrigued to know what Natasha wanted to tell her. 'I'll get in touch asap. Are you on the same mobile?'

'Yes. Better run to this meeting. Talk soon.'

Megan saved the number, pushed the phone to the bottom of her bag and leaned forward to tap the glass screen. 'Just anywhere here, please.'

'No problem, hen. I'll pull over there.'

As she stepped from the taxi, she gasped as the cold air hit her cheeks. She slid the door shut behind her and managed to dodge the puddles in the gutters. The wind tugged at her hair and she ran over to take shelter in the doorway of a delicatessen. She stood for a moment, thinking. She could hardly turn up empty-handed. Turning, she opened the door and walked into the shop. Her eyes flicked over the chocolate-chip shortbread, then the flavoured coffee, and she padded across the terracotta-tiled floor to the basket of flowers. She decided on all three. It looked as though the rain was going off, so she started walking down the slope of Clarence Drive towards Falkland Street. Turning into the street, she quickly scanned the numbers on the red-sandstone tenements flanking either side of the street. She continued walking, looking at the carefully pruned hedges and the Charles Rennie Mackintosh stained-glass doors. Some of the buildings weren't quite so well maintained: the brickwork was crumbling, and the tiny front gardens were strewn with shiny packaging, soggy newspapers and crisp packets. She was surprised to find that her sister's building was one of the more well-kept properties. Walking up the freshly weeded path to the

duck-egg blue front door, she read the brass name plates next to each buzzer. *J. Ross*. She pressed her forefinger to the dull gold bell-push and waited.

'Hello,' said a tired voice over the intercom.

Megan suddenly didn't know what to say.

'Hello,' said the voice again, this time sounding more impatient.

'Joanna . . .'

'Who is it?'

'Joanna. It's me. It's Megan.'

There was a moment's silence, then the door clicked open. Megan pushed it open and walked in. Her footsteps echoed as she padded along the corridor and up the worn marble steps. She was slightly breathless when she arrived at Joanna's door, two flights up. Joanna stood in the hallway, wrapped in a silver silk gown with her hair scraped back in a ponytail. Her arms were folded, her mouth in a straight line. The last time Megan had seen her, briefly, was three years ago at their mother's funeral in Edinburgh.

'Hello,' said Joanna, glancing over Megan's shoulder. 'Well, this is a surprise. Are you just here on your own?'

'Yes,' said Megan and thrust the bag of gifts at Joanna. 'Here you are.'

'Thanks,' Joanna said, her voice even.

Megan gingerly reached out to touch her sister, then moved in awkwardly for a hug, feeling the sharp angles of Joanna's bones poking into her. She felt her sister clasp her hands briefly around her back.

'Come on through,' said Joanna, pointing to a door which led to the living room.

Megan sat on a pink-upholstered chair in the bay window. Her sister curled up on the sofa opposite, tucking her feet underneath her.

'I'm sorry,' said Megan. 'Did I get you up?'

'Aye, but don't worry. I hadn't quite drifted off. I was on night shift last night.'

'Oh,' said Megan, not really knowing what else to say.

'I'm working at the women's refuge in Dumbarton Road,' explained Joanna, filling in the blanks for her.

Megan smiled, still unable to talk.

'So, what brings you here?'

Megan scratched her head and looked at her sister, who was just three years older than her. She looked so different to when Megan last saw her. She had a few more lines around her eyes, and looked older but then so did Megan. There always used to be an air of vulnerability around her, but now she seemed stronger, somehow less fragile. Although she was still very slim and looked quite delicate the way she sat there. There was a coolness in her eyes, which looked like two large, pale-blue marbles. She had greyed around her temples, but it suited her and made her look quite distinguished. Megan noticed her toenails were painted a gunmetal grey.

Joanna had noticed her glance. 'Do you like them? I got them done last night.' She smiled. 'One of the perks of the job. A girl comes into the refuge and offers to do wee treatments for the women. That's if they want them done. Some of them don't want to be touched. But some welcome a wee bit pampering time.'

'They look nice,' said Megan. 'Suits you.'

'Ach well, sometimes it just makes the time pass a bit more quickly, you know. And if I offer to get mine done then sometimes some of the women take my lead.'

Megan rolled her neck back and forth to try and loosen the tension which was making her feel so rigid. She jumped when she heard the clatter of the main door and the echo of footsteps running up the stairs in the close outside.

'It's just the kids below. They don't know the meaning of shutting it gently. You get used to it. They're just kids.'

Her words hung in the air for a moment, so awkwardly that Megan wanted to reach out, pluck them and put them in her pocket.

'Look, I don't know about you, but I fancy a cuppa. Shall I put the kettle on?'

'Yes, please. That would be nice.' While she was gone, Megan looked about the bright and airy room. Joanna's old flat had been dark and gloomy with a constant smell of damp. But then perhaps that was because she was living with a teenage boy back then.

'What are you here for?' said Joanna, walking back into the living room carrying a tray with two mugs and a couple of Kit-Kats.

Megan was sitting with her coat still on and her bag on her lap.

'You can take that off if you want. That's if you're staying for a bit,' said her sister.

Megan shrugged it off, then looked suspiciously at the mug her sister was handing to her.

'It's okay. I remembered you don't take milk.'

'Thanks.' Megan watched Joanna as she sat down.

'You didn't answer my question,' said Joanna. 'What brings you here?'

'To Glasgow? Or to your flat?'

'Well, both.'

Megan shrugged. 'A new job. I've left London. I've moved to Glasgow.'

'I see.' Joanna's voice was thick. 'When did you move back?'

'A couple of weeks ago.'

'Right,' said Joanna uncertainly. 'Why?'

'Thought it would be a fresh start. And better for Matthew.'

Neither of the women spoke for a moment.

'I should also be saying sorry . . . for - you know . . . not being in touch.' Megan exhaled loudly.

Joanna took a sip of tea, then unwrapped a biscuit. The foil crinkled and she rolled it up into a ball. 'Where are you staying? What's your plan? . . . Do I get to meet Matthew?'

'Plan?' said Megan, bristling slightly.

'Yes. Where are you staying? What's Matthew going to do? Have you got him in a nursery?'

'Yes, I have. One near the office. And I've got some flats to look at this week.'

Megan nodded. 'This is a nice place,' she said, looking around.

'Yes. I like it here. It's amazing what a difference the compensation has made to my life.' She gave a brittle laugh. 'I've moved up in the world.'

'I'm sorry, Joanna. I'm sorry I haven't been in touch. You must hate me. Or blame me.'

Joanna shook her head and scrunched up her nose. 'Why would I hate you, Megan? Or blame you? None of it was your fault.'

'I just wish I could have done more. Got there on time.'

Joanna sighed and put her cup down. 'Megan, I've been through this so many times myself. There was nothing any of us could have done. We did what we could. You did more than anyone else.'

The two sat for a moment in silence. Megan's mind flashed back to what had happened. Joanna's son George had been accused of murdering an asylum seeker but had insisted he was innocent. By the time Megan had found enough evidence to prove he'd been framed, it was too late. He was found hanged in his cell. She could still picture his body lying there on the mortuary slab, as though he was asleep, when she had gone with Joanna to identify his body.

'You need to let it go. George is gone. He's not coming back,' Joanna said, interrupting her thoughts.

Megan leaned back in her chair and looked at the small framed picture of her nephew, which sat on the mantelpiece next to a scented candle and a pile of cards.

'Aw, Joanna. Your birthday. I forgot it. Again.'

Joanna gave Megan a sad look. 'I've stopped counting them. Please, don't worry about it.'

Megan felt the start of a horrid sensation gnawing in her stomach and she clasped her hands together.

'Look, Megan, it's okay. I understand why you ran away, after everything that happened. I don't blame you for anything. I'm just sorry that we've not spoken.'

Megan waved her hand in the air. 'I know. That's my fault. My head has been all over the place.' Her stomach started to gurgle.

'Eat your biscuit. You look like you could do with one.' Joanna paused to let Megan take a bite of the chocolate-coated finger. 'So how is the wee one?'

Megan smiled. 'Good,' she said. 'Really good. At home with his dad . . . in London with his dad. He'll come up soon.'

'Aren't you missing him?'

Megan didn't respond immediately. 'Kind of. It's been so busy though, there's not been much time.'

'Can I see a picture?'

'Of course.' Megan reached into her bag to retrieve her mobile. 'There you go,' she said, clicking onto the gallery of images.

'He's *gorgeous*. Look at those big brown eyes.'

'He is quite cute. Sometimes he . . . ' She stopped when she saw Joanna wipe away a tear.

'I know,' said Joanna. 'I can see it too.'

Megan went over so she could sit next to her sister on the sofa, and awkwardly patted her knee. 'I wanted to be closer to you Joanna. I'm going to live here. With Matthew . . . you're the only family I've got.'

Joanna laughed, her mouth wide open, revealing the metal fillings in her molars.

'What's so funny?' Megan demanded.

'Just this.'

Megan gave a brittle chuckle. 'And what about you though? What do you do . . . now?'

'What, with all my time? Now I'm a widow and childless?'

'I just mean are you okay?'

'I know what you mean. Work keeps me sane. It reminds me there's a lot of people a whole lot worse off than I am.' Joanna ran her fingers through her hair and Megan noticed that her nails were painted to match her toes.

'That must be hard though?' said Megan, trying to latch onto something to talk about.

'Aye, it can be. Especially when you hear what has happened to some of these women. You wouldn't believe it. Some of them are so young too. Some men should be castrated,' said Joanna despairingly, sinking back into the sofa.

'How often are you working?'

'Full-time. But shifts, like I said before. You're lucky you caught me.'

'I'm sorry Joanna. I didn't realise, didn't even think. You must be knackered and wanting to get some sleep.'

'I'm tired, yes. But I'm glad you came.'

'Me too,' said Megan, glancing at her watch. Her phone had been on silent and she realised she had fifteen missed calls. She stood up abruptly. 'Look. I'd better go. I've got to get back to the office.'

'Okay. Well, just don't leave it so long the next time, eh?'

Megan felt a smile cross her lips. 'I won't, I promise.'

Before she left, her brothers hugged her. The little one, Osato, clung to her like a limpet. Then his brother, Dmiklo, peeled him away and demanded that he go and play football with the other boys in the field. The girl kissed them both on each cheek and shooed them away. They ran, giggling. She turned to her mother who stood beside the car crying silently, salty tears flowing down her cheeks. The girl buried herself in her arms, breathing in the fruity scent of her skin and looping her hands tightly around her waist. Mother held the girl tightly, squeezing her hard and then, she pulled away, and looked at her.

She turned to Auntie and said, you look after her. I trust her with you. Your brother would have too. Then Mother grabbed the girl and held her one last time.

Come now, said Auntie briskly.

Mother turned to go back into the house. The girl called after her and started to follow her but Auntie grasped her arm. Leave her, she said. She will be fine. We need to go now.

The girl stared after her mother and hesitated. It would be so easy to run after her and stay at home with all that she had ever known.

Your new life begins now, said Auntie, gripping her arm. Good times ahead. Now come, she said, opening the car door. Auntie waited for the girl to get in, then slid in next to her.

The girl stared out of the window and waved to her mother who stood watching. She rested her head against the glass. Her mind felt jumbled. Then she began to weep. But as Auntie started to tell her what an adventure she was going to have, butterflies started to dance around the girl's stomach. She was doing this for her family, Auntie reminded her. They needed money and she could earn it for them. The girl would get to see the world. Auntie again promised they would see all the sights: Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, the London Eye. She passed the girl a tissue. The girl felt reassured as she wiped away the tears. She was excited again. She couldn't wait.

Chapter 5

Megan was in the office, attempting to proofread the pages of the latest edition of *Enquiry*. Rubbing her eyes, she sat back in her seat. The rest of the team weren't due in for another couple of hours but Megan, unable to sleep, had been in the office since before six. Chewing her bottom lip, she looked again at the pictures they had chosen to use with the feature on domestic abuse. There were a couple of stock images showing the backs of anonymous women, and a couple of Rachel Thompson at the press conference. She scratched her head. Something wasn't quite right with the layout. The early morning sunshine was streaming through the bay-windows of the office and she decided that a blast of fresh air and some coffee might help wake her up and clear her head. She pulled on her coat and glanced at the clock as the phone began to ring. It was a bit early for calls.

'Hello. *Enquiry*.'

Nobody spoke.

'Hello,' she said impatiently.

'Megan Ross?' said a muffled voice.

'Speaking.' Megan's eyebrows twitched upwards.

'That prostitute they found . . . the one in the river.'

Megan's heartbeat quickened. She flicked the call onto speakerphone, then hit the record app on her mobile. 'Can you tell me who I am talking to?'

There was another pause. 'It doesn't matter.' The voice sounded tinny and distorted.

'What can you tell me?' Automatically, she reached for a pen.

'There's another one.'

'What do you mean? Another one? Another what?'

A silence.

'Hello?' Megan clutched the phone. 'Are you still there?'

'There's another body,' whispered the voice.

'Another body?'

'In the Kelvin . . .'

'Where?' Megan's voice was breathless, despite her best efforts to remain calm.
'What else can you tell me?'

'It's in the Botanics. By the bridge. You know, that shiny one.'

'What's your name?' But the person had hung up. Megan sat for a moment, staring in disbelief at the phone. Then she jumped out her seat and began pacing. 'Think, think, think,' she muttered. It must have been a crank call, she said to herself. Yet she could feel a niggling of doubt forming. Why would the caller have asked for her by name? Unless it was Sam trying to have a laugh now he knew she was back. She wouldn't put it past him. Pressing play on her mobile, she listened to the conversation again. Then she snatched her bag and ran out the door.

Despite the sunshine, it was a cold morning and Megan hurried down the steps onto the street below. There was no point in calling in the police quite yet, she told herself. Then she would look like a prize buffoon, which was probably what Sam wanted. Megan half expected to see him hanging around in the bushes waiting to see if she'd fall for his bait. It wouldn't have been the first time she'd been duped by him. She jabbed out a text, just in case, as she hurried up the street.

Cars were crawling along Byres Road and she dodged people running towards the subway, clutching their cups of coffee. She focused on listening to the click of her shoes on the pavement. This wouldn't take long, she reasoned to herself, then she could return to the warm office with her own coffee and an almond croissant. Standing at the top of Byres Road she impatiently tapped her foot against the pavement, looking for a space in the traffic which she could nip through. The green man lit up and she ran across Great Western Road. The bushes and trees in the Botanics were heavy with blossom which trailed over the railings. The gates were open, but she followed the curve of the road onto the bridge which gleamed a reddish-pink colour in the early morning sun. Megan shook her head and laughed at herself. This was definitely Sam - or else one of those surreal calls which would turn out to be a wind-up. There was no way somebody would have dumped a body here, in such a public place. It was the West End of Glasgow for God's sake. The road was lined with parked cars and she stopped to peer over the bridge. Leaning over to look down, she watched as the water, glistening in the sun, flowed past carrying crumpled crisp packets and cola cans.

‘Maybe I should just go down and check,’ she muttered. ‘For my own peace of mind.’

She doubled back and retraced her steps, going through the gates and stepping out of the way of a couple of joggers. She walked briskly along the path, focusing her eyes on the blooming daffodils lining the grass verge. The morning was very still, not even a slight breeze to ruffle the branches of the trees, and as she headed down to the edge of the water her heart began racing. There was nobody else around. Just her, in an empty city park, with bushes to camouflage everything. She briefly wondered if anyone would come to help her should she suddenly scream. Now she was standing on the path, directly below the bridge, looking upwards at the blue sky. Then she flicked her eyes down to the muddy water. *Subway wrappers*, juice cartons, branches and reeds. There was no sign of a body or a limb protruding from the water. She shrugged and was about to turn away when something floating on the surface of the water caught her eye. She had to hoist herself over the railing to get closer to the edge. Crouching down, she grabbed a stick. It was the handle of a bin bag, spreading itself out and flapping in the water. Well, Harry could at least have a good laugh at her when she told him this story. He would tease her that she thought she was about to get the scoop of the year when in fact all she was getting was other people’s shite in a bin-bag. She now wished she hadn’t just sent him that text telling him what she was up to.

‘I need a coffee,’ she said to a bird hopping about on the path. She poked the bag with the stick and was about to stand up when she saw it. There, sticking out of the bag, draped with reeds. Surely not. It wasn’t. Was she imagining things? She leaned in closer, peering at what looked like dark flesh. And nails. Painted toe nails. Cerise. Bright and pretty and perfect. It was a foot, sticking out of a bin bag, with glossy, pink nails. Megan couldn’t move or shout. She fell backwards onto the damp grass and stared.

When the plane began its descent into London, the girl strained in her seat to look out of the window. She was desperate to see one of the sights Auntie had talked about. All she could see was blackness. Auntie told her to sit in her seat and wait as the other passengers around them rushed. The girl was looking forward to stretching her legs. It felt like she had been sitting for hours. It had been good fun though. She had enjoyed playing with the headset and flicking through the channels. The best bit though was when they were brought a meal to their seat. She excitedly opened the foil container and tried her best to eat the chicken with the plastic cutlery. She'd never tasted anything like it before.

She followed Auntie's lead and walked down the plane towards the exit. The first thing she noticed was the whoosh of cold air as she descended the steps onto the tarmac. It smelt different too. Fresher, sharper. Not like home. The girl remembered seeing the white neon sign, with black letters, as they hurried up the steps into the terminal building. She was confused. She didn't understand why the sign said Milan. The air stewards had said they were landing in Milan too. Maybe it was just the name of the airport in London. She didn't mind that Auntie was a bit grumpy and kept telling her to hurry up. She was trying her best to keep up but her feet were sore and rubbing against her shoes. She kept her head down like she'd been told. They might send her back home if she made eye contact with anyone. Auntie had warned her about this constantly during the flight. She said she would take care of everything. Auntie had her passport and travel documents in her bag. The girl knew that was best. She would hate to lose them. The girl hobbled alongside Auntie and watched as she handed tickets to a lady wearing a black suit. She didn't ask why they were boarding another plane. Maybe that was what happened in London. Perhaps they were flying to another part of the city. She was thirsty. When she asked Auntie how long it would take before they got to their destination, the woman glared at her. You stop asking questions. I do the talking, she said in a harsh voice. The girl felt as though she had been slapped. Nobody in her entire life had spoken harshly to her. She looked at Auntie's chipped nails and her lipstick, which was smudged across two of her top teeth. The girl said nothing as they sat down and fastened their seatbelts. Her ears stung as the plane took off and she sat clenching her hands, willing the shooting pains to go away. After a few moments, her ears popped and the pain disappeared. She daren't ask where they were going to and she couldn't

understand what the stewards were saying. The girl felt as though they had been in the sky for ages, and she began to fidget with her seatbelt. She squirmed in her seat. She needed to use the toilet. Auntie put a warning hand on her knee and held her firm. Almost there, she said. Her breath was hot and smelly in the girl's ear.

Chapter 6

'Megan,' shouted Harry, just as she stood up and wiped her mouth.

She watched him stride towards her, his mouth in a tight line. 'How did you get here so fast? Are you some kind of superhero?'

'Don't touch anything.' His voice was low and urgent.

Megan shrugged. 'It's a bit late for that.'

'Jeez, Megan.' He threw his hands up in the air. 'What is it? What did you find?'

She pointed to the water. 'There. A foot. In a bin bag.' Her voice trembled.

He gave her a puzzled look. 'But, Megan, I told you not to do anything. I told you to wait for me.'

Megan was trying to bite back the tears. 'It could have been a false alarm though. All I did was have a look. It's there, sticking out. Anyone could have seen it.'

'Did you touch it?'

'No. Not the foot. Just the bag . . .'

'Megan, don't you get it? Your DNA will be all over the place now.'

Megan covered her mouth with her hands. 'But I didn't touch it with my hand. I used a stick.'

'Don't move. Don't touch anything else. I'll need to call this in.' He glared at her and turned away.

Just then, the sounds of sirens blared as police cars raced onto the bridge and screeched to a halt.

'I've done that already.' She stepped back, watching as several officers ran onto the footpath. Harry directed them to the bag.

After that, things seemed to pass in a very slow blur. Megan was asked several times to tell the officers what time she had arrived on the scene and exactly what she had seen. For some reason, though, the image of a woman, struggling on all fours, eventually slumping in a corner, was the only picture in her mind. She wondered if the rest of her body was in the bag or if it was just a foot and maybe a bit of leg. She watched Harry as he ducked under the police cordon and started making his way towards her. A wide circle had now formed around the crime scene with police crawling over every inch of the path. The large white forensic tent, which had been

erected over the remains, reminded Megan of a marquee at a wedding. Several years ago, she had been at a wedding in these gardens and now she was part of a crime scene. The muscles in Harry's jaw were tense and she thought she could see a tear glistening in the corner of his eye.

'You okay?' he said, not looking directly at her or waiting for an answer. 'Jesus, it's not a pretty sight.'

The air felt heavy, smelt sour. Megan was shaking now. 'Was the rest of her there?'

'Aye. Just about.'

'Bloody hell,' said Megan.

'Looked pretty fresh too. Think she must have been dumped in the last few hours. But they'll get a better idea once they've done their tests.' He looked over at the white tent that had appeared by the water. 'She's black too, like the other one.'

Just then a young officer ran under the police cordon and retched.

'Must be his first murder,' said Harry. 'Yours too, I'm guessing?' He placed a hand on Megan's shoulder, squeezing it awkwardly. 'What a morning. How are you feeling?'

'Super,' she said drily. 'Look, here come the tourists.' She pointed up to the bridge where a small cluster of people had stopped to gawk.

'Mathis,' shouted Harry, 'get up there and tell them to beat it.'

The young officer who had just thrown up raced off to deal with them.

'They're going to want to talk to you again,' he said. 'You'll need to make a statement.'

'Why? I didn't do anything. I just found the body.'

'No. I think I can safely say you've been eliminated from the enquiry. But they'll want to ask you again about the phone call. They'll need to get a copy of the recording off your mobile. You'll need to think about why someone would have called you. Why they asked for you by name.'

Megan shook her head in disbelief. 'I'm a journalist, Harry. It's not the first time I've had a tip-off, you know. That tends to be what happens. In fact, I thought it was that idiot Sam Martin having a laugh. I thought he was going to swing from a branch and shout "gotcha" at me.'

'Anything you can think of that was different or stuck out?'

'I told you already. The voice was muffled.' She shrugged. 'But maybe it was a bad line.' She pulled her mobile from her pocket. There were ten missed calls and a text message from Sebastian reminding her that she was picking him and Matthew up at the airport later. 'Shit.' She looked up from her phone. 'Look, can I go now? I really need to get back to the office. It's production day.'

Harry frowned at her. 'Surely you want to go home?'

'Back to the hotel?'

'Aye.' His voice was thick with tiredness.

'And do what, Harry? Mope about feeling sorry for myself? Go and soak in a hot bath?'

'No.' He took a step towards her. 'I meant just give yourself a bit of time. You've had a shock.'

'I've had a shock but I'll be fine. I've a job to do.' She pointed at the tent. 'It's not me that's in bits in a bag in the river. There's no point in feeling sorry for myself.'

'Okay, well, I'll tell them where you are if they need to come and talk to you.'

'Sure,' she said stepping back from him. 'I just need a coffee. My head is pounding. Anyway, how did you get here so quick from Edinburgh?'

'I was here anyway.' He rubbed at his eyes.

'Right. Look, I need to go. I need to get back. I'll speak to you later.' She turned and walked away, leaving Harry staring after her.

When they eventually got off the plane, the girl was tired. She walked slowly behind Auntie, who had applied a fresh coat of lipstick and dabbed some perfume behind her ears as the plane taxied down the runway. Auntie scanned the waiting crowd in the arrivals hall. It was noisy. Lots of people were shouting. The girl felt overwhelmed by all the faces staring and leering at her. Hurry, said Auntie. Hurry up. The girl looked up in confusion as she felt Auntie's hand in the small of her back, pushing her towards a tall, bald-headed man. He was African and the girl wondered if Auntie knew him. Here she is, said Auntie, passing him an envelope. He rubbed his hands together and snaked his arm out towards the girl pulling her to his chest. His black leather jacket was tatty and she screwed up her nose at its musty scent. Yes. You are a beauty. You will do nicely, he said.

The girl was confused. She didn't like this man. He didn't seem to be a friend. She felt a knot of anxiety start to form in the pit of her stomach. I don't feel well, Auntie. Can I go to the toilet? The woman sighed. Silly girl. We will be right back, she said to the man. Just make sure you are. No funny business, he said. She raised an eyebrow. As if. I have a plane to catch. And you have something to give me, I believe. The man laughed. Hurry up, said Auntie, pointing the girl towards the toilets on the other side of the hall. Stay close to me and no nonsense, okay.

In the cubicle, the girl sat with her trousers at her ankles and frowned in confusion. What was going on? Who was the man? And what was wrong with Auntie? She was behaving oddly. The girl didn't have a good feeling about any of it. Come on. Hurry, shouted Auntie, who was tapping her foot outside the door. The girl swung it open and walked out slowly. Where are we going now, Auntie? When will I go to my new home? And what about the job? Are we in London? Auntie dismissed her questions with a wave of her hand. My friend will take you there, she said. I thought you were doing that, said the girl. You told Mother you would look after me. You said you would make sure I was okay. You promised. Auntie slapped the girl across the cheek. Stop. Enough.

The girl was stunned. You always did ask too many questions, said Auntie. Even as a little girl. But that is enough. You're staying here. I'm going home.

Chapter 7

‘Sorry I’m late, everyone,’ said Megan, walking into the office. ‘I’ve brought coffee though, and croissants.’ She held up the cup carrier and paper bag.

‘You okay, Megan? We were wondering if we should send out a search party for you?’ said Ronnie, the designer. ‘You’re looking a wee bit peely-wally.’ Ronnie was tall, slender and always wore jeans and a shirt in an assortment of primary colours.

‘I’m fine.’ Megan shrugged. ‘In fact, if I told you I don’t think you’d believe me.’

Ronnie’s dark eyes flashed and he just about managed to raise an eyebrow up to his botox-injected forehead. ‘Try me,’ he challenged.

‘Coffee first,’ she said, hanging her coat on the back of her seat and smiling at Katherine, the administration manager, who was on the phone. Katherine gave her a small wave.

The magazine was based in the ground floor of a Victorian townhouse off Byres Road. The location had been an added bonus of the job. The room had high ceilings with ornate cornicing, polished walnut floors and a bay-window overlooking a lush green park. Yet in two minutes she could walk to Starbucks or a murder scene.

‘Did you steal Emma’s coffees?’ Ronnie pointed at the scrawled name on the cups.

Megan laughed. ‘I’m being Emma today. Easier to say and easier to spell. Keeps the queue moving without folk behind sighing that you’re having to spell out your name.’

‘Here you go.’ Katherine walked across to her, carrying a bundle of envelopes. ‘Here’s your mail.’

‘Thank you.’ Megan reached out to take it from her. ‘So how is everyone this morning?’

Ronnie stood holding his cup, staring at Megan. She knew he was desperate to hear what had happened. Sunita, the picture editor, who’d just picked up the phone, gave her the thumbs-up sign. ‘Sunita, in case I forget, can you have another look at the images of Rachel Thompson on that spread, please. I’m not sure they work.’

‘Of course. Will do.’ Sunita turned back towards her screen.

'What happened to your shoes?' asked Katherine as she picked up a coffee from the tray.

Megan looked down at her black shoes, which were smeared with mud and grass. Her trousers were dirty too. Then she looked up at Katherine who was dressed immaculately, as always, in a woollen dress with expensive, polished boots.

'Oh dear. I suppose I am a bit of mess.'

'Em, you just need a wee tidy-up.' Katherine turned and walked back to her desk. Reaching into her drawer, she pulled out some wipes. 'Here you might want to use some of these.'

'Thanks.' Megan bent down to scrape the dirt from her shoes. It was no use. They were filthy.

'So where have you been?' Ronnie had now scooted his chair over towards her and was helping himself to a pastry from the bag.

Megan took a sip from her cup. 'It's a long story . . . but I got a call. I found a body.'

'You what?'

'A body. I found a body.'

'Where?' said Sunita, walking over and perching herself on the edge of Megan's desk. She was petite and had cropped hair which framed her almond-shaped eyes.

'The Botanics.'

'Bloody hell. You okay?' Ronnie broke off a piece of croissant and shoved it in his mouth.

'You know what,' said Megan. 'I'm fine. Probably still in shock. But I'll be fine.'

'So, who was it? Where was it?' Ronnie's mouth was now full of croissant.

'In the river. In a bin bag. And don't talk with your mouth full.'

He quickly swallowed. 'What did you see?'

'A foot sticking out of it.'

'A real foot?' said Ronnie, now helping himself to a *pain au chocolat*.

'A real foot, Ronnie, with nail varnish and everything.'

'Jesus.'

'What about the rest of the body? Was it there?'

'I believe so.' Megan felt suddenly tired. She sat back in her chair, clasping her cup.

'So, it was a woman then?' asked Sunita.

'Yes. That's all I know.'

'Fuck a duck.' It was Sunita's turn to look horrified.

'Maybe there's a serial killer on the loose,' said Ronnie. 'The tabloids will have a field day with this, won't they?'

'One body hardly constitutes a serial killer, you daft prick,' Sunita said.

'It's not just the one body though, is it?' Ronnie leant back against Megan's desk and scowled. 'What about that body pulled from the Clyde? They still haven't found out who did that.'

'Or even who she was.' Megan spoke quietly as she remembered that the caller, earlier, had made the link to the other body.

'And then there have been all those prostitutes done in over the years. Maybe there's a madman on the loose. There must be.'

'Ronnie, will you shut up. You're not Columbo.'

'There's no need to be like that. I'm just trying to piece it together,' he said.

'Aye - you're putting two and two together and coming up with eight. Leave it to the professionals.' Sunita frowned at him.

'What colour was the nail varnish?' asked Ronnie.

'The nail varnish?' Megan frowned, closing her eyes for a moment. She could see the toenails on the small and slender foot.

'Aye, on the foot.'

'Why do you want to know that, you sicko?' said Sunita.

'Just do,' he said.

'It was cerise.' Megan's voice was quiet. 'Cerise pink . . .'

Katherine looked up from her desk. 'You don't look that great, Megan. A bit pale. Perhaps you should go and freshen up.'

'You know, I think I will,' said Megan, rubbing her temples. The enormity of what had happened this morning was starting to press down on her. She needed some fresh air and to be alone for an hour. 'If you don't mind, I'll nip back to the hotel and grab a quick shower, change my clothes. Then head back in.'

'I'll get you a cab.' Katherine picked up the phone and started to dial.

Megan quickly sent Sam a text: *Murder incident ongoing at Botanics. Near the bridge.*

Her phone pinged almost immediately. *Ta. On my way.*

Ronnie and Sunita had skulked back to their desks, clearly not talking to one another.

'I won't be long, children,' said Megan. 'We need to go to print by two o'clock. Shame we're not a daily, otherwise I could've written about this morning.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'Would have made a great first-person piece.'

The girl couldn't allow herself to have any bad thoughts. The gods wouldn't like it. Auntie had disappeared and left her with the creepy man. He ordered her to follow him, pulling her close and moving her along. As they walked outside, she shivered. Haha, don't worry, I will soon warm you up, my little one, he said. Pushing her towards the car park, he unlocked a dark blue saloon car and shoved her in the back. She looked around frantically, wondering if she should make a dash for it, if she should run back towards the terminal. But just as she tried to grab the door, he clicked the locks shut. Don't fucking think about it, he said, turning round and staring at her. Where are we going? asked the girl. I'm taking you home. To meet your new family, he said. But, but I thought I was going to school in London, she said. He didn't answer her question. Your new boss is a very rich man. You will clean his house and look after him. What was he talking about? New family, new job? I want to go home. To my village. Please take me there, she said and started to cry. Sshht. That's enough of that. This is your new home.

She stared out of the window and watched as the illuminated buildings flashed by. Then gradually everything became black. She felt a dull ache in the pit of her stomach again, and tension in the muscles at the bottom of her back. Maybe this was a dream? Where was her mother? Then her shoulders began shuddering and she began to sob.

The car stopped abruptly and the man jumped out. The door swung open, and the man hauled her out of the car, pushing her to the ground. She could feel the damp soil through her jeans, then she heard a zip. Stop that, he shouted, leaning close to her face. Enough of the sniveling and tears. She stared in horror at his pock-marked face leering down at her. Any more fucking noise and your mother and your brothers get it, he said, slicing his hand across his throat. Is that what you want? She gasped. See this, he said, pointing at his private parts which were sticking out of his fly. Any more of your shit and I will fuck you. You're lucky I'm not doing that right now. Normally I would. But I get good price for you. You should be enjoying this bit. Sitting down in the car having a rest. Because this will be the best bit of it. This is like a fucking holiday. You wait and see. Now get back in the car.

The girl did as she was told and he slammed the door behind her. He didn't get in the car immediately. She waited, not daring to look out and see what he was doing. Then suddenly he jumped back in the driver's seat, roughly started the ignition and

the car roared off. She felt a warm sensation between her legs and realised she'd wet herself.

Chapter 8

The next morning Megan leapt from her bed when she heard Matthew begin to rustle in his cot. She'd tossed and turned all night, getting up to go to the toilet, then pausing to check on him on her way back to bed. She stood watching him, lying on his back in the travel cot, his arms sprawled above his head. He didn't have a care in the world.

Matthew clung to her when she lifted him from his cot and changed him, crying whenever she went out his sight. She knew he must be hungry and rummaged around around in his changing bag for some ready-made formula. Sebastian had even labelled a bag with a sterile bottle.

After he'd guzzled his milk, she lifted him up and carried him down to the hotel restaurant. Plopping him into a high chair, she flinched as his fists remained clasped around her hair. Matthew beamed and waved at the businesswoman at the next table. She gave him a stiff smile and flicked her glance back to her paper.

'So, young man, what shall we do today?' She spooned some mashed Weetabix into his mouth. He giggled and grabbed the spoon off her, launching it to the floor. Megan picked it up and placed it on the table next to her out of his reach. Then he threw his toy down.

'Come on, wee man. That's enough. Here, have some more Weetabix.' She could feel the disapproving glare of the businesswoman boring into her back. Megan looked over at her and gave a hard stare. 'There you go, Matthew. Open wide.' She'd originally planned to take him to the Botanic Gardens, but yesterday's events, which were splashed across the woman's newspaper, had put a damper on that. Maybe they'd go to Kelvingrove instead, or the Museum of Transport. Slotting another spoonful of mush into Matthew's open mouth, she thought about yesterday's production and how smoothly everything had gone despite the interruptions. The cover story was about a woman who had escaped from ISIS. She had bought in the copy from a freelance contact in London. It was expensive but worth it. The team had promised to call her today if there were any issues, but she couldn't see why there would be. 'More?' she said, and smiled as Matthew leaned towards her, trying to grab the spoon. It did feel slightly strange to be sitting there as a mum rather than

a single businesswoman. The morning's papers were still sitting in a pile outside her room.

'Dadadadada,' said Matthew who was pointing at the man in red trousers walking towards their table.

'What are you doing up?' Megan was irritated. He looked such a tosser in those jeans. 'Thought you'd be making the most of a long lie.'

Sebastian smiled. 'I woke up at the usual time and couldn't get back to sleep. Typical, isn't it? It does feel strange being in a room on my own.'

'We were just going to head upstairs and get cleaned up, weren't we, Matthew?'

'Don't worry. Go ahead. I just thought I'd come down and have some food.'

'It's okay. We'll sit with you.' Megan handed Matthew a cold piece of toast from the rack on the table.

'What's the plan today?' Sebastian sat back in his seat and smiled.

'Well, I thought I would take him to a park or a museum. Or maybe both.'

'Oh,' said Sebastian.

'Is there a problem?' she asked. 'I just assumed you would want some time to yourself.'

He shook his head. 'Not really. I mean I was quite keen to see some of the city. But I was hoping you'd show me.'

Megan sighed. 'Of course. You mean you want to tag along?'

'Yes. I wouldn't mind seeing a bit more of this place if I'm going to be moving here soon.'

Megan bristled. 'What do you mean?'

'I just think from a practical point of view it might be better.' Sebastian was now spreading butter on a slice of toast.

Megan wanted to stab him with the knife. Instead, she ground her fists into her thighs and tried to count to ten. She made it to three. 'But I thought we'd talked about this. I thought you were happy if Matthew lives with me and you come up at weekends?'

He sighed. 'I know. But the thing is, I don't think that's enough for me.'

Megan stared at him and felt her mood start to quickly deflate. 'But, Sebastian,' she started slowly. 'We agreed on this.' She watched him across the table as he

unfolded the napkin on his plate. 'We're not together anymore and we can't be together. Not as a couple.'

'I know that,' he snapped. 'I'm talking about my son. Our son. I just don't think I can hand him over to you and make do with weekend visits. Especially if you're going to be working as much as you are.' He bit into the toast.

Megan could feel a heat rising from her chest and spreading up to her cheeks. 'I'm only working as much as I am because Matthew isn't here. Obviously, it would be different if he was.'

He shook his head. 'I don't see how, Megan. It's hardly a part-time job.' He gestured at Matthew. 'What are you going to do for childcare?'

Megan sat in silence and stared ahead as she took a sip of cold tea. 'We discussed this and we talked about a nursery. I've already put his name down for it. It's not that different to what he's doing now. Except he won't be mixing with kids called Arabella and Felix.'

Sebastian laughed and leaned forward. 'Look, I'm not trying to unhinge you or catch you out. I've just been thinking about it. I work at home anyway. So really it makes no difference to me whether I'm in south London or Glasgow. Then at least I can see Matthew every day or be on hand if you get caught up at work.'

'What's the catch though with all of this, Sebastian?'

He frowned. 'Why does there always have to be a catch with you, Megan?'

She sighed and let her shoulders slump. 'There just always *is* a catch.' She stared at him and wished for the millionth time that she hadn't swiped to the right when she saw his image on that dating site. Then felt sick with guilt when she looked at Matthew, who was now blowing raspberries and throwing his crusts on the floor. 'Look, I'd better go and get him tidied up so we can head out.'

'Okay,' said Sebastian, pouring himself another cup of tea. 'I'll leave you to it and then catch you up. Just text me and let me know where you are.'

'Will do.' She was about to lift Matthew from his high chair when her mobile started to ring. She slipped it from her pocket. Perhaps she had been too confident about the abilities of her colleagues. 'Hello.' She sat down in the chair and frowned. 'This morning? Is that necessary?' Her voice was brisk. 'But I've already told you what happened. In fact I repeated myself several times yesterday.' Matthew was staring at her and making 'O' shapes with his plump red lips. 'Fine.'

'Problem?' said Sebastian.

'Yes. The police want me to go in and give an official statement about yesterday.'

'I'm assuming now?'

'Yes,' she said, glaring at him.

'Okay. Just go and do it.'

'But Matthew . . .' Her voice trailed away and she felt tears beginning to well.

'It won't take long. I'll look after him.'

Megan could see a hint of a smirk on his face. 'At least let me go and get him organised. I'll bring him down and meet you in the lobby in ten minutes.'

'It's not a problem Megan. Relax.'

She took a steady breath. 'Stop trying to be the perfect bloody man.'

'I'm not, Megan. I just don't let things affect me the way you do.'

'Come on, sweetie.' She lifted Matthew and clutched him close to her. 'Let's go and get you ready for Daddy.'

'Dadadada.'

She began to stomp across the restaurant and then heard Sebastian calling after her. She turned. 'What?'

'Do you want to know what the catch is?'

'Eh?'

'The catch with me coming to Glasgow?'

'What?'

'The spectacular weather.' He pointed at the windows which were being lashed by rain.

Megan turned away so he couldn't see her tears. She could feel the claustrophobia descending again, this time heavier than before.

When the car eventually slid to a stop outside a large barn, the girl gazed out at darkness. The man ushered her out of the back-seat and towards the building ahead. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw a large red-brick house, about twenty metres away, and the smell of smoking wood crept up her nose. The man gripped her arm, slung her bag over his shoulder and hauled her towards the door. Her feet skidded on the slush. She tried her hardest to pull her sweater down over her soiled jeans.

The door opened and a fat, olive-skinned man, with gold capped teeth, opened the door. Behind him stood a small, scrawny woman with brassy yellow hair pulled back tightly in a high ponytail. The girl could see her pale scalp.

The man pushed her towards the couple and had a brief, staccato conversation in another language. She hung her head and kept her eyes fixed on the floor, but she knew the woman was staring at her. Then the door slammed shut behind her and she heard her captor crunching over the gravel back to the car. He really was leaving her.

Come. This way, said the woman. We show you your room. The girl had no choice but to follow. The woman led her through a small door in the hallway and down a set of damp concrete stairs. She knew the man with the gold teeth was behind her, watching and waiting. The girl shuddered. She focused on the stairs beneath her as she descended into a very dark room. The woman reached to switch on a light and she squinted as she took in her surroundings. The walls were roughly plastered, the ceiling low and the floor bare and grey. The bed was narrow, with a flat pillow, a yellowing sheet and a moss-green blanket. The woman's eyes narrowed and she pointed at another door in the wall. The toilet, she said. Thank you, the girl managed to say. Though she wasn't sure what for. Clean yourself up, said the woman, glancing at the girl's crotch, then come upstairs and I will show you the kitchen. We are hungry. Knock twice and I will fetch you.

The girl looked up and could see the silhouette of the man against the door. The woman walked up the stairs slowly, then shut the door behind her, bolting it shut. The girl stood for a moment in the silence. The room was sparse and cold and she screwed up her nose at the unpleasant odour in the air. Walking over to the toilet door, her heart sank as she realised the smell was coming from there. It wasn't a proper bathroom or even toilet. It was just a cupboard with two buckets and a cloth.

Chapter 9

Megan couldn't sleep. When she closed her eyes all she could see was mottled flesh and a decaying corpse. The scent of rotting skin crept up her nostrils. She longed to hold Matthew's soft little body, bury her nose in his shortbread-and-washing-powder smell and forget it all. Perhaps it was a good thing at the moment that he wasn't here. That way she could keep home and work separate. He had waved bye-bye at the airport and smiled. Then he had blown her a kiss. Megan wasn't sure what would be better. A torrid, tearful, emotional farewell that left her aching for her wee boy. Or the fact that he was quite happy to head off with his dad and leave her waiting in the cold, harshly lit corridors of Glasgow Airport. It would be ten days until she next saw him and already she could feel the dull ache of emptiness in the pit of her stomach and the tingle in her nipples even though she had stopped feeding him over a year ago. She was onto her second cup of coffee from the small stash of Nescafé sachets in her hotel room when she called her sister.

'Joanna, it's me.'

'Hello,' said a groggy voice.

'Oh crap. Sorry. You've been on night shift.'

'No,' said Joanna, 'it's fine. I'm needing to get up anyway. You okay?'

Megan sighed. 'No, not really.'

'What's up?'

Megan could hear a tap in the background and a gush of water. 'Work stuff.'

'Oh . . .'

'Look,' said Megan. 'Do you mind if I come over?'

'What, now?'

'Yes,' said Megan and paused. 'If it's okay. I could do with talking.'

'Sure. I'll just jump in the shower and make myself decent.'

Megan heard the sound of the toilet flushing. 'Okay. See you soon.'

The sky had clouded over and spots of rain started to fall just as Megan stepped out of the taxi onto the pavement outside Joanna's flat.

‘Are you going to tell me what’s up?’ Joanna showed Megan through to the sitting room, pointing at the chair. She plonked herself on the sofa, curling her legs underneath her.

Perching on the edge of the seat, Megan’s eyes darted around and fixed on the picture of George on the mantelpiece. ‘Joanna, it was just horrible.’ A fat tear plopped onto her cheek.

Joanna uncurled her legs and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and clasping her hands together. ‘What was horrible?’

Megan rubbed her chin with her thumb. ‘A body. Joanna, I found a body. A young girl. Stuffed in a bin bag and dumped in the river. Like a piece of shit in a bag.’

Joanna looked at Megan blankly. ‘What do you mean? What are you talking about?’

‘Just what I said. I found a body. A body in a bag.’ Her tone was firm.

Joanna’s eyes widened. ‘Where? How?’

Megan’s stomach began to rumble and it dawned on her that she hadn’t eaten since yesterday. Was it dinner last night? She couldn’t even remember having any. She cleared her throat to cover the sound. ‘I got a call about it. Assumed it was a wind-up but thought I should check it out just in case. Happens more often than you would think.’ She paused, and the ripple of bubbles in her stomach filled the silence. ‘Though this is the first time it’s been a body.’

Joanna sat back. ‘Is it that story I saw in the *Record*?’

Megan nodded. Sam had managed to sell some copy to the paper thanks to her tip-off.

‘What are the cops saying?’

‘Murder. Obviously. They think it might be linked to that other body pulled from the river a few months ago.’ Rubbing her eyes, and puffing out her cheeks with a sigh, she said, ‘But don’t quote me on that. It’s all very much off the record at the moment.’

‘Megan, remember I’m not a journalist. I’m not exactly going to tell anyone that, am I?’

‘Yes, sorry. Force of habit.’

Joanna stared at the wall beyond her. ‘Jesus. Poor, poor girl.’

Megan watched her sister across the room. She was saying all the right things but didn't look particularly shocked by Megan's news. 'You look calmer than me, Joanna. Have you seen a body before?'

Joanna laughed drily. 'Apart from George? No.'

'Oh, Joanna. Me and my stupid mouth. Sorry.'

'It's okay, Megan. Don't get your knickers in a knot. That was a bit different. Anyway, at least he looked at peace. And he was lying down on a bed when we saw him.'

Megan bit her tongue. What the hell was wrong with her? She sat staring at the dots on the carpet.

'Look, don't worry. I know what you were getting at. So no - other than George, no, I haven't seen a real body. But I may as well have. I've seen women come to us with their teeth hanging by threads or knocked out completely. I've seen them with their faces completely smashed in. We even had a woman with an axe sticking out her head.' Joanna leant forward towards Megan. 'And I'm getting on. So nothing really surprises me anymore.'

'Who would do that though? In the middle of Glasgow? In twenty sixteen?'

'Yes, I know. But it's been around forever. It's not going to disappear overnight just because of a few government initiatives or free legal advice.'

'I know. And I should be more hard-nosed than this, Joanna. I mean I've been to war zones and interviewed child prostitutes on the other side of the world. I think . . .'

Joanna put up her palm. 'It's motherhood,' she said and smiled. 'That's what happens, Megan. It softens your view on the world.'

Megan's eyes filled with tears. 'I'm not sure that I like it.'

'Rubbish. It makes you a better person, Megan. I think you've changed. For the better.'

'It doesn't feel like that,' she said, wiping her eyes. 'I just want to be able to focus and get the job done. I want to tell this girl's story. Who is she and who was responsible for doing that to her.'

Joanna stood up. 'And you still can. But you're human, Megan. Let yourself have a bloody cry. And then get on with your job. You're good at it. Don't forget that. Now let

me go and make you some coffee and something to eat. You sound like you could do with it.'

'Okay. You're right. Thanks.' When Joanna had left the room, Megan allowed herself to cry.

They expected her to clean the whole house and make all their meals under their watchful gaze. For the first week or so, the girl had managed to keep track of the days. But then they all seemed to merge into a mass of nothingness. She always slept scrunched up in a ball, rocking herself to sleep. During the night she would frequently wake shivering, and pull the blanket tighter around her. It didn't matter that she slept in all of her clothes, she was still cold. She would be woken at six o'clock by the shrill bell on the alarm they had put beside her bed. How she longed for a warm bubble-bath and to wash her hair properly under hot running water. Just before half-past six, she would wait outside the door for the bolt to be slid open. Then she would empty her bucket in the toilet, scrub her hands and go to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Then scrub the floors, the walls and do whatever list of tasks was thrust upon her. Their bathroom was filthy. It didn't matter that she cleaned it every day. Each morning it looked the same. Towels balled up on the floor, skid marks in the toilet, pools of piss on the rim, dark and curly pubic hairs clogging up the plughole. And every morning she had to swallow back the vomit in her mouth.

She would scrub, wipe, chop, fry, wash, iron and fold throughout the day, until her eyelids were drooping closed. Surely her mother must have told the police that she was missing? Surely someone would be out looking now? Auntie would have to tell her mother what had happened. The woman kept a watchful gaze on her as she chopped the onions for the evening meal. She was preparing a stew and she tried to focus on slicing and dicing the knife through the onions, knowing she was being monitored. She couldn't help the tears springing from her eyes as she chopped the onions, it always happened to her at home. And for a moment she could hear her mother singing in their kitchen at home, moving around her humming a lullaby and the tears started to fall harder. Then, as she wiped her tears away, out of the corner of her eye she saw the woman pull the belt from her trousers and quickly flick it in the air. The stinging thrash of the hard leather across her back winded her and she choked back a sob. She could feel the skin swell under her thin T-shirt, and knew that a welt would have appeared, snaking its way across her shoulders. The woman stood there, gloating, as she watched the girl trying to compose herself.

Chapter 10

Natasha Campbell stood outside the restaurant, her phone clamped to her ear. Petite, with a sharp brown bob, she was never seen without her brightly-coloured heels which had become her trademark. Today she was wearing shiny pink shoes, teamed with a navy-blue trouser-suit. On anyone else it would have looked ridiculous, but somehow Natasha managed to carry it off. Rondo's was a small bistro tucked away in a small close off Edinburgh's cobbled Royal Mile. It was their usual meeting place, quiet and discreet. While she had been waiting, Megan had checked her phone again. She had texted Harry on the train to let him know she was through on his turf and suggested meeting up. He hadn't replied.

'How are you?' Natasha strode towards Megan, her arms out. 'Feels like it's been ages since we last saw each other,' she went on, hugging Megan.

'Well, I suppose it has been,' said Megan. 'It's been a while.'

'Love what you're doing with the magazine by the way,' said Natasha. 'God – we're crying out for something new. The papers here have just completely gone down the pan. A pile of shit. Full of celebrity crap and waffle and all being run by about two hacks.'

Megan took a sharp breath. 'Yip,' she said, taking a seat opposite Natasha. 'It's certainly changed days. Not like it used to be.'

'And you've got the same old dinosaurs covering politics that have been doing it for years. Not much has changed there. I don't suppose you'd consider helping them out?'

Megan laughed. 'Not a chance.'

'Fair enough. So tell me about *Enquiry*.' Natasha helped herself to a piece of bread from the basket on the table. 'Are you really autonomous and allowed to do what you want? Glass of wine? Sod it, let's have Prosecco.' She signalled to the waiter who was approaching their table. 'The feature on women and sectarianism was brilliant.'

'Thank you,' said Megan. 'I thought it was time it was covered properly and the woman at the Glasgow Women's Library had told me about the launch of their film ages ago. Thought it would be a good hook for it.'

‘Yes, it certainly seems to have gone down well with some of the west coast ladies,’ said Natasha. ‘Though as you can imagine some of the usual suspects are moaning about it.’

‘The same ones who think it’s a good idea to reintroduce regular Old Firm games and drinking at matches now that Rangers are no longer relegated?’

‘The very ones,’ said Natasha. ‘They say sectarianism’s all just a bit of banter. All a bit of fun.’

Megan rolled her eyes. ‘The same kind of wankers I used to work with in my early days who thought squeezing your arse was all a bit of a laugh. Or asked if the woman I’d just interviewed was “fuckable”.’

‘Unbelievable,’ said Natasha, spreading some butter on her bread. ‘Can you imagine the uproar if you’d said something about the size of their dicks?’

Megan laughed. ‘I did, Natasha. I always liked a bit of a challenge. Didn’t make me very popular but I didn’t see why I should put up with it.’

‘Bet that went down well? Anyone I know?’

‘Most of the old guys have retired now or are dead. Some of them took the huff, others saw my point. Got me the reputation of being feisty. Or yappy.’

Natasha threw her head back and chuckled. ‘Well, hopefully those po-faced lads I’m talking about will be retiring soon anyway. The younger guys seem to be a bit more progressive with their views. Always nipping off to do the school run or pick up nappies from Boots.’

The waiter set down two glasses of Prosecco on the table. ‘Well, cheers.’ Natasha clinked her glass against Megan’s. ‘Congratulations on the new job. Good to have you back.’

‘Cheers. It’s good to be back. Well, kind of. Anyway, tell me how things are with you? How are the corridors of power?’

Natasha groaned. ‘Okay. Actually, I’m lying. Things are good. Much better now that Rachel is in charge. At least she actually gets things done rather than just talking about it.’

‘And what about your boss? Karen?’

‘Well, I suppose she’s okay.’ Natasha shrugged.

‘What did you want to talk to me about then?’ Megan reached to slip a notebook from her bag. ‘Anything exclusive? Specifically for us?’

Natasha tapped her nails on the table and nodded. ‘Yes.’ She glanced around and lowered her voice just as the waiter approached again. ‘Megan, do you know what you would like?’

Megan quickly scanned it. ‘The salmon, please.’

‘The same for me, and a large bottle of sparkling water please.’

The moment the waiter stepped out of earshot Megan leaned forward again, pencil clasped between her fingers. ‘So what can you tell me?’ Megan’s pencil was clasped between her fingers.

‘Well,’ said Natasha. ‘It’s the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Bill. We’ve got traffickers facing life imprisonment; no punishments for the victims forced into committing the crimes . . .’

‘I see.’ Megan sat back, an image of the dead woman’s foot from the other day suddenly again fresh in her mind. ‘You know I found her.’

‘Who?’ said Natasha.

‘The woman in Glasgow. In the Botanics.’

‘The murdered woman? Oh God.’

‘I know.’ Megan tried not to let her voice falter. ‘The police can’t identify her either.’

Natasha swirled some Prosecco around her mouth then swallowed. ‘Wonder if she’s linked to the other one.’

‘We’ll find out soon enough.’

‘That must have been grim.’

‘It was.’ She was still reeling from Harry’s call to her earlier. There was no CCTV footage as the cameras hadn’t been working for a while. Budget cuts had struck again. Megan eyed Natasha up and down, wondering if she should say anything. But she didn’t get the chance. Natasha had an agenda to fulfil.

‘Well, what I want to do,’ said Natasha, smoothly changing the subject, ‘is bring in the Nordic model to Scotland. I think if we can follow that then without a doubt we can reduce the levels of human trafficking. And the exploitation involved in prostitution. But I’m coming up against resistance.’

‘Yes, I saw that,’ said Megan. ‘So it’s not going into that Bill then?’

'No, but I am looking at bringing another one in.'

'What, specifically for legislation for criminalising prostitution?'

'Yes. And so ... this is where you come in.' Natasha leaned forward. 'How do you fancy a trip to Sweden? International trafficking conference next month in Stockholm . . . Karen will be announcing the legislation there.' She took another sip of Prosecco. 'If you can work something into your investigation about the Nordic model and its success rates, then it may just keep the pressure on and the spotlight on the issue.'

'A bit contrived, no?' Megan jabbed her pencil at the pad.

'Not if I get you some case studies and an exclusive interview with the new Lord Advocate. A proper sit-down chat with her. The first she'll do in her new post. She's keen to make sure Scotland leads the way with this trafficking legislation. We're already getting international interest with what we're doing. This will just cement the Scottish position.' Natasha took another sip from her glass. 'Think about it. Your marketing department will love it too. That way they'll get loads of positive PR for the magazine, they'll be able to syndicate the interview and that'll raise the profile of *Enquiry*.'

Megan could see the start of a smile twitching at the corners of Natasha's mouth. She laughed wryly and raised an eyebrow. 'A win-win situation all round then? No wonder you were hired as a spin-doctor. You're better than Alastair Campbell.'

'Ugh, please don't compare me to *him*,' she said and sat back, smirking.

Megan was usually irritated if anyone tried to tell her what to do, especially government stooges. But today she felt a surge of adrenaline which she hadn't had in a long time. If she could get the exclusive on the Justice Minister's trip to Sweden plus an exclusive with the Lord Advocate, packaged with a piece on the rising number of trafficking victims in Scotland, with a wee bit help from Harry and perhaps a couple of real case studies too, it would make a brilliant cover story.

'Salmon, ladies.' The waiter placed their plates on the table.

'Thank you.' Megan was now desperate to eat so she could get back to the office and start planning. 'How's the family?'

'Good,' said Natasha, forking the fish into small pieces. 'That's my daughter away at university now. And the hubby is always working. Always away. Just as well I have a job or I'd be an empty-nester.'

'How's he finding Scotland?' said Megan. 'Bit of a change from life in Australia. How long is it you've been back now?'

'Two years. And remember we were only away for two years, so he's had enough time to get used to the weather again. And he has the life of Riley. He's up and down to London all the time.'

'Life as a diplomat, eh?'

'Yes. Not bad at all. Keeps him busy though, and you know what he's like. Does love to *network*.'

'You sure he actually exists? Can't believe I still haven't met him.'

Natasha chewed thoughtfully on her salmon. 'You're not missing much. And how about you?'

'Yes. Work is keeping me busy too. Keeps me out of all kinds of mischief.'

Natasha wiped her mouth with her napkin. 'And how's the boss?'

'Richard?' said Megan.

'Yes.'

'Approaching retirement. Golfing lots. Too mellow.'

'I did always have a soft spot for him.'

Megan raised an eyebrow. 'Really?'

'Really.' Natasha smiled. 'And how about you? Do you have a man on the go just now?'

Megan's cheeks flushed. 'Nope. Far too much like hard work.'

'Yes, you're right,' said Natasha. 'So are you up for Sweden then?'

'Definitely,' said Megan. 'I'll be there.'

It was always going to be just a matter of time. The man was a constant presence, waiting and watching. Lingering in the background, staring in anticipation. All the doors were padlocked shut. Where would she go anyway? The gods would be furious if she disobeyed. They would harm her mother and her brothers. She thought of little Osato. How she longed to hear his chuckle. She had been there she thought for almost a week when the woman told her that she stank. You need a shower. Or a bath, she said, grabbing her hair and sniffing it. Pah. It's disgusting. You are smelly. Like an animal. The girl couldn't disagree. She was embarrassed that she smelled so bad. The thought of a bath gave her a small glimmer of hope. Come, said the woman, roughly pulling her. I run you bath. The girl followed her into the bathroom, which she had cleaned that morning. Sitting amongst the bubbles, in the bath, was the gold-toothed man. Get in, said the woman, slamming the door shut. Don't be afraid, said the man, crossing his hands together behind his head. His stomach was pale and flabby and the hairs on his chest floated into the water, like tendrils of seaweed. You know you must obey me. You have sworn an oath of obedience to the gods, he said, moving his hands, under the water. Now get clothes off and get in.

The girl bent down awkwardly to fumble with the clasps on her sandals. For as long as possible she stared down at the floor she'd earlier mopped. The faint smell of bleach started to work its way up her nostrils, and she tried to hold back the tears. She stood up, feeling a trickle of warm liquid between her legs, and pressed herself against the wall. He was now holding his erect penis in both hands and it stuck up, breaking the surface of the water. She stared at him, rubbing her bottom lip with her thumb. Her heart was beating erratically, her eyes on the locked door. I said get clothes off and get in. Now. She pulled off her T-shirt and let her trousers and wet pants slide to her ankles. His eyes flicked over her rigid body and he held out his hand to her. She stepped into the tepid water. Her mouth was dry and she gulped when he grabbed her. She tried to focus on the water sloshing up and down the sides of the bath. He began grunting as he rubbed a cloth against her breasts, then moved his hand lower and lower. Throwing the cloth aside, he thrust his fingers inside her and she cried out in shock. She screamed, but the man kept probing deeper and deeper. The girl closed her eyes and tried to think of the sound of her mother singing.

Chapter 11

'Is everything okay?' Megan was walking through Dowanhill towards Hyndland Road. Her hand was clamped around her phone, her heart fluttering as she tried her best to push back the anxiety inside which was threatening to gush to the surface. 'Right. I see. Yes. Okay. When is the next appointment? . . . But what does that mean? Thanks for letting me know.' She bit her bottom lip as she listened. 'What? I don't know. I'll call you later on.'

Sitting down abruptly on a bench, she rested her elbows on her knees and held her head in her hands. Her clammy hands felt cool against the warmth of her cheeks. Sebastian had been trying to reach her all day, he told her. His tone was accusing and Megan felt nothing but guilt. Looking up, she saw a young woman approach pushing a designer buggy.

'Hiya,' she said.

Megan glanced at the baby in the pushchair who was chewing on a dummy. The woman walked along with purpose and for a moment Megan let the strange feeling of rootlessness settle over her. Her son was ill and she wasn't there for him. Again. Sniffing, she dug around in her bag for a tissue. There was no sense of solidarity or support from Sebastian, no propping each other up with supportive words or cuddles. Just a short, perfunctory phone call to inform her Matthew was sick. The image of her fevered son weighed down on her and she felt the burden of responsibility grow heavier. She knew the best thing for her mind was the distraction of work, so she called Harry for an update. He hadn't replied to her text the other day and she wondered if he was still annoyed with her.

Harry answered his phone after just one ring. 'Hello. Are you missing me already?'

'I was thinking that I could do an investigation into trafficking. Give it some exposure. What do you think?' Megan could imagine him sitting at his desk, his shirt sleeves rolled up, and his feet on the desk.

'Okay. Cut to the chase, why don't you?'

'I'm just keen to get the ball rolling with this,' she snapped.

'Okay. Where shall we start?'

'With the body of the girl with no name.'

'Megan, where are you just now? Are you in the office?'

Her voice was brisk. 'No. I'm out and about. I'm just heading to a meeting in Hyndland.'

'Look do you want to do this over the phone? Or would you rather see me in person?'

'Probably over the phone would be better,' said Megan. 'I don't fancy another trip to Edinburgh, thanks.'

'Oops,' he said sheepishly. 'That's why you're mad. Sorry. I didn't reply to your text.'

'Don't be ridiculous.' Megan was furious that she was letting her feelings get in the way. There was a silence for a moment or two.

Eventually Harry spoke. 'Look, do you want me to come and meet you?'

'I don't mind.' Megan felt an unexpected rush of sadness wash over her.

'Megan, is everything okay?'

For a moment, she couldn't speak. 'Yes, I'm fine. Just busy.'

'Where are you?' asked Harry.

She looked at her watch. 'I'm going to a marketing meeting in Epicures. Should be done by five. When can you get away?'

'Meet me there. I'm in Glasgow. I'll be with you the back of five.'

'Okay.' She slipped her phone into her pocket and stayed on the bench as her thoughts began to flicker between her work, Matthew, work, Sebastian, Harry and back to work again. She stood up, rolled her shoulders and started walking again. This marketing meeting was important. The executives wanted an update on advertising revenue and whether the targets were being met. Dealing with it all was one of the drawbacks of being the editor-in-chief.

An hour later, Megan sat alone in Epicures nursing a large hot chocolate, wishing she could give Matthew the mini-marshmallows and let him have fun stirring the drink and making swirly patterns on its surface. It was nice just to sit at the window and watch life pass by against the backdrop of the red sandstone tenements opposite. She saw a famous actor sauntering past with his paper bag of groceries and a couple of school-kids giggling and pointing at him. She glanced down to check her phone, automatically scrolling through her emails looking for anything of interest.

She paused when she saw one marked: URGENT STORY. Opening it, she clicked on the link which was in the body of the mail. Then cursed herself in case it was spam. But a website appeared, powered by Wordpress, and which was simple in design. The title page had white letters against a green background. *Trudy's Story*. Intrigued, Megan started to read.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't think your husband horrid if he seems a bit irritable; probably he has had a very trying day, and his nerves are overwrought.' — **Don'ts for Wives, 1913**

I sit in the bath. Hunched, shivering and waiting. For him to come home. I know where he is. He's with another woman. Playing with his friends. Slapping and punching. Forcing, humiliating. Women, victims, me. I can't leave the bath. The water's cold, the door's locked. He said I must wait. And so I obey, like the good wife that I am. For better, for worse. The doors must stay closed. Everything is a secret. My husband is nice. I hide the bruises, concentrate on my breathing. Everything is fine. He won't smash my face, or break my teeth or my bones. He doesn't like blood. I think I might die. I'm sure one day he'll kill me. I wait and I wait. I'm cold in this bath. I hear a car door slamming. It's him, he's coming.

'That looks good.' Harry sat down opposite her.

She looked up, shocked by what she had just read. 'Oh hi Harry.'

'Same again, please,' he said to the waitress. 'Sorry, have I interrupted you?'

'No, no,' she said, slipping her phone back into her bag. Then, in a bid to change the subject, she asked, 'So how come you're always in Glasgow these days? Are you stalking me?'

'Aye,' he said with a chuckle. 'How are you?'

'Okay.' She shrugged. 'Just lost an hour to sales and marketing which I will never get back. But apart from that, okay. How about you? You're looking a bit rough.'

'Thanks.' He rubbed his hand over his chin. 'Not really. Just been up against it.'

'Any leads?'

'No. We're still waiting to get all the tests back from forensics. Think we'll do a press conference later in the week to try and get something. Can't get anywhere with the IDs.'

'So that's two women now with no names?' Megan took a gulp from her cup.

'Aye.' Harry smiled at the waitress as she placed the mug in front of him.

Megan bristled, then reprimanded herself. What was wrong with her?

Taking a sip, he leaned back. 'Two young black girls. We think they've both been working as prostitutes. And DCI Campbell thinks they may or may not be trafficked. Doesn't give us much to go on, does it?'

'They're not really hookers though, are they, if they've been trafficked here?'

'Well, if you want to get down to the nitty-gritty of it, no. But for our purposes they are.'

Megan pulled a face. 'But surely that's the whole point. They're not. They're not choosing to sell themselves, are they? Someone else is forcing them to do it.'

Harry yawned. 'Regardless of the specifics, Megan, we're trying to gather intelligence from our usual sources. But coming up with nothing. We just need a wee break so we can get some movement on this. At the moment nobody seems to know anything.'

'Which is why I want to do something in the magazine. If they *are* victims of trafficking, then maybe we need to raise awareness of it as an issue here and let people know that this is happening in their neighbourhoods.'

'Yes, but you'll need to tread carefully, Megan. Everything I'm telling you is very much off the record.'

'Okay. But I'll need something,' she pointed out. 'Something which can link these girls to a trafficking ring.'

He lowered his voice and moved his head nearer to her. 'Though what is interesting is that we have a link between both bodies.'

Megan's eyes widened. 'What?'

'We think - though we're still waiting for confirmation - that both may be from the same area of Nigeria.'

'Right ... and how do you know that?'

'It can be done by tracing minerals in their bones.'

'Are you making that widely known?'

'No, not at the moment. These tests are complex. They take time.'

Megan thought about her call to the TARA Project earlier. The woman she had spoken to had confirmed that Nigerian women had consistently been the largest nationality group for the charity over the years. She had also emailed her contact who was an expert in African ritual crimes. Hopefully she would have some insights. There was no point in mentioning this to Harry yet, though. 'Anything else?'

'Just heard this afternoon that both victims have had bleach inserted up their arses.'

'Eh? I don't understand.'

'It means that they've had unprotected sex. And someone has tried to cover their tracks.'

Megan let out a groan and sat back staring at the grim look on Harry's face. Her hot chocolate was no longer appealing.

The girl had always trusted other women. But now she knew that women could be worse than men. That night she was in the kitchen washing dishes at the sink. Then she felt a thwack on the back of her legs which buckled underneath her. She fell to the floor, her soapy hands sliding as she tried to grab onto the cupboard as she fell. The girl lay there stunned and sore. Before she was able to stand up, the woman kicked her again. Then again. The girl tried to curl herself up into a ball but the woman grabbed a fistful of her hair. Pain seared through her scalp. The woman kicked her again in the stomach then casually walked away and out of the room. The girl didn't dare move. She couldn't. She lay there whimpering until she heard footsteps behind her and her muscles tensed. You take this, said the woman in a rasping voice. The girl managed to turn her head to see the woman holding something out in her hand. Get up, she said, yanking at her hair and hauling her up onto her knees. The girl bit her lip, trying so hard not to scream out in agony. You take this now. Take it. Swallow. The woman lunged at her again pushing the girl's head back and roughly prising her mouth open. The girl felt something in her mouth, a dry lump, and she retched. The woman threw water into her mouth and hissed in her face. You take this. You swallow. The girl thrashed her head from side to side desperately trying to spit it out, but the woman forced her fingers down the girl's throat, pushing the tablet in further and further. Drink. You drink this, she snarled. The girl drank the water and the woman finally stood back, her arms crossed, her eyes hard. You done now. You go down there, she said, pointing at the girl's door. Go there. Now.

The girl, wincing with every step, slowly shuffled, towards her room.

Chapter 12

Megan had an appointment to view another rental property in the West End. She had already looked at several but discounted them because they were too small or up several flights of stairs. This had only dawned on her when the estate agent had pointed out that the wide landing would be perfect for storing a bike. She sighed when she remembered the only set of wheels she had was a pushchair. The thought of clattering a buggy up and down more than ninety stone steps in a tenement close did not appeal. After that, she had stipulated that she only wanted to view ground-floor properties. Today's was a garden flat in Dowanhill which would be handy for work too. Glancing at her watch she realised she had to leave if she was going to get there on time. 'Katherine, I've just got to nip out for half an hour or so. Shouldn't be long.' Katherine glanced up and nodded. For a moment Megan thought she saw a fleeting look of something in her eyes. Was it worry or surprise? But she didn't give it much thought as her mobile started to ring. Pulling on her coat and reaching for the phone in her bag, she pulled it out.

'Megan, it's Gina.' Gina was an old college friend of Megan's who had left the seedy world of journalism behind and moved up through the ranks of corporate communications. She had been a useful friend and contact on more than one occasion. 'I'm just calling to let you know there's a press conference scheduled later today. Probably about three.'

Megan walked back to her computer and glanced at the screen. 'Is it about the girls?'

'Yes,' said Gina. 'I just wanted to give you a heads-up.'

Megan waved at Katherine and walked out the door. 'The dailies are going to be all over it. Is there anything you can tell me?'

'I'm sorry, love. No can do. It's a live enquiry and we need help. We need to put out an appeal.'

'Okay, thanks. I'll keep an eye on the wires.'

'Maybe see you there?'

'Maybe.' Then she pulled a face. 'Urgh. I've just remembered I have a bloody circulation meeting with sales and marketing.'

'Haha. That's what happens when you get promoted.'

Megan snorted. 'Yes. Meeting after bloody meeting.'

'Not like the early days, eh? When we were trying to change the world.'

'Yes, we're just cynical and old now.' As she walked out into the street, huge pellets of rain started to fall. She smiled as she clocked a man run past wrapping a plastic bag around his head as a makeshift hat.

'Look, if I hear anything I'll give you a shout. But honestly, there's not much else doing this end.'

'Okay, cheers, Gina. Thanks for phoning.' Megan ended the call, grimacing at the rain ruining her hair. Maybe the man with the bag had the right idea. She used to think that having a friend in the police's communication department would be quite helpful, but everyone was so paranoid these days about information leaking out that they might as well have been discussing the weather. Hailing a black cab, she gave the driver the directions, sat back in her seat and closed her eyes. She was so tired. It was ironic that Matthew had kept her up for months when he was a baby and now, when she should have been able to sleep undisturbed, she spent the night tossing and turning. Whenever she closed her eyes all she could see was the body in the bag. She vaguely thought about getting some sleeping-pills from the doctor. The thought of making an appointment, though, was just another thing to add to her ever growing to-do list.

'Here you go, doll,' said the driver.

Megan opened her eyes. She handed him a note from her pocket. 'Keep the change.' Shaking her umbrella open, she stood for a moment looking at the leafy streets around her. She smiled when she noticed the crumpled empty packet of Percy Pig sweets jammed in a railing. It was quiet, and she could picture herself pushing Matthew along the wide pavements. She had spoken to him on the phone this morning and he had chuckled as she told him she was going to find them a new house. Sebastian said he was like a different child. His fever from yesterday had been short-lived.

She glanced over at Crown Gardens, a row of blonde sandstone buildings which had been converted into apartments over the years. Megan stood there for a moment, enjoying the silence. But she sensed that the man with the large golf broly

standing outside the property was waiting for her. He was moving anxiously from foot to foot and peering at his watch. He obviously had other places to be.

‘Ms Ross?’ he said, striding towards her.

She nodded, trying not to reel at the sickly, flowery scent of his aftershave.

‘I’m Jeremy. How are you?’ He flicked his gaze down at his watch again.

‘Fine, thanks. Sorry I’m a bit late. Shall we?’ she said, pointing toward the building.

‘Of course, let’s go. This way.’ His shiny brown brogues clipped against the pavement. ‘As you know, this one isn’t yet on the open market. It’s lucky Richard happened to mention you were looking for something.’

Megan nodded curtly. ‘Yes.’ She made a mental note to herself to have a catch-up with Richard.

‘Anyway,’ he said, sweeping his hand around, ‘it’s a lovely area. Here we go. He opened the door. ‘Everything has been freshly decorated. It really is quite smart. The owner is looking for a long-term let A.S.A.P.’

Megan was quiet as he showed her around the freshly painted magnolia rooms. The floors were wooden, the rooms were bright, and it was exceptionally clean. She was even more impressed when she saw that the kitchen door opened onto a small decked area. ‘What about storage?’

Jeremy looked affronted at her question. ‘I think you’ll find there’s ample storage here.’ He pointed at a large press and opened it for her to look in.

‘Okay. I’ll take it.’

‘I should think so too. You’d be silly not to. I have a *huuuge* waiting list.’ His voice was curt. ‘I’ll get the office to send you over the contract. We can speed this one up, you know, because of the connection with Richard. I know you’re trustworthy. Despite your profession! Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go.’

Megan shook Jeremy’s limp hand and felt a flicker of excitement for the first time in weeks. She could really see herself here with Matthew making a life for both of them. The rain had stopped, so she walked back towards Byres Road, taking in her new neighbourhood. Walking past the Victorian mansions and gardens, she peered in as many of the bay windows as she could, thrilled to think she would soon be able to walk to work. She was smiling as she walked back into the office. Katherine was not at her desk, which was unusual, but Megan was glad to see that maybe she had for

once decided to take a lunch break. Sitting down at her desk, she flicked quickly through the hundred or so emails that had dropped since she'd been out, looking to see if anything was urgent. She saw a Facebook message from Sam and was about to click on it when her online calendar buzzed to remind her about the sales and marketing meeting at three. Scowling, she pressed delete. She was going to the press conference. She had always been adamant that she would be a hands-on editor. Reporting and investigating were what drove her and she had never wanted to be a suit that just sat in meetings and issued instructions to her team over the phone. Not that she had a massive team anyway; so much of the work had to be outsourced. She simply could not just sit there waiting when she knew that she might be a step ahead of the police. She picked up the phone to call the marketing manager but it went straight to voicemail. 'Hi there. It's Megan. Just to say that something has cropped up and I'm needed out of the office on urgent business. I won't make the meeting but should be back about four thirty if you want to reschedule.' Then she emailed Katherine to let her know she had been called out on urgent business, grabbed her bag, and headed to the door, almost colliding with Katherine.

'Sorry to run again.' Her voice was apologetic. 'I've just emailed you to say I've been called out.'

'But your three o'clock?' Katherine said crisply.

Megan noticed that her face was pale. 'It's okay. All taken care of . . . are you okay? You look tired.'

'Fine, fine. I'm just a wee bit under the weather. I'll be fine.' Katherine headed towards her desk.

'Okay, well, if you're sure. I'll see you when I get back.'

Katherine smoothed her hands over her dress as she sat down. 'Okay.' She winced as her buttocks made contact with the seat.

'Are you sure you're okay?'

Katherine's shoulders tensed. 'Yes, I'm fine, honestly. It must have been the new Zumba class I went to last night. I'm obviously not used to it.'

'Good for you,' said Megan. 'The most exercise I get these days is walking up and down these stairs. I should really get back out running again.' Katherine's attempt at

a smile failed to reach her eyes. Maybe she's just having an off-day, thought Megan. God knows I have enough of them.

The press conference was being held at Stewart Street station near Cowcaddens in the centre of town. Megan decided she would take the subway, aware that her taxi usage was verging on the ridiculous. When she arrived, she was ushered to a small, windowless room at the back of the building. She quickly scanned the room, smiling to acknowledge a few hacks she knew, looking for other useful potential sources of information. She headed to the back row of chairs, carefully trying to avoid tripping over one of the many wires which the BBC crews had draped across the floor. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Sam Martin standing near the door, looking around shiftily. She glanced at the Messenger icon on her phone and clicked it open.

Fancy a drink soon? Sam

'Thanks for coming, ladies and gentlemen,' said Detective Superintendent Jim Smith, who sat at a small table at the front of the room. Clearing his throat, he continued: 'As you know, the body of a young woman was found in the Botanic Gardens last week. We are appealing to the local community for anyone who knows anything about this woman to come forward. Someone, somewhere, knows who she is, and possibly what happened to her.' He took a sip of water. 'We'd also like to make the same appeal to anyone who may know anything about the woman who was recovered from the River Clyde earlier this year to come forward. Her body was found opposite the Riverside Museum and Tall Ship. She is also believed to have been murdered. Both women are thought to be from West Africa, most probably Nigeria. Despite extensive enquiries, we haven't been able to trace next of kin for either of these women. We'd like to appeal to anyone who was in the vicinity at these times to think about anything at all which they may think could help us with our investigation.'

Megan sat quietly, watching and listening to what he was saying. It added nothing to what she already knew. She noticed Harry was standing in the corner of the room. She tried to catch his eye. He avoided looking at her.

'Now, if anyone wants to ask any questions?' Gina, the communications manager, had swept in from the side of the room.

'Is there anything to link the girls together?' asked one of the daily reporters.

'Not at this present time,' said the DS, 'though obviously we're keeping an open mind.'

Megan raised an eyebrow.

'Any leads?' asked another.

'We're working on a few lines of enquiry, but we need more information from the public. Who are these girls? Does anyone know them? What were they doing?'

'Do you think they were trafficked here?' The room turned to look at Megan.

DS Smith looked at her as though she had suggested something inappropriate. 'We don't wish to speculate at this present time.'

'Why not?' said Megan, unable to stop herself from blurting out the questions which needed to be asked. 'You've said you think they're from the same area in West Africa. There isn't any trace of them in official records here. Trafficking is big business.'

DS Smith coughed to clear his throat. 'We don't think it would be helpful to speculate on this at the moment.'

'Now, if anyone wants to do a one-to-one then DS Smith would be happy to do a piece to camera.' Gina caught Megan's eye and gave her a curt nod.

Megan let the throng of reporters push ahead for their interviews and headed towards Harry. But he was too quick for her and had disappeared by the time she got to the door.

'Can you not get the staff to do the conferences?' Sam appeared at her side, a smirk on his face.

Megan smiled. 'Staff? Are you joking? We don't *have* any staff. I always think it's important to keep in touch with the little people, Sam. Reminding myself what it is you all do when you're on the road. Very little, if this is anything to go by. The questions weren't exactly probing, were they?' Her phone beeped. Glancing at it, she saw an urgent email had dropped. 'Excuse me a minute, Sam. Need to sort this email.'

'New lead?' he said. 'Or an offer for Viagra.'

'Yes, that's it. Want me to forward it to you?'

He laughed. 'I heard it's drug-related.'

'In what way?'

'The girls were finished off after someone didn't pay a drug debt.'

'Is that right?' Megan asked.

'Aye,' he said, tapping his nose.

'I've a feeling there's more to it than drugs.'

He scowled.

'Who you covering it for, anyway?'

'*The Star*,' he muttered. 'Anyway, let me know about that drink.'

'Will do,' she said, walking out of the room. Finding a quiet corner in the corridor, she quickly read the email and took in a sharp breath. For the second time that day she felt a spike of adrenaline surge through her as the story began to develop in front of her very eyes. Megan's contact had confirmed her suspicions. The injuries on the bodies of the girls did seem to be linked, and her initial thoughts were that if the women were from Nigeria then they could be dealing with witchcraft.

The girl curled up in the foetal position on her bed and drifted into sleep. She was dreaming of Mother, humming that same tune in the kitchen, and she tried to reach out and tug at her orange and yellow flowery skirt. She could smell Mother's soapy scent and hear the laughter and chatter of her brothers outside. Then she saw the village priest, standing with the chicken and the knife and she smelled the blood and saw it dripping onto the floor. She could hear him talking to her, reminding her of her bond, and what she had promised. She could feel the rubbery chicken's heart in her mouth and she woke up gagging, her heart racing. She tried to uncurl her body but her stomach was clenched in agonising spasms. Clutching her covers around her she squeezed her eyes tightly shut and tried to rock slightly back and forth to help ease the pain. Sometimes she was distracted from her stomach pains by the ache at the back of her legs where the woman had kicked her. She lay, eyes wide open, for a while until the urge to pee forced her up. Gingerly, she stood up and limped to the corner where she squatted over the bucket. The girl had no idea of the time, but there was a little light in the room which had crept under the door, so she thought it could be early morning. Glancing down she saw blood dripping from between her legs into the bucket. Her breath quickened in panic and she began to feel queasy. She started to wipe herself but there was blood smeared on every piece of tissue and she didn't have much left to use. She padded her knickers as best as she could with what was there and crept back to bed. She must have been in a deep sleep because she was woken abruptly by the woman jabbing her fingers into her. You. Get up, she said. She kept prodding at the girl until she stood up. Then the woman reached up under the girls' night-dress and pulled at her knickers. The girl yelped as she yanked them down. The woman's eyes shone when she saw the blood. Good. It is good.

Chapter 13

The Daily Standard, London, 4 April, 2011

Modern Day Slavery: The Truth About Human Trafficking

Megan Ross, Chief Reporter

Anastasia refuses to make eye contact with me for more than a second or two. Her eyes flit between the door and the floor and she constantly rubs her thumb and forefinger together.

'If you tell anyone, if you speak to anyone about this we will hurt you and your family. The police won't believe you. You are nothing. That is what they said to me. Every day,' she whispers.

Anastasia is from Moldova. She came to London two years ago after being promised a nannying job by a friend of the family. When she arrived at Stansted Airport the family friend gave her to another man. A pimp. Within a day of leaving her home and family life in Moldova she was being held hostage in a filthy flat.

She wipes away a tear as she starts to tell me what happened to her. 'I tried to ask to go home. Said I wanted to leave. That man, he beat me. Then . . . then he rape me.'

The beatings and rapes continued for months. Sometimes Anastasia would be forced to sleep with up to ten men a day. The pimp taunted her and told her she couldn't leave.

'He said to me you have no identification. You will be sent back. You have debts to pay back before we give you back your passport. You keep working.'

One day she was beaten so badly, her arm was wrenched from its socket and she had internal bleeding. Her pimp panicked and dumped her at the Accident and Emergency entrance to the local hospital.

'The hospital, they called the police. The police they want to know where my passport was. Where my visa was. I told them I didn't know. I told them I didn't have it.'

Anastasia was then taken to Yarl's Wood detention centre and locked up. 'I thought I would be helped. I realised I was silly to ask for help. Other women were there like me. They told me the police wouldn't help me.'

Anastasia remained there for two months, confused as to what her crime was. 'I was told I needed visa. I told them the man had it. It was like they thought I made it all up. Why would I make any of it up?'

Anastasia was released thanks to the Poppy Project, an organisation set up to help victims of trafficking. It was then she realised what had happened to her, that she had been a victim of trafficking.

She is now trying to rebuild her life, though says she is constantly scared. 'I keep thinking the man will come back. That he will get me and make me do that stuff again and again.'

Anastasia is just one of the estimated thousands of victims of trafficking in the UK. Human trafficking is a hidden crime and so it is impossible to put an accurate figure on how many are affected.

The UK Government will publish its Human Trafficking Strategy next month. When asked what she hopes this will do for victims like her, Anastasia speaks slowly and says: 'I not know what this means for people like me. I not understand. Will it mean girls like me stop being raped and hurt? Can it save their lives?'

Megan shut down the page on her screen and stared out the office window into the darkness. Everyone else had left about an hour ago but she just couldn't bring herself to switch off her computer. She thought about Anastasia and wondered where she was now and what she was doing. Had she managed to forget what had happened? Had she been able to move on and rebuild her life? Megan's article only scratched the surface of what had happened to her. It had been drastically cut, much to her fury, because the features editor thought it was too depressing. He'd told Megan people wanted good news stories and not to be reminded of the darker side of life. She'd tried yelling at him to tell that to Anastasia and all the other girls, but he'd just licked the foam from his cappuccino and gone back to playing *Candy Crush* on his phone.

She scrolled through the news wires and read what the dailies had on their sites. They had all taken the same line from the press conference, that the police were baffled by the discovery of these nameless women and were begging the public for help. Megan felt slightly euphoric at the thought of sitting on a scoop. As it stood, she seemed to have more information than the police. She just didn't know how long she could sit on it without telling them what her source had revealed. After Julie's email had dropped she'd called her to verify a few of the facts. Julie was an expert in ritual crime. She had given evidence at a child abuse case Megan had covered at the Old Bailey. They had kept in touch, occasionally meeting for a drink. Julie did not want to be quoted on the record at the moment as she was giving evidence in another case down south. But she had given Megan enough of a background to run with. Megan typed 'Nigerian trafficking victims UK' into Google and had pulled up several news

stories. The reports went on and on. A story began to formulate in Megan's mind and she felt her heartbeat quicken as she realised that she now had a very strong hook for a cover story. She googled Anti-Slavery International then dialled the press officer's mobile number. It didn't take long for him to confirm her fears and add some background to the story.

Then she called her contact at the city morgue who told her, off the record, that that the women had similar scars on their bodies.

'We think they may have been tortured. Or perhaps they had self-harmed,' he said.

'On their feet?' asked Megan.

'Aye. That's right.'

'What about something else? Like a ritual killing or something like that?'

He gave a snort. 'Think you've been watching too much *CSI*, love.'

'It's a possibility, though?'

He breathed out loudly. 'We'd need to get a specialist to look into it and we've not been given any special instructions by the cops. Tight budgets and all that. You know how it is.'

'But surely it's worth mentioning?'

'Who to?'

'The cops.' Megan felt tears of frustration prick her eyes.

'It might just complicate things. We're trying to establish where the women are from. We've flagged up the presence of the cuts to them. That's all we can do. Up to them to join the dots together. Or put the dots there in the first place.'

'For fuck's sake.'

'Tell me about it. Look, I need to go. It's going like a bloody funfair in here.'

'Okay . . . Listen, one last thing, have the blood tests come back yet?'

'No, we're still waiting. There's a backlog in the labs.' He coughed and said something to someone else in the room.

'Will you let me know if anything interesting comes up?'

'Aye, love. Look, I really need to go. I'm needed in the lab.'

'Thanks.' Megan hung up and jabbed a message into her phone. *Dinner? Tonight?*

A few moments later her phone buzzed. *OK. Take-away at mine. Half an hour?*

Stretching her legs out, she circled her feet and rolled her shoulders back. She needed to talk to someone else about this and get a fresh perspective. Her stomach grumbled and she bent down to root in her bag for a snack. Pulling out one of Matthew's toddler cereal bars, she tore off the wrapper and sunk her teeth into it.

'Arrgh,' she said out loud. 'My flights. I haven't booked my flights.' She was due to fly to London at the weekend to see Matthew. Though if this story was going to come off she was going to be under a lot of pressure. She quickly sent Katherine an email, so she'd have it first thing, asking her to book her onto the last shuttle on Friday night. Once again it was too late to call Matthew and say goodnight. She'd have to call in the morning. Sometimes she felt like the worst mother in the world. Switching off her computer, then the lights, she pulled on her coat and left the office in darkness.

Ten minutes later the taxi driver pulled up outside Joanna's flat.

'Come in, come in,' said Joanna, opening the door and letting her in. 'Well, what do you fancy? Indian or Chinese?'

'Indian from the Ashoka please. Been dreaming about it all week.'

'Okay, I'll order it. What do you want?'

Megan rubbed her eyes. 'Anything. Pakora, chicken Chasni, naan bread.'

'Okay.' Joanna laughed. 'Just give me a minute.'

'Fancy some wine?' Megan pulled a bottle of red from her bag.

'Sure. Do you want to get the glasses?' She gestured towards the kitchen.

Megan took the wine through and paused for a moment as she noticed the tidy worktops and pristine surfaces. Nothing had been left out and even the tea towel was hanging neatly on a hook by the door. It was very much a single woman's kitchen and the thought caused her to give a small gasp. It was so different to the kitchen in Joanna's last flat, which was always strewn with open packets and crumbs. She opened the cupboard by the sink and reached up for a couple of glasses.

'Food will be here soon. Good guess with the glasses.'

'Same place I keep my wine glasses,' said Megan, unscrewing the wine and pouring. She handed her sister a glass. 'Cheers.' They clinked their goblets together.

'Cheers,' said Joanna. 'Shall we sit at the table?'

Megan sank down into her chair, glugging back the wine. 'Thanks for letting me come over at such short notice.'

'No problem.'

Megan looked around the room. 'This is a nice kitchen. Great view of over there.' She pointed at the window. 'Reminds me of that picture. What's it called?'

'*Windows of the West End*? I think that's the one you mean. Aye, it's not bad. You get a nosy into other people's worlds. See what they're doing . . . sometimes it's a good distraction, you know, if I can't sleep.'

'It's nice here, though. Quiet.'

'Yes, I suppose. Though sometimes too quiet.' Joanna shrugged. 'Tell me, how's the flat-hunting going?'

'Good. I saw one yesterday morning.' She scratched at her head and yawned. 'Or was it this morning? It's been such a long day.'

'Where is it?'

'Not far from here. Dowanhill. Near Crown Road North.'

'Nice. Handy for work too?'

Megan nodded and swirled the wine in her glass before taking a sip.

'So when do you get the keys? And when is the wee man coming up?'

'The week after next. I'm not sure. I'm supposed to be going down this weekend so I can talk to Sebastian about it.' She took another sip from her glass. 'He's talking about moving up here too.'

'I see.' Joanna raised an eyebrow. 'And what do you think of that?'

Megan shrugged. 'It's not up to me, is it? He wants to be near his son, so I can hardly stop him. Thinks that I'll struggle to cope on my own with work and Matthew.'

'Right. I'm assuming he thinks he's Superman or something?'

Megan tittered. 'Something like that. The thing is . . .'

The buzzer went.

'That'll be the food. Two ticks.'

'Here — let me get it,' said Megan, grabbing her bag and pulling her purse out.

The women sat with an assortment of foil trays between them, spooning chicken and sauces onto their plates.

‘So what were you going to say about Sebastian?’

‘Och, I can’t remember. It doesn’t matter.’ Megan looked away for a moment.

‘Joanna, I wanted to talk to you about a story I’ve been covering at work.’

‘Okay. The dead girls?’

Megan forked some rice onto her plate. ‘Yes.’

‘Have the police made any progress?’

‘No. That’s the thing. They’ve made an appeal, but they don’t seem to have any positive leads. They seem to think they could maybe have been working as prostitutes.’

Joanna sat back in her seat and considered this for a moment. ‘Could have been. They’re young girls, right? Both black?’

‘Does that strike you as strange?’

‘Not really. To be honest, there are so many refugees and asylum seekers in the city now, it’s quite normal to see every colour of prostitute on the streets these days.’

‘But that’s the thing. I don’t think these are street hookers. Nobody seems to know them or recognise them. Surely someone would have recognised them from their patch?’

Joanna sat chewing for a moment and then nodded her head. ‘Well, so much stuff is going on behind closed doors these days.’

‘Exactly. Which is why I think they could have been trafficked.’ Megan rested her fork on her plate.

‘They could’ve been. But then how do you prove that?’

‘It reminds me of a story I covered in London,’ said Megan. ‘A girl from Moldova. She was kept prisoner in a flat and forced to have sex with scores of men.’

‘And what happened to her?’

Megan laughed drily. ‘She was one of the lucky ones. She escaped when she was dumped outside A and E.’

‘Why would they be bumped off?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, from what I know about trafficking, these girls make their bosses a *lot* of money. I mean, a lot of money.’

Megan tore at the naan bread. 'Do you ever come across any trafficked women in your refuge?'

'Not really. It's more about women who are trying to get away from abusive partners. There are a few asylum seekers, but to be honest they don't really say much.' Joanna stood up and walked to the sink, filling two glasses with water.

'Which countries are they from?'

'There was one woman from Sierra Leone. Another from Iraq. To be honest, you might have more luck if you talk to someone at the Refugee Council.'

Megan took the water from Joanna. 'The thing is, if they *are* trafficked, then why would their pimps get rid of them if they're such a valuable commodity?'

'I don't know. To be made an example of perhaps? But to who?'

'I don't know. That's where I'm drawing blanks.' Megan picked up the bottle of wine and refilled their glasses.

Today you go. You go away, said the woman. The girl shrugged and frowned, unable to understand what the woman meant. You go, hissed the woman. poking her finger at her. Go. She thrust a shabby grey bag at the girl. Your stuff. The girl thought briefly about the suitcase she had left home with. It was her only reminder of her family. It had contained her mother's precious beads. She hadn't seen it since that first journey when the man had taken it from her. Where are my things? My suitcase? she asked. There, said the woman pointing at the bag. You don't need anything else where you are going. She sniggered and walked away. The man with the gold tooth appeared and ordered her to follow him. It was dark outside and he shoved her into the back seat of the car. She sat there, trembling and chewing her lip. Maybe she was going home? Maybe it was over and she was being taken back to the airport to meet Auntie? The man didn't talk to her and she didn't dare speak. She sat quietly for an hour, maybe more, and then the car stopped suddenly. She could see flashlights flickering in the darkness. The man opened and slammed the door and she could hear voices. She sat as still as she could manage, wiling herself not to shake, and felt the mucus from her nose dribble down her chin. Then her door was abruptly opened, a hand grabbed her shoulder, and she was hauled out. The man with the gold tooth didn't give her another glance. The man gripping her arm was dressed in a black suit and a heavy overcoat. The girl managed a sidelong glance at him and saw he had a scar running down his cheek. He pulled her over to another black car, opened the door and shoved her in. She didn't dare speak. Maybe he was taking her to the airport. She closed her eyes and prayed that she was going home. The man turned to her, his eyes steely, his lips in a thin, cruel sneer and thrust a drink at her. Drink this, he said. She hesitated and he grabbed her wrist, clutching it tightly. She reached out for the bottle and drank.

Chapter 14

'The boss has been striding around looking for you,' said Katherine.

Megan frowned. 'Has he? What about my mobile?'

'Apparently it's switched off.'

She reached into her pocket and pulled it out. 'Oops, so it is. What's wrong? What's the drama?'

'Well, you didn't hear it from me, but he's not very happy that you didn't show for that meeting with sales and marketing.'

'I know but something came up. I let them know.'

Katherine shrugged. 'Just letting you know.'

'Right, well thanks. Guess I'd better go and do some fire-fighting then.' Megan headed to the lift which would take her up to Richard's office on the fourth floor. As the door pinged open, a small gaggle of women from marketing stumbled out. 'Good morning,' said Megan, her voice clipped as they walked past sniggering. The door of Richard's office was ajar and she walked in, sitting down at his large walnut desk.

'No problem. I'll get back to you on that and maybe we can line up a few holes of golf one of these days?' He laughed as he hung up. 'Come in and sit down, why don't you?' he said.

'Thanks. So, I hear I'm in trouble.'

He burst out laughing. 'Who's been stirring?'

'I've just been told that you were stalking the corridors looking for me because I didn't go to the meeting yesterday.'

'Yes. To be honest, that wasn't your smartest move, Megan. The thing is, you're an editor now. You can't just waltz off when you get the sniff of a story.'

'Even if it could be the scoop of the year?'

Richard leant back in his seat and clasped his hands behind his head. 'Go on, then. Tell me what this amazing scoop is.'

'Look, we need to sell copies of this magazine. Which means we need hard-hitting and exclusive content, Richard. None of the rewritten wires rubbish which the others are full of. I mean, did you see the state of that new free-sheet this morning?'

'Okay, I get that. But you're the editor. You need to come to the meetings. You're not on the road any more, Megan.'

'I know that, but who do I get to do the investigations? I've got a skeleton staff as it is and I'm loath to commission stuff out. Especially when I'm the one with the contacts.'

'I know, but the first few editions have been okay, haven't they?'

'Yes, but I've also spent the next six months' budget on them.'

He paled and sat forward. 'You've what?'

'You can't have expected me to produce a quality magazine with the pittance you'd budgeted for. I told you at the start that the figures were unrealistic, especially if I'm having to buy in content and pictures.'

'For fuck's sake, Megan.' His face had turned red, and he stood up and walked over to the door, pushing it shut. 'Why would you do that?'

'Richard, this is what drives me so mad about newspapers these days. They are full of nonsense. Everyone is rewriting press releases or paying pennies to inexperienced twenty-year-olds to write the copy.' She threw her hands in the air. 'God, it's so different to when you and I started.'

'Look . . . I know. I know you want to be hands on but, really, we need to work out some kind of compromise. Otherwise the board will freak. Especially when this is supposed to be a trial . . .'

'A trial? What are you talking about?'

He spoke quietly. 'They just want to keep an eye on expenditure and figures before they commit fully to a permanent operation.'

'And why am I hearing this just now?' said Megan, trying to keep the edge from her voice.

'Because I was hoping to smooth it all out without worrying you. It will all be fine - as long as you don't ruffle any feathers.'

'That's why we're all on contracts then? It's nothing to do with it being an HR problem that was going to be ironed out?'

Richard looked embarrassed.

Megan leaned forward, steepling her hands. 'Regardless of that, I have a job to do. I can't be worrying about the future of the magazine when it's only just come out. I'm

on the verge of something big and exclusive with these women who've been found dead. I think it could be trafficking. Maybe even something worse.'

'Eh? What could be worse?'

'Well, I hope I'm proved wrong. I just need some time to investigate it.'

'But why not get a freelance in?'

She snorted. 'No way. I don't trust anyone else to do as good a job as I can . . . Richard, you know how brilliant my contacts are. Come on.'

'But what about the rest of the team?'

'What about them? Do you want me to ask Katherine to go undercover? Or get Ronnie and Sunita to start putting in calls to the cops? You know how stretched we are. You'll be asking me to get Sam Martin in to do shifts next. Mind you, that's maybe not a bad idea.'

'Don't even mention that miserable wee shite's name in this office,' said Richard. 'I was hoping he'd fucked off abroad or down south.'

'The point is, we're all fighting for circulation. We need to sell copies and we need people to want to buy us. We're the best out there.'

'Well, let's face it - there's not exactly much competition.'

'Not at the moment. But that could all change so we need to build our readership now so we have brand loyalty.' She winked. 'See, I do know some of the lingo.'

Richard sat back again and tugged at his tie. 'Okay, you've got a few weeks to try and pull this together. But I need you to be visible too, otherwise people will talk.'

Megan tutted.

'And you need to attend some of the senior meetings.'

'Fine. Though I'm in London this weekend. Not back until Monday night.'

He rolled his eyes.

'Richard, I need you to trust me to do this.'

'Funnily enough, that's why I gave you the job.'

She pushed her chair back and stood up. 'Oh, before I forget, Natasha Campbell has invited me to Sweden the week after next. An exclusive. It's an international conference on trafficking and she's unveiling new legislation there.'

'Mmm.' Richard's eyes were now focused on his screen.

So you're fine to take that from the budget then.'

'I don't believe it!'

'What?'

'Och, Hearts have bloody well gone and drawn Celtic in the Cup.'

'So, Stockholm then. You're fine with that. Should be away two days max.'

'Mmm, yes,' he said. 'That's fine. Bloody wankers. That's so typical.'

Megan knew he had no idea what he'd just agreed to. 'Perfect. And thank you.'

She walked out of the room, muttering to herself, 'Better get the flights booked now, before you change your mind.'

The girl was groggy but managed to sit up. It was dark outside and she couldn't see any sign of lights or buildings. Where were the toilets? You go there, said the man, pointing to the side of the road. The girl stumbled forward, shivering in the night air, but she desperately needed to empty her bladder. She briefly wondered if the man would look away and give her some privacy. He didn't. She had no choice but to squat down beside him, feeling the sense of relief as her pee flowed across the dry dirt on the ground. He stared at her the whole time. She stood up, her cheeks hot with embarrassment and anger. Get in car, he said, pushing her into the back seat. Eat this, he said and thrust a small bag towards her. The girl clutched it in her hands. She didn't want to eat anything. Her stomach still ached and she wasn't remotely hungry. But he stood there waiting and watching. She prised it open and pulled out some bread, which felt stale, and a piece of yellow cheese. He handed her a bottle of orange juice. Drink this. Drink it all. The girl took small bites of the food and a few sips of the juice which was sweet but not refreshing. She tried to swallow down the food but gagged with every bite and sip. The man eventually moved away and shut her door. He sat in the driver's seat again staring at her in the rear-view mirror. Where you taking me to? she whispered. Am I going home? Yes, he said. I'm going home, she asked. I'm going home? He gave a harsh laugh. Yes. You going to new home.

Chapter 15

The editor of the *Daily News*, which was in an office on the first floor, had developed a habit of appearing at Megan's shoulder. She'd even resorted to moving her desk so her back was against the wall, in order to deal with the unwanted visitor.

'Can I help you with something, Paul?' she snapped.

'No, not really,' he said, scratching his precisely shaped goatee. 'Just wondered what you've got this week. I wondered if we could help you out with anything.'

'We're doing a spread on top facial cleansers, a feature on lipstick and a guide on how to pull a bloke.' Megan didn't move her eyes away from her screen. She had spent all morning trying to rewrite freelance copy and was not feeling charitable. The wind was howling through the gaps in the windows and the raindrops were battering off the glass.

Paul stood there pouting. 'There's no need to be like that.'

Megan looked at the 'No' badge pinned to his dishevelled shirt. It was the only reminder she'd seen of the Independence referendum in 2014. She wasn't quite sure what point he was trying to make two years on. 'Paul, you do this every week. I wouldn't dream of wandering into your office uninvited and casually asking you what your splash is for tomorrow.'

He stuck out his bottom lip. 'Well, we do all work for the same company. We should be helping each other out.'

Megan was suddenly overcome by weariness. 'Paul, we're not friends, okay? We're not here to share copy and we may work for the same company but we're different publications. Separate entities. We're here to sell newspapers, magazines, whatever. Please, can you just go away and leave me to it.' She glanced at the clock.

He flared his nostrils, then sucked his stomach in. Megan knew he was trying his hardest to think of a smart reply. But couldn't.

'And make an appointment next time you want to see me.' She glanced up as he marched away muttering.

'What did you just say?' she said, glancing up.

He stopped and turned. 'I said it must be your time of the month.'

Megan burst out laughing. 'Really? Is that the best you can come up with? Might just have to report you to HR for that wee remark, Paul. I think that could be interpreted as a sexist comment, don't you?'

He glared and turned away.

'By the way, Paul,' she said, turning back to her screen and beginning to type. 'I really like your trousers. I wish I could wear my sister's clothes too.'

He stormed out the door, slamming it behind him.

Katherine burst out laughing. 'That shut him up.'

Megan smiled. 'Yeah, well, he is quite the nob, isn't he?' Sighing, she returned her attentions to the screen. She was checking cuttings in preparation for the trip to Sweden. She wanted to know what the trafficking situation was in Sweden. Several articles came up and she hit 'print' for them all. Megan was about to start another search when another email dropped into her inbox with the subject marked: URGENT STORY. She clicked on it and opened the link. It was that site again. *Trudy's Story*. She began to read.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't expect your husband to be an angel. You would get very tired of him if he were.'

When did it start? It's not something I ever talk about to anyone. Nobody knows. Well, apart from you. See, you need to keep reading now. I always have it there in my head, niggling away in a corner. I try and rationalise it. Try and smooth it all out. Sometimes that works and I feel okay. Then the niggle comes back and I'm reminded that it's my fault. His moods wouldn't be so volatile if I was a better wife, cooked him nicer meals, made him laugh and was better in bed. If I was just better then everything else would improve. I must try harder to keep him happy. If he is happy then I am happy.

I don't remember the first time he hit me. But I do remember the first time I pushed back. I never did it again. I'm a pathetic cow. I am scared of my husband. Frightened of the man who is supposed to cherish me until the day I die. Worried about what the father of my child might do next. Who would believe me? Everyone thinks he is amazing.

When we go into restaurants people turn to smile at him, say hello and I stand there with a stupid smile plastered onto my face. I know women are looking at him. I know they are

thinking that I am a lucky cow, wondering why on earth he is with someone like me when they could be with someone like them.

To some people my husband is a god. He's successful. He looks after his family, he's oh-so good-looking and so, so charismatic. He could charm anyone - and he does. For years all my friends and my family told me I was lucky to have him. They told me he was a keeper and I shouldn't mess things up. Mind you, he is the only one who has always been there for me. Those so-called friends have distanced themselves over the years. I keep telling myself it's not me, it's them. Or that they're jealous of me and my wonderful life.

Some days, I hate him. I despise him. Even more so since I discovered all of his sordid little secrets. I know what he is doing when he says he is working late. But I also know that nobody would believe me. They would say I was making it up.

Megan frowned, copying and pasting the page before closing the window. She was used to being sent random emails and had dealt with plenty of them over the years. This was certainly different, though, and she wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

The girl's eyes were stuck together and she felt cold water being splashed across her face. She could hear a man's voice telling her to wake up. She didn't know who he was or where she was. Maybe she was at the airport? A sharp pinch to her arm made her sit up abruptly. It was dark, she was in the car. Still in the same car. She noticed the green tree hanging from the mirror at the front. She looked to see where the cold air was coming from and saw the man standing there. She was hauled out of the car and bundled along a gravel path, then led through a door. She couldn't see where she was being taken. Then the light was suddenly bright and harsh and the man shoved her into a room. The girl could see other people. Black and white girls. Girls like her. All standing there, trembling, with their eyes fixed to the ground.

A different man, with a shaved head and a beard, started to brush her hair. He tugged at her and she yelped when the bristles hit the tender part of her head. He thrust a cloth at her and told her to wipe her face. Then he shouted at all the girls to remove their clothes, quickly. The girl looked to see what everyone else was doing. What was happening? The man shouted at them to take their clothes off otherwise he would kill them. The girl cried silently as she removed her top, kicked off her shoes and socks, then peeled off her trousers and finally her underwear.

The man ordered them to follow him and the girls all followed silently behind in a line. He took them down a dark, dingy corridor. The brickwork was exposed and she shuddered as something furry brushed past her ankle. It felt like a long walk. Then the corridor opened out and the girl heard loud music thumping. The man told them to keep their heads up and walk slowly up and down the stage. She was glad she didn't have to go first. She was terrified. They were each given a sheet of paper to hold with a number. Following the girl in front, she stifled a gasp when she saw the audience, all men dressed in suits. They looked like the businessmen she'd seen at the airport that day with Auntie. She tried not to stare at them but wondered if they were there to help. She kept walking up and down the stage; the music was deafening, the lights bright and she noticed one man taking notes. Her arms shook as she held the paper in front of her as she'd been told. The girl and the others were then led off the stage and back down the corridor. The man took them to the room where their clothes were. He told them not to put them on yet. He said some of the men might want to try their new purchases out. The girl was not the only one to start sobbing.

Chapter 16

When she arrived back in London late at night, exhausted and with a heavy head, Matthew was fast asleep. She felt a flash of guilt at the partial relief she felt, that all she needed to do just now was to reach in and stroke his warm, chubby cheek.

‘How’s he been?’ She walked into the lounge, kicking off her shoes and throwing her coat on the sofa.

‘Fine,’ said Sebastian, glancing up from his laptop. He was sitting in his usual position, at the dining table, in the tiny lounge-cum-dining room of their poky rented flat. ‘Think he might be teething as he’s been chewing on everything he can get his hands on. But I just gave him some Calpol.’

She slumped into the sofa, curling her feet underneath her and chiding herself that her toes stuck out of the holes in her tights.

‘How are you? How was your week?’

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Just busy . . .’

‘Did you see your sister?’ He took off his glasses and placed them on the table.

‘Yes.’

‘And how was it?’

‘Okay. Better than I expected.’

‘Do you want a cup of tea or anything?’

‘No thanks. I had something on the flight.’ She reached for the remote control and switched on the TV, searching for the news. They sat together in silence listening to the headlines. Megan yawned. ‘Think I’ll head to bed if you don’t mind.’

‘No problem. Though there was something I wanted to mention to you.’

She felt the skin on the back of her neck start to prickle. ‘Sounds ominous. Is everything okay?’

He leaned back in the chair, clasping his hands behind his head, and sighed. ‘Yes. Everything’s fine. I just wanted to let you know that I’m seeing someone.’

‘Oh,’ said Megan. It came out as a small gasp, which wasn’t her intention, and she wished she could grasp it from the air where it hung and start again. She cleared her throat. ‘Right. I see. That’s good. Who is she?’

‘She’s called Felicity.’

'Okay ... and is it serious?'

He smiled. 'Could be. I don't know yet.'

'And what does she do for a living?'

'Works in marketing,' he said, folding his arms.

'Does she know about our situation?'

He nodded. 'Yes, and she's totally cool with it.'

'How old is she?'

'Um, twenty-five.'

Megan laughed. 'Well, these young things tend to be quite cool with things like that these days. So where did you meet her?'

'Tinder.'

'Of course.' That was where she and Sebastian had met, so why would she expect anything different? She had often considered how different life would have been if she hadn't swiped to the right. Leaning forward, she pinched the bridge of her nose for a moment. 'When have you had a chance to see her though? When have you found the time?'

His cheeks reddened.

'Sebastian, you've not had her here with the wee guy, have you?'

'Only at night when he's been asleep.'

'What, and you've been shagging her in my bed, I presume?'

He began to fidget in his seat. 'Of course not. I've kept everything in here on the sofa bed.'

Megan began to laugh, and her giggles started to gain momentum. 'God, you should keep hold of her. If she's not been put off by the fact that you're a parent still living with the mother of his child, and she's looking at plastic toys during foreplay, well then, I think you're onto a good thing there.' She held up her hands. 'What can I say? I'm never really here for long, am I? I'm a rubbish mum. You're a much better dad than me. And you're a bloke. You need your women. I can't expect you to be a full-time dad and not have any playdates, can I?'

He sighed, and his shoulders dropped several centimetres. 'Are you *sure* you're okay with it?' He seemed perturbed.

‘Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be? We’re not together any more. And we just live like this,’ she said, pointing around the room, ‘until I’m settled in Glasgow. Maybe this is a good thing, that things are serious with Felicity.’ She exhaled loudly. ‘What about your plans to come north then?’

He pursed his lips together and stood up. ‘Well, the thing is, we, I mean I . . . look, it may take a bit longer than I had hoped. I can move, but her work is being a bit sticky about it.’

‘And let me guess. She’s not quite sure she wants to move to Glasgow? She thinks it’s dangerous and she might get stabbed?’

Sebastian did, at least, have the grace to look sheepish.

‘Can’t say I blame her.’ Megan, started to feel elated at what this meant. ‘I’m assuming she’s a Home Counties kind of girl? Moving to Glasgow would be a bit of a shock to the system.’

‘Er, it’s still to be decided, but all I’m saying is that things may take a bit longer than I had hoped.’

‘Sure,’ said Megan.

‘Thanks for understanding, Megan.’

‘It’s fine. I’m going to go to bed now though. I’m shattered.’

Sebastian walked over and hugged her. ‘You’re not a rubbish mum, Megan. You love your son.’

For a moment she stood there, secure and safe in his arms, and blinked through her stupid tears. If only things had been different, she thought sadly. She had tried to make it work for the sake of Matthew. But she just couldn’t pretend to love him when she never had. He was too nice, too attentive, and it had suffocated her. Sometimes she felt irritated just being in his presence for too long. Megan had thought many times that he was, on paper, the perfect man. But for someone else - not her. Sebastian began to stroke her hair and then bent down and began kissing her. She pulled away but he gripped her arms.

‘What are you doing, Seb? Get *off*.’ Megan jerked away.

‘Sorry. I’m sorry.’ He turned away. ‘Sleep tight. See you in the morning.’

‘Good night.’ She couldn’t bear to look at him. Later, when she crawled into bed, she pulled the duvet around her and cried silently. What had happened to her life?

She knew she had been right to leave, yet it didn't make things easier. Lying there, she thought about her life in London. Before Sebastian and Matthew. She'd revelled in being invisible, in having no emotional ties to anyone, nobody having expectations of her; she could come and go as she pleased without that oppressive feeling of being beholden to anyone. Then she'd had a fling with Sebastian, unexpectedly fallen pregnant with Matthew, and those feelings trickled away. The responsibility of motherhood constantly weighed down on her. Eventually she drifted off into a restless sleep, dreaming of her dead nephew George and then Harry and then Matthew. Suddenly Sebastian's face loomed large in her mind and she woke up sweating. Why had he kissed her tonight? Was it about control? Or asserting himself? Did he think she was going to be jealous about Felicity? And why had she almost allowed herself to be lulled back into his arms? For the first time in a long time Megan wasn't afraid to admit to herself that she felt very alone.

The girl was exhausted. She couldn't lift her head off the pillow. She just needed to close her eyes for a while. Everything that came after was hazy. She remembered the gentle rhythm of a car which was oddly soothing. She thought she heard Auntie's voice, could smell her perfume, but couldn't remember actually seeing her face or touching her. She thought it must all have been a dream. She just wanted to sleep forever. It was cold and dark when the girl was bundled out of the car and upstairs. There was a smell of stale urine on the dirty concrete stairs. Her head flopped over the shoulder of a man. He was muttering under his breath, she didn't understand what he was saying. She lay there limply, pretending to be asleep. There was no point in struggling, she didn't have the strength. She was dumped on a bed in a small, cold room. A glass of water was left by the bed. The girl gulped it down, curled up and quickly fell asleep again.

That night she saw the priest from her village in her dreams. She could see his face looming large over her, his yellowing eyes staring at her, piercing all the way through her. His voice hissed at her and he was shaking a bloody, squawking chicken. Its beak was pecking at her face and she screamed, trying to get it off her. She woke up trembling, curled tightly in a ball. She was in a bed, with a lumpy mattress, and bright yellow blankets wrapped around her. Flicking her eyes up at the ceiling, she stared at the brown stains and the fancy cornicing. Something was battering the windows outside. It sounded like a million stones being thrown at the windows at once. The girl didn't dare move. It could have been the priest coming to get her, or the spirits or anyone. Had she been bad? Disobeyed? She had tried so hard to do as she was told, even though she hated every second. Her mind was foggy and she couldn't remember anything clearly. Glancing down she could see she was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. They didn't belong to her. Where was she? How did she get here? There were noises outside the door and she scrambled further into the corner as she watched the handle turn.

Chapter 17

When Megan flew back into Glasgow, Harry was waiting for her in the arrivals hall.

She walked towards him and kissed him on the cheek. 'What are you doing here?'

'Thought you might want a lift.'

'But how did you *know*?'

'I called your office and Katherine told me.'

Megan frowned. 'And why are you always in Glasgow all of a sudden?'

'It's okay,' he said, ignoring her last question. 'I know how discreet Katherine is normally. But I said it was urgent police business and your mobile was switched off.'

'Yes, you normally have to switch them off when you're airborne.'

'Anyway, you could just say thanks, Harry, or really, Harry, there was no need to come.'

'Well, there wasn't, but now that you're here I wouldn't want you to think that you'd made a wasted journey.'

Harry was looking over her shoulder at the escalator. He waved and she turned to see who he was smiling at.

'How are you doing, Harry?' said the man walking towards them.

'Good, thanks. How are you?'

'Not bad at all.' He turned to Megan and smiled. 'Hello there. I'm Tony.' He extended his hand. 'Tony McGinty.'

Megan reached out to shake his hand and returned the smile, not quite able to take her eyes off him. Tony was tall with dark hair and pale blue eyes. He wore a dark, expensively cut suit and his teeth were just the right shade of white. Megan immediately felt self-conscious of her own coffee-stained smile.

'This is Megan Ross.'

'Megan Ross.' He looked puzzled. 'Now why does that name ring a bell?'

Megan laughed drily. 'Of course. Now it all makes sense. You're Katherine's husband?'

He smiled. 'I am indeed.'

'I edit *Enquiry*.' Megan was unable to peel her eyes away from his gaze. He really was very good-looking.

'Ah, so you're the famous Megan? I've heard all about you. You're my wife's boss?'

Megan laughed. 'Well, I don't know about that. Quite often it feels as though Katherine is the one running the place.'

'You're doing a great job with the magazine. Lots of people are saying good things.'

'So how do you two know each other?' Megan was suddenly aware that Harry was standing there like a spare part.

'We're just old friends.'

'Oi, less of the old,' said Tony. 'I'm going to have to run. My lift is waiting.' He pointed to his driver. 'Megan, it was lovely to meet you.' He took her hand again and shook it just slightly longer than was necessary.

'Likewise. Hopefully we'll meet again.' She watched him walk away.

'Stop ogling.' Harry patted her playfully on the arm.

'Was I that obvious?'

'Don't worry. All the ladies love him. He's the George Clooney of the legal world. Apparently.'

'Mmmm, I can see why. There's certainly something quite captivating about him. No wonder Katherine's been keeping quiet about him.'

'Well, he's built up quite a reputation over the years,' said Harry. 'I mean in an entirely professional capacity of course. Come on, let's go.'

Megan followed him towards the door. 'What kind of lawyer is he?'

'Something to do with oil and gas.'

'Right.'

'Fancy some dinner before I take you home?'

'That sounds good. I can't actually remember the last time I ate. Maybe this morning?'

'Okay, well, let's stop off in Byres Road and grab a bite. The car's parked over there.'

Neither of them spoke during the journey. Megan flicked the radio on, searching for the news. But she was lost in her own train of thought and gazed outside at the glowing orange street-lamps.

‘How was the weekend, then?’ They were sitting in a quiet corner of an Indian restaurant. The waiters had greeted Harry like a long-lost friend when they’d arrived, and then discreetly disappeared. ‘How was Matthew?’

‘He was great. It was lovely seeing him.’ She coughed. ‘Excuse me for a second.’ Megan dashed to the toilets, locked herself in a cubicle and, to her shame, started sobbing. She tore at the toilet roll and frantically tried to mop up the tears and snot running from her nose. Then she swallowed hard and exhaled through her mouth. She’d taken Matthew to nursery that morning and he’d started to cry as soon as she parked his buggy in the entrance of the old Victorian nursery building. Then, when she’d unclipped the clasps of the buggy straps and lifted him into her arms, he’d clung to her.

‘Come on, wee chap,’ said Vera, an older Glaswegian woman who had lived in London for thirty years. There was something comforting about her accent and the way in which she spoke to Matthew, which usually reassured Megan. But this morning she didn’t want to let him go. ‘Come on, mister,’ she said again as he opened his mouth and started to howl. ‘It’s okay. Your mummy has got to go to work. Come on - let’s go and see what toys we can find.’ Matthew held onto Megan and Vera tried to gently prise him off her. It was almost comical. Eventually Vera won the tug-of-war. She managed to mouth over the top of the cries, ‘Don’t worry, he’ll be right as rain in a few minutes. I promise you, dear. You just go.’

Megan had looked longingly after him but turned around before the tears, which had pooled, started to fall down her cheeks. She pulled a crumpled tissue out of her pocket and wiped her eyes. Yet she couldn’t make herself walk away from the nursery. Normally she was always in a hurry to get away from the bangs and clatters and cries. And the sweet stench of old nappies and warm pee. She realised that for the first time in a long time, she hadn’t wanted to leave her son. She made herself walk towards the front door, which swung open just as she reached to open it. A woman dressed in Lycra and trainers came in and just about knocked Megan off her feet as she swept by, pushing a buggy like a steamroller. ‘Come on, Willow,’ she

said in a too-loud voice, 'let's get you all ready and good to go. Mummy has a Pilates session to go to.'

'Don't mind me.' Megan unpeeled herself from the wall. Silly cow. Talking about her child as if she was a takeaway coffee.

Vera came out at that moment and winked as she caught Megan's eye. 'He's absolutely fine now. Out in the sand-pit having a ball.'

Megan smiled. 'Thank you.'

'Off you go,' said Vera. 'Dad's picking up today?'

'Yes.' Megan left then, suddenly glad she had a busy day of meetings ahead.

Now, as she stood in the cramped toilets in a Glasgow restaurant, hundreds of miles from her baby, her body ached for her son. She washed her hands, splashed some cold water on her face and sighed. Then she took a deep breath and walked back to the table.

'Are you okay?' Harry reached out to grasp her hand.

'Yes, I'm fine. How's work going?'

Harry noticed her puffy eyes. 'Busy.'

'Any more leads for me?'

'Was it nice seeing him?'

'Who?'

'Matthew.'

'Yes,' she said, nodding. 'He's just growing up so fast.'

'Think he'll come up soon?'

'I hope so, I've got a flat now. Well, I get the keys in a couple of weeks.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Crown Gardens. You know, in Dowanhill?'

'I know exactly where you mean. And, if you need a cup of sugar, call me.'

'What do you mean?' Megan was confused.

'I'm staying there just now too.'

'What - in Crown Gardens?' She was too tired for this confusing exchange.

'Nearby. I just need to be here for the short term.'

'What do you mean?'

He lowered his voice. 'I'm here on a case. It's just easier that way.'

'Are you going to elaborate?'

There was an awkward silence and they both studied their menus.

Harry finally spoke. 'Nope, not at the moment.'

'Okay, so did you have an ulterior motive for picking me up tonight then?' She could hear the chatter of the few other customers and sitar music playing quietly in the background.

He took a sip of water. 'Well, perhaps.'

'Thought you'd be having a beer?' She gestured at his glass.

'Nah, not worth it. Not with the new drink-drive laws. Can you imagine? The *Record* would have a field day.'

'What's new then?'

'Well, I heard a couple of things that may be of interest.'

She leaned in closer. 'Me too.'

'Right, well, I'll show you mine if you show me yours.'

Laughing, she nodded. 'You first.'

'Okay. Well, forensics are now making a link between the women. Some hair fibres found on both. Similar markings on their bodies. We know they were both Nigerian. But so far the databases are drawing blanks.'

'Right. I knew that. What else?'

'There's also signs of prolonged sexual abuse.'

'And what else?' Megan was getting impatient.

'Well, I thought that was quite a lot of information to go on. Definite link and a near-firmed-up place of origin.'

'But no motive or suspects?'

He shook his head. 'Still too early. But we now definitely think they've been trafficked here.'

'What makes you think that?'

'The fact that we can't trace them and nobody wants to claim them. They must have been brought in from abroad.'

'Anything else though?'

'We're keeping our eye on one or two people of interest.'

'Who?'

'Can't say at the moment.'

Megan narrowed her eyes and leaned towards him. 'Did they have any markings on them? Apart from the cuts?'

'What do you mean? And anyway, how did you know about the cuts?'

Megan ignored his last comment. 'Did they have any branding marks? That's apparently quite common. Logos or signs tattooed onto them.'

Harry sat back. 'No, but you're becoming quite the expert. Are you after my job?'

'No.' She paused when the waiter approached. 'I agree with you though. I think they have been trafficked. I think someone is using witchcraft to force these girls to come here.'

'But you're not going to say any of that in the piece though? Jesus, I can already see the headlines: Black magic. Voodoo on the streets of Glasgow.'

'Do you know about this?'

He didn't answer.

'Look, I spoke to a contact of mine and told her about the cases and the marks on their bodies. She's an expert on African religions and rituals. Her first impressions are that the women have been forced to come here. What I don't get, though, is why they're being bumped off.'

'I know. Normally they're sold on. They're worth a fortune to their pimps.'

'Unless they were you know damaged goods?'

'What do you mean?'

'Were they pregnant?'

Her words hung there for a moment and eventually Harry shook his head. 'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'Not that I've been told, Megan. And I'd like to think I would have been.'

'Is it worth double-checking?'

'I would have been told,' he said, his voice tense.

‘Okay. I just think there must have been something wrong with them. Something that we’re missing.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Or something that you’re not telling me.’

A man stood in the doorway. The girl recognised him from the night before. He'd prodded her and touched her intimately when she and the others were waiting in the room. But then she'd been given something to drink. She couldn't remember much else. He was a white man with blond hair cropped close to his head. He wore jeans and a black T-shirt. His arms were covered in tattoos and he stood watching her for a moment. The girl didn't dare move. She held her breath. Then he walked away, leaving the door open. The girl wondered if she was supposed to follow him. But she was too frightened to move. A few moments later he returned holding a tray. There was a plate of sandwiches on it and a bottle of water. He told the girl he was her new boss and she needn't be afraid. He said he would only hurt her if she didn't do as she was told. But even when he smiled at her, she knew there was nothing nice about him. He offered her a sandwich and when she didn't take one straight away he gripped her arm tightly and squeezed it. He told her she had to eat to keep her strength up. He said he got annoyed when his girls didn't eat. It made him angry. She reached out and took one, biting into what felt like a damp towel. She had no idea what was in it. It looked like pink meat but was tasteless and she chewed each piece several times before forcing herself to swallow. When she finished it he told her to eat another one and another. Then he told her she would have to be careful not to be greedy. He said he didn't like his girls to be fat and the customers didn't either.

The girl was told that she wouldn't have to work that night. She could have the day to rest and then tomorrow business would begin. The girl knew what kind of work he was talking about. All her hopes and dreams of babysitting or housework had gone. I own you now. I paid a good price for you too, he said, licking his lips. He ate the last sandwich in two bites, then wiped his hand over his mouth. I didn't give you a test run last night. But I will need to try you out, he said. He pushed the tray aside and walked back over to the door to make sure it was locked. Then he turned back to the girl and began to unbuckle his belt.

Chapter 18

Later that night Megan got out of bed and pulled on her dressing gown. She was sure Harry was holding something back from her about the victims. When he had dropped her off she didn't invite him in. She had told him she wanted a good night's sleep as the next day would be busy. He took the hint.

Megan took her laptop over to the table by the window, sat down on the chair, and tucked her feet beneath her. She clicked on her email account and sighed. She'd need to get IT to look at it. The laptop was so slow these days. While she waited for the system to warm up she flicked through some old images of Matthew. How he had changed. He was almost two now, and when she looked back at the baby pictures she couldn't believe that the little boy she had spent the weekend with had once been so small. She couldn't even begin to process what had happened with Sebastian on Friday night. It was firmly parked away in a corner of her mind for another day. Perhaps tomorrow. Or the day after that. She glanced down at the screen and saw that her emails had finally loaded. She clicked on them and scrolled through, deleting the numerous offers from *Gap* and the bank. There were a couple of documents from Katherine. Some copy which had been forwarded on from a freelancer and some queries from another regarding a payment. Pushing her hair off her face, she tried to open her eyes wide and focus. If she could edit the copy now then it would save her a job in the morning. Within minutes though, her back had started to ache and her eyelids were drooping. She wouldn't be rushing to commission this freelance to write again for her in a hurry. His copy was riddled with errors. She shook her head. She'd always thought spellcheck was supposed to make everyone's life easier, but the freelancer obviously hadn't used it, let alone checked his own work afterwards. A tinkle chimed, signalling that a new email had dropped in her inbox. She squinted at the screen. It was a message from Trudy. She clicked on it straight away.

Trudy's blog

'Don't sulk with your husband.'

He was working late again. I sat in the kitchen, picking at beans on toast and watching the tomato sauce congeal on one of my best Denby plates. I pushed it away, no longer hungry. Last night he laid out his clothes, as always, for the morning. To begin with, when we were first married, I thought it was quite a sweet characteristic. He was so organised and meticulous about his appearance. Now, after all these years, I see through it. I can see through him.

This morning he was bashing through his wardrobe, swearing and throwing things over his shoulder, screaming that he couldn't find his favourite tie. I began to worry. Once when he thought I'd been snooping in his study he looped the tie around my neck in a flash. All I could see were flashes of white light, then black spots. Fortunately it was winter, so nobody at work questioned why I always wore polo necks. Mind you, I don't really expect anyone would notice. I don't let anything show when I'm at work. I'm professional and get on with the job. I'm sure people would be astounded if they knew the truth. He's more careful about where he leaves his marks now. Arms, stomach, breasts, buttocks. But mainly it's inside.

He used to tell me I should lose some weight and said I was getting podgy. That was just after I gave birth. He climbed up on the hospital bed and had his way with me as our newborn baby lay just a few feet away. Bastard.

Today I have nothing to lose. My clothes hang from me. He says I'm disgusting and could do with fattening up. My breasts have shrivelled and are non-existent. He says screwing me is like screwing an adolescent. It doesn't seem to put him off though.

He smiled at me this morning when he left. That was after he pulled me close and gently kissed the top of my head. I desperately tried to think what he wanted. What was he planning? Or am I becoming paranoid? Maybe he was just being nice. Maybe I am imagining things. Maybe he can't help his temper or the way he behaves. I know enough about his past to know it isn't his fault. Though I know I haven't imagined my bruises or the dull ache which permanently moves itself around my body. I do have to keep reminding myself that this is my life and this is really happening to me. And I know it must be my own stupid fault.

I was restless tonight in the empty house. I walked around looking at this building which was supposed to be home. I ran my finger along the banister, then the top of picture frames, absent-mindedly flicking away the dust. I stood at the doorway of the empty bedroom and just stared. I began to wonder if anyone would notice if I disappeared. Would anyone actually care?

Megan replied to the email: *Hello? Can I help you?* But, as before, Megan's laptop quickly chimed again. The email was bounced back stating that the recipient was unknown. There didn't seem to be any way of contacting Trudy through the website, either. She made a mental note to ask Ronnie about it when she went into the office the next day. She wondered if anyone else was privy to Trudy's thoughts or if Megan was the only reader. As she sat there, an idea for a feature began to form in her head. She tapped her fingers against the worktop, then quickly googled 'Scotland and domestic abuse'. The cuttings from Rachel Thompson's recent press conference appeared. The 'two strikes and you're out' policy. Megan scrolled down further until she found a cutting which revealed statistics. She sat there quietly for a moment contemplating what the new angle could be. Maybe she should talk to someone at Women's Aid. Another mental note for tomorrow. Yawning, she shut her laptop and lay down on top of her bed. She fell asleep immediately.

The girl was being taken out. She didn't know where she was going. Just that she had been chosen for a special outing. She felt a tiny flutter of something in her stomach. Dread or excitement? She hoped that this might be a sign that things could maybe get better. She tried to have faith.

The bossman barged into her room with a black dress. A black, clingy slip which looked more like a fancy nightie. He gave her a pair of high-heeled shoes to try. She pushed her feet inside them and winced. They hurt her toes. That nipping sensation reminded her of that day with Auntie in the airport. The bossman watched as she changed, his eyes snaking across her body. He smacked his lips and told her she needed make-up. The girl had none. She had nothing. She stared at him and shrugged. He disappeared for a moment and returned with a woman who had pale skin, blonde hair and huge brown eyes.

Make her up, he said, pointing at the girl. The woman was thin and unsmiling. The girl thought she looked about twenty. Her eyes were lifeless and the girl trembled as the woman told her to sit down. The woman gently rubbed powder on the girl's cheeks then glanced down to the make-up bag on her knees. She pulled a lipstick out and some mascara. A large tear rolled down the girl's cheek and the woman tutted, then quickly wiped it away. Shh. You be okay. You do as told. You be okay, she said and tried to smile. But the smile didn't reach her eyes. The girl sat still, her hands clasped together, as she was made up to look like a woman. She didn't like the way her eyelashes stuck together or the greasy bright lipstick on her mouth. Look, said the blonde woman, pushing a mirror into the girl's hands. The girl stared at her reflection and wondered who was looking back. She wanted to wipe it all off and to scrub everything away. The girl wondered briefly if she should thank the woman for her help. But the woman had turned away. Just do as told. You be okay, she said. The girl nodded her head and dropped her gaze to the floor. The bossman opened the door and gave a small, low whistle. He clasped his hands together, his eyes shining. Very good. Very good, he said. Come on. It is time to go.

Chapter 19

'We need to talk.' It was Joanna.

Megan had stepped away from her desk when she saw her sister's number flashing on her mobile. 'Is it urgent?' Megan could feel the familiar gnaw of worry twisting in her stomach.

'No. Nothing to worry about. There's just someone I'd like you to meet. Can you pop round about eight? I can tell you more then.'

Megan tapped her foot against the floor. 'Don't know if I can wait that long.'

'Well, you'll have to. I need some kip. I'm just off a shift.'

'Okay, fair enough. I'll see you later on.'

'And Megan?'

'Yes?'

'Sebastian called me.'

'Called you?' Megan's voice dropped. 'But why?'

'He said he doesn't think you'll cope with Matthew and he thinks you're working too much. I told him it was none of my business. But he asked if I would talk to you. Make you see some sense.'

Megan dropped her mouse with a clatter on the desk. She began rubbing the base of her neck, which had started throbbing. 'What did he say?'

'Not very much. But, Megan, I hope you don't mind me saying. He's a bit of a twit.'

Megan nodded but said nothing. She had been trying not to think too much about their argument at the weekend when he'd issued her with an ultimatum. His ego was obviously bruised after she had rejected his pass and the next day he said he'd decided he wanted sole custody of Matthew. She hadn't even let her mind wander to the topic since she'd left London. A few times she picked up her phone and started to call him. Then she realised there was no point. It would just make things worse. She needed to talk to a lawyer. Maybe the trip to Stockholm would give her head-space and allow her to process what had happened. She wanted the best for her son, but at the moment her mind was so busy she didn't know what that was.

Megan listened to her sister yawn down the phone. 'Okay, thanks for letting me know, Joanna.'

'I'll catch up with you later. I need my bed.'

You're not the only one, thought Megan.

The new few hours passed in a blur as she oversaw the final edits to copy for that weekend's edition. Her stomach grumbled just as Katherine placed a chicken sandwich from Waitrose in front of her.

'I'll get you some tea too.'

'Thanks. You're an angel.' Megan wanted to drop her head onto the keyboard and weep. Did *everyone* think she was unable to cope? She hit the base of her palm against her forehead. 'Katherine, I can't believe I forgot to tell you. I met your husband at the airport the other day.'

Katherine stopped in mid-stride and turned back to look at her. 'Did you?' She twirled the beads at her neck. 'He didn't say.'

'Yes. Sorry. I've had such a busy head. It was when I was coming back from London. A friend met me off the flight and he knows your husband. He introduced us.'

Katherine smiled.

'It was nice to meet him and put a face to his name.'

'Well, you may see him again sooner rather than later. He's staying at the same hotel as you in Stockholm. He's there for a meeting.'

Megan sank her teeth into the soft bread and chewed a piece of chicken coated in spicy mayonnaise. She cocked her head to the side and said, 'He's a lawyer, right?'

'Yes, that's right,' said Katherine. 'Oil and gas.'

'Of course. I forgot. That's a shame.'

'What do you mean?'

Megan flicked her eyes back to the news wire. 'I may need a lawyer.'

'What for?'

'For my son.' Megan put down the rest of her sandwich. She no longer had an appetite.

There was another message from Trudy. She clicked on the link.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't Let Your Husband Become Merely Your Children's Father After the Arrival of the First Baby.'

It was my daughter's birthday today. Her twentieth birthday. We chatted this morning and she told me about her plans to have drinks with friends. I was sad that I couldn't be with her. How I wish she was still small and I could scoop her up in my arms and bury my nose in the smell of her hair. She's all grown up now with a life of her own and I know she's happier being away. That doesn't stop me looking wistfully back through my rose-tinted glasses though. But of course my family life wasn't like the scenes you see in *The White Company's* glossy brochures.

I remember the one birthday party she had for her friends from school. She was six. The cake was in the shape of a house. Chocolate with multi-coloured Smarties dotted all over it and chocolate fingers for the walls and the roof. I remember being so proud of it. I felt like I'd been a good mummy because she was so excited. Then *he* arrived home and slammed his fist into the cake. Said I hadn't ironed his shirt properly. Someone had commented on the creases at work. He'd come home in a rage. The chocolate-finger wall of the cake looked like a car had smashed through it. I had to quickly patch it up with more chocolate biscuits. It didn't look the same. She noticed. I know she did. It was the first time I felt I had really let her down.

Are you wondering why I am still here? Why would I stay with a man like him? A bully? Because I don't think it's all that bad, really. He's always had a stressful job. I'm supposed to be there to support him through it. Isn't that the job of a good wife? He's been working so hard all these years to build up his business and support us. He's had a lot on his plate. There have been some happy times too: picnics on the beach, bunting in the garden, twinkling tea lights at Christmas. Maybe we would still make it into that brochure after all. Maybe I'm focusing on the negative things rather than the positive, happy memories. I should try harder. It's not always terrible. He's my husband and I love him and I take my wedding vows seriously. I need to try harder. All marriages go through their ups and downs. I'll make more of an effort. I'll make him a special meal. Focus on the good things.

'Ronnie, can you come here a minute? I need your help.'

'Sure.' Ronnie stood up and stretched his hands above his head. Today he was wearing a yellow shirt and he'd clearly applied some fake tan as his face was ridiculously bronzed. It didn't fit with the damp spring day outside. 'Though if it's the same thing as before I might be struggling.'

'Yes, it is.'

'What is it?' asked Sunita.

'Can you trace an email for me? Or a blog?'

'I tried,' said Ronnie. 'But you might want to ask IT.'

'Or you could just ask me,' said Sunita, without moving her eyes from her screen.

'Thanks, Sunita. I'll ping it over and then you can see what you can do.'

Ronnie tutted.

'Doesn't matter who does it,' said Megan. 'It's not a competition.'

The girl noticed that she was always moved when it was dark. The car weaved its way from the city, the harsh yellow lights disappearing until all she could see was the starry sky. None of the girls looked at each other for long. They just shared brief, tense looks. There were three of them. The blonde, with her hair piled on top of her head, and another girl with short, cropped hair and delicate features. She looked like a little boy, and the girl had to stop herself from staring. Maybe she was a little boy.

The car turned and crunched over a gravel drive, pulling in to park. The bossman and his helper, another face she hadn't seen before, told the girls to get out and walk to the house. The bossman led the way. The door opened and they stood in the hallway waiting to follow orders. The girl noticed the candles twinkling on the mantelpiece and she could hear music quietly playing in the background. Her stomach grumbled at the smells wafting from the kitchen. It was almost homely and welcoming. Then the bossman pointed at the door and told them to go through. They were taken into a large room, with several dining tables and lots of men. They were all well dressed and wearing suits. They looked like respectable men. Tidy, with well-brushed hair and good teeth. The girl started to relax. Maybe this was going to be okay. Perhaps she and the others were just there to help serving food. They were all handed a glass of something to drink. The girl took a sip and didn't like the taste but when the bossman glared at her she knew she had to swallow it all.

The girls were asked to walk around the room serving drinks to the men. There were perhaps a dozen. Then she noticed the other girls in the corner of the room. They were perched on the edge of seats, clutching glasses which they too kept sipping from. They were all smiling but the girl knew they were not having fun. When she realised none of the men would make proper eye contact with her she began to worry. Then when they started to clap and jeer she began to worry. Yet her head felt woozy and she couldn't think fast or work out what to do. She set the tray down on a table, then she felt someone clutch her from behind. His hands circled her waist and he pushed into her. I won, he kept saying. I won. I won. He grabbed a glass from the tray and swallowed it in a gulp. Cheers, darling, he said handing her another glass. The girl didn't want to drink anything else. She felt spaced out and frantically tried to look for the blonde woman or the bossman. All she could see were blurred faces smiling and jeering at her. The man pulled her towards him and she stumbled, trying to grab onto something, anything. Come on now, he said. You're mine now for the

night. I won. You're mine. She saw the bossman staring at her, making a gesture with his fingers. She heard the village priest's voice telling her she had to do as she was told. The man pulled her with him and she had to go.

Chapter 20

Joanna had company. A girl with blonde hair, dark at the roots. Chunky gold bracelets hung from her wrists and several delicate silver necklaces were swathed around her neck. She was wearing black jeans and a bright red sweater. Her thick black eyebrows dominated her face.

As Joanna welcomed Megan into the lounge, she felt as though she had stumbled into a private party for two. Half-full mugs of tea sat on the coffee table, with slabs of chocolate cake on plates. Megan's eyes focused on the thick icing smeared across the cake.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude,' said Megan as the girl stood up to leave.

'It's okay. This is Rhona. She works at the refuge. This is my sister Megan.'

Rhona gave Megan a tight smile and then folded her arms.

'Nice to meet you, Rhona.'

'I'd better be going, Jo. Thanks for the chat and that. Maybe see you later on.'

Megan was confused.

'No problem at all. Any time. Come on and I'll see you out.'

'Bye,' called Megan - but Rhona didn't look at her.

The front door closed and Joanna returned, shrugging apologetically.

Megan pulled a face. 'I thought she wanted to talk to me.'

'She did. But she's also wary of the press. I did try and encourage her to stay and talk to you, but the *Record* turned her brother over. She's not having a good day. She thinks you're all the same.'

'Why, what did her brother do?'

Joanna shook her head. 'I'll fill you in another day. Do you fancy a cup of tea?'

Megan remained standing and walked over to pick up the pot of lukewarm tea.

'Not that, I'll get you a fresh pot.'

'No, honestly, this looks fine to me.' Megan poured some tea into the third, unused cup on the table.

Joanna frowned. 'Are you feeling okay? Honestly, it's not a problem.'

‘Joanna, it’s fine. Stop fussing,’ she said, topping up the cup. She sat down and took a slurp of the tea, then stuck her pinky into the icing on the plate. ‘Do you ever get lonely, Joanna? Have you been with anyone else since David?’

Joanna blushed. ‘Er, no, not really. Why?’

‘Just wondered. Sorry. I know it’s not any of my business.’

‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘I’ve got Max.’ The grey striped cat had just jumped up and curled up beside her on the sofa. ‘He’s been my constant companion since . . . well, since George.’ She scratched his ears. ‘Why? Do you?’

‘What?’

‘Get lonely?’

Megan thought about this for a moment. ‘Mmm, sometimes. But I just get on with it. Work keeps me busy.’

‘I suppose it always has . . . would you like some cake? Rather than sticking your finger in the icing?’

Megan pulled her finger from her mouth and blushed. ‘Oops, sorry. It’s nice. Did you make it?’

‘Yes.’ She paused. ‘It would have been his birthday yesterday.’

‘Oh, Joanna. Of course.’

‘It’s okay. I don’t expect anyone but me to remember. Really, it’s fine. It just gets to me sometimes, you know.’ Her eyes slid down to stare at Max.

‘Anything I can do?’

Joanna smiled. ‘Yes, have a bit of cake from a plate.’

‘Okay. Thanks.’ She watched her sister slice a piece and took it from her.

‘Do you want to know what Rhona said?’

Megan nodded.

‘Rhona knows everyone and everything. But she’s nervous, a bit jumpy, and she tends to get her details a wee bit mixed up. She’s been a bit of a drug user in the past. Anyway, she says she knows one of the bouncers in a club in the town. He’s told her that the girls in there pass through like cattle in a market.’

‘Has she seen any of them?’

'Aye, well, that's the thing. Sometimes she'll get asked in to do some wee treatments for them. A bit of waxing, some nails and fake tans and that. Cash in hand, no questions asked.'

'And what does she think?'

'Just that she said she never needs to do any travelling. The women of the world are all in the centre of Glasgow. You name the country and she guarantees that there'll be a girl in there representing it. It sounds like the United Nations.'

Megan looked surprised. 'What's the club called?'

'The Tinkle Club . . . I know, nice name, eh? And if my experience is anything to go by then the police will know. They're just not doing much about it.'

'Did Rhona say anything else?'

'No. She was freaking out that she'd said that much to me.'

'What is it that Rhona does at the shelter?'

'She comes in and does wee treatments for the women there. Same kind of stuff. But all above board.'

'Does she paint their toes?'

'Yes,' said Joanna, 'if they fancy it.'

'What colour?'

'Eh? What's that got to do with it?'

Megan drained the rest of the tea and stood up. 'What colour does she paint their toe nails?'

'Why you asking that? Are you feeling okay, Megan?' Joanna gave a nervous laugh. 'You're acting really weird tonight.'

'Is there a chance she knows more than she's letting on?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, I just get the feeling that she knows more than she's letting on.' Megan was getting impatient now.

'Look, leave it with me. The last thing I need is you running after her and frightening her. She's jumpy enough as it is. She clams up under pressure.'

'The sooner the better. Time is kind of the essence here. Look, I'd better go. Thanks for the tea and cake. But I'm catching a flight in the morning.'

'Where are you going?' Joanna walked her to the door.

'Stockholm,' she said glumly. 'For a work thing.'

'Okay . . . and what about Sebastian?'

'What about him?'

'Well, do you want to talk about it?'

'No. Not just now. I'm tired, Joanna. I'll call you when I'm back.' Megan hugged her sister.

'I'm worried about you. Please take care of yourself.'

She woke up, her eyelashes sticky and clogged together. She looked around the room confused. It wasn't where she normally woke up. It was a proper bedroom with high ceilings and fancy bedcovers. There was even a window. She peered under the covers. She was naked and sore, extremely sore. The girl had no idea where she was or what had happened. The last thing she could remember was serving drinks. She lay there gripping the bedclothes tightly to her chin, willing herself to remember what had happened. Then she spotted her clothes slung across a chair by the window. That dress and those shoes. The fancy house and the well-dressed men. She heard the door swing open and the bossman loomed. His blue eyes seemed to laser straight through her. Hurry. We're leaving soon. Get dressed.

The girl desperately needed some water, her mouth was so sore and dry. She crept out of bed, pulling a sheet around her. A door was slightly ajar on the opposite side of the room and she saw a toilet. Wincing with every step, she sat down and felt a burning sensation between her legs and watched as blood and urine trickled from her. She wiped herself gently and then washed her face and hands. Looking up at the mirror she gasped. Bruises, like blooming flowers, circled her neck. She saw purple welts on her breasts. Looking down, she saw more bruises on her thighs, scratches on her leg and when she turned to look at her back she saw red welts across her shoulders. She dressed as quickly as she could, pulling the dress over her head and pushing her feet back into those shoes. She wished she had a large coat to cover up with. Come on, said the bossman. Noticing her bruises, he slipped his coat off and handed it to her. Put that on. Cover that up. It's no good for business, he said.

For the first time the girl felt grateful towards him. She followed him out and saw the blonde waiting, an unlit cigarette in her mouth. There was no sign of the girl who looked like a boy. The blonde's eyes met the girl's briefly and she detected a glimmer of pity in her eyes. The girl wondered if she knew what had happened to her last night. There were still ripples of conversation and laughter coming from across the hallway and the girl wondered if the men were still there dressed in their best clothes and having a good time.

Chapter 21

'Picture if you can the following room,' said the woman standing on stage. She gripped the sides of the lectern, fixing her steely glare on the back row of the audience. 'It's grey, with a dim, flickering light. In it are six beds with thin mattresses and cheap, dirty sheets and blankets. There is no carpet, just rough wooden floorboards. The room is sparsely furnished. No lamps or cushions.' She paused. The conference room was silent. 'Just the beds and six girls. Two from Romania, two from Nigeria and two from Moldova.'

Megan scribbled in her notepad as the woman, Liza, a Swedish expert in gender violence and trafficking, continued. 'Men arrive at all hours of the day. The buyers. The girls are dragged from their beds and forced to strip. The men prod them like cattle, touch them and examine them. Often, they are taken out of the room and the men try them to find out how they perform sexually. They are degraded and dehumanised. They are made to feel worthless. They are treated like animals.'

Megan was sitting in a row near the front of the lecture hall which was packed with delegates from around the world. Tugging at her lanyard she looked around. There were a couple of other journalists, a woman from Reuters and a guy she recognised from *The Telegraph*, though she was the only Scottish journalist.

'We've been told of girls forced to parade on stage as though they were in a fashion show. The lights are dimmed. The audience is full of men in business suits. Professionals. Who look like many of the men here in this room today . . .'

Megan squirmed in the uncomfortable silence.

'These men, and believe it or not sometimes women, buy and try the goods. After being broken in, the women are auctioned off to the highest bidder.'

Megan underlined this sentence in her notepad and looked up, catching Natasha Campbell's eye. The pair exchanged a brief nod.

'It's important to distinguish the difference between trafficking and smuggling,' said Liza. Walking to the left of the room she paused. 'Does anyone know?' Without allowing anyone the chance to answer, she continued. 'Smugglers are paid by people to bring them across borders. Traffickers *force* people to cross borders . . . what we need to do is raise awareness. Where there are men, there will always be a demand for supply of these women.' Liza took a small sip of water.

Megan continued to take notes as Liza went on to talk about the Kvinnofrid law which was introduced in Sweden in 1999 which made buying sex illegal. 'In Sweden protecting the sanctity of human life is more important than protecting the sexual desires of men,' said Liza. 'There needs to be a serious penalty for men buying sex. Let us pause for a moment as we think about this,' she continued, fixing her eyes on someone at the back of the room. 'Sweden has the lowest rate of trafficking in the EU.' She gave a brief nod to the audience before confidently walking down the steps at the front of the stage and taking her place in the front row. The room erupted in applause.

Megan reached into her pocket for her phone and quickly scrolled through her messages and emails. She was about to put it away again when she saw one from the blogger. She clicked on it.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't think that, because you married for love, you can never know a moment's unhappiness.'

He's been away on business for a few days. When I spoke to him yesterday he sounded bright and enthusiastic and told me it had all gone well. In fact, things had gone so well that they were all going out to celebrate. He told me he wouldn't call again and he would tell me all about it on his return. So, for the first time in a long time, I felt able to relax in my own home. I wasn't constantly watching the phone or feeling on edge.

But he was waiting for me tonight when I got back from work. I'd stayed late for a meeting and was tired. There he was, sitting in darkness in the kitchen, nursing a large measure of whisky. When I flicked on the light he didn't look up. He wouldn't speak to me. Just gulped the drink down, smashed the glass against the sink and then flashed me that look he does. Revulsion, contempt, hate. His face was pale, large circles around his eyes, and I thought maybe someone had died. I tried to ask if everything was okay. What happened? What's wrong?

He used his controlled voice to tell me the deal hadn't quite worked out the way they were expecting. It was a stressful evening and he'd hardly slept. I could smell him. Stale sweat, whisky and something else. I didn't allow my mind to wonder who his latest whore was.

Go and have a shower, or shall I run you a bath? Can I get you something to eat? A cup of tea? Do you want to read the paper? Oh, how I wish I could learn to shut up and stop talking.

His phone buzzed and I jumped. He did too. There was a layer of sweat on his top lip. He was a funny colour. He checked the message on his phone and took a sharp breath.

Are you okay? Is everything okay? I asked him hurriedly. Panicked. He told me to shut the fuck up. His ears were bleeding with all the questions I was asking. He wanted to be left alone. Everything was fine, he said. He shoved me out of the way and stormed upstairs to his study. The door slammed and I heard the click of the lock turning. I wondered what had happened. What had made him so cross. But it was none of my business. I know nothing about his work. I wouldn't have a clue about his business deals or the stress he's under. I retreated back to the kitchen and I cleared up the smashed glass. I need to try and understand that he's under a lot of stress. I need to be more patient. This is just a phase, it will all blow over. Tomorrow is another day. We're all allowed to have an off day, aren't we? It could be worse. We've all got our health, a roof over our heads. At least nobody has died.

Megan shuddered as she read the last sentence. Placing the phone on her lap, she looked back at the stage.

'So how do we know if people are being trafficked? Well, we need to be vigilant to what is going on in and around our neighbourhoods,' said the Dutch psychologist who was now talking.

But Megan couldn't focus on what he was saying. All she could think about was the woman in the blog. Who was she? Why was she emailing her? And what was she trying to tell her?

The sun was rising when they walked outside. The girl shivered, pulling the coat closer around her. She had done as she had been told but she didn't feel okay. She felt disgusting and ashamed. She tried to focus her gaze on the world outside. She wanted to record any details at all which might help her. Dark green forest, gravelly tracks and an ocean which looked as though diamonds had been scattered across it. Everything about the setting should be beautiful. The girl stood staring at the sky. It was pale blue. She couldn't remember when she last saw the sky during the day. But she was surrounded by trees. There was nowhere to run. The bossman told them to get into the car. The blonde sat next to the girl and passed her a bottle of water. The girl took small sips from it then closed her eyes again, her head falling against the window. When she woke later she was back in her room, groggy and with a thumping headache. It was dark and she had no idea how long she had been sleeping or what time it was. She heard the key in her door turn and someone entering. It is me. Sssh. It okay, said a voice. It was the blonde woman. She sat on the girl's bed and helped her sit up. She had a banana and some crackers on a plate. You eat. You hungry, she said. The girl gnawed on a cracker. You sore, yes? The girl nodded. You be okay. You did good. She sighed. You there two days. The girl frowned. I cannot remember, she said. The boss he happy. You good girl. You given special drink to help you forget. Is better that way.

When the blonde left, the girl gently edged her way back down onto the bed. It didn't matter that she had no memory of what had actually happened. She knew bad things had happened to her. She could tell from the marks and bruises on her body. She knew from the pain she felt inside. She didn't feel like a good girl. She felt dirty and sore and bad. She wondered if all those men were bad. Or was it just the one who had claimed her. She wondered about the priest from her village and if he knew this was how her life would be. Did Auntie know about this too? How could any gods let this happen to her? Then she thought about her mother and brothers. If she kept obeying then perhaps one day she would get to go home, to her real home and be with them.

Chapter 22

The conference was being held at the Waterfront Congress Centre, next to the harbour and close to the Central Station. Megan was desperate to get outside for some fresh air and to stretch her legs. She'd visited Stockholm before, though the waterfront had been completely redeveloped since then, so she was keen to explore. She glanced at her watch. There was an hour or so until the next session began so she started walking towards City Hall, admiring its spire with the three golden crowns. She greedily breathed in the fresh, cool air and rolled her neck gently from side to side as she walked.

She'd come to Stockholm several years ago with a group of girlfriends. They'd stayed in a boutique hotel a short ferry ride away from the centre. They'd spent their days chatting, eating, drinking and sitting on their private terrace overlooking the waterfront. It was a life that seemed a million years ago to Megan. Those same friends had just posted pictures on Facebook of a trip to New York. There had been no attempt to invite Megan. She wasn't surprised, though, as their efforts to stay in touch had dwindled after Matthew had been born. Children were not on their list of priorities, which meant neither was Megan. She smiled to herself as she thought about the different paths their lives had taken and, as she stood looking up at City Hall, she briefly wondered if she would be happier if she hadn't chosen motherhood. Or if motherhood hadn't chosen her.

Later that night she lay in the bath until the water cooled and her skin was wrinkled and shrivelled. She stepped out and wrapped a large white towel around her. She reached over to check her phone which had been on silent. Three missed calls, fifteen texts and twenty-two emails. It was seven o'clock and she was due to meet Natasha in the hotel restaurant in half an hour. Walking through to the room she quickly scrolled through her messages looking for anything that needed to be dealt with urgently. It could all wait. She sat on the edge of the bed, her damp feet cold against the carpet. She needed to hear his voice for reassurance. It wasn't his fault his father was a prick. She had a short, terse exchange with Sebastian. Then her eyes welled up when she heard Matthew's soft babbles. 'Mamamamam,' he said.

'I miss you, sweetheart. I miss you, my darling boy.'

'Mamamama work. Got tank. Got Thomas.'

'Are you playing with Thomas? What about Edward?'

'Got him too,' he said.

She closed her eyes, the tears rolling softly down her cheek as she imagined him sitting there on the floor with his train track around him.

'How was nursery, darling?'

'Thomas. Choo-choo.'

She knew he was getting bored and she had only a few more seconds with him. It didn't matter that he couldn't answer the questions she was firing at him. She just wanted that connection with her son, to hear his ragged breath in her ear.

'Bye bye mumma.'

'Okay. I'll see you very soon. I love you. Bye bye.' Megan lay down on the bed, wrapped in her damp towel. She was shivering. Her eyes felt heavy.

'Well, what did you think?' asked Natasha as Megan walked towards the table.

'Sorry I'm late.' Megan sat down. 'I thought it was pretty impressive. Good range of speakers. Packed audience.'

Natasha raised an eyebrow. 'Yes, well, Angelina Jolie was rumoured to be one of the keynote speakers, which probably had something to do with it.'

Megan laughed. 'Good PR strategy if you can get away with it.'

'This will need to be quite a quick bite,' said Natasha as the waiter approached. 'There's a drinks reception after this at the embassy which I need to go to. I've ordered you a glass of wine. Red okay?'

'You're a star. Thank you.' Megan reached for the glass and took a large gulp. 'So, are you all ready for your big announcement tomorrow then?'

'Yes. Absolutely.' She reached down into her bag and pulled out some papers. 'Here you go. A wee sneak preview just for you.'

Megan reached out to take the bundle from her. 'Thanks.' She flicked through the papers. 'Is there anything classified here? Anything that I could be arrested for having?'

Natasha laughed. 'No, just a few of my wee doodles on it. I know the dailies will mop up tomorrow's news so I've made a few notes which may be useful to you for your piece. If you can't read my writing then just give me a shout.'

As the waitress set down their plates, Megan quickly glanced through the briefing papers and saw a section which had been underlined. 'The forty-five-day rule. What's that?'

Natasha scratched at her arm. 'Good question. The National Referral Mechanism grants a forty-five-day period for recovery and reflection which basically gives the teams a chance to work out whether their asylum process can be processed.'

'And if not?'

'Well, to simplify it, really it's more than likely they face deportation.'

Megan frowned. 'But that's not a very long time, is it?'

Natasha shook her head, picking at the meat on her plate. 'No, it's not. Not if you've been beaten and raped and are terrified for your family back home. But at the moment it's a bit out of our hands. It's not a devolved issue.'

'Even though you're bringing in this new legislation.'

'Yes.' Natasha took a sip of water. 'Our hands are tied.'

'Right,' said Megan. 'So what you're saying is, if this was a devolved matter then you would have more flexibility over this?'

'Yes. But, as you can imagine it's a tricky one. Anything mired up with Westminster legislation is tricky.'

Megan snorted. 'Yes, I wouldn't imagine this is a matter of importance down there. Especially when plenty of them will probably be cavorting with victims in the clubs they go to.'

Natasha's sucked her cheeks in. 'Don't get me started.'

'I know, I know. You couldn't make it up.'

'Exactly. Sorry, I've digressed.'

A man came to the table and put his hand on Natasha's shoulder. 'Excuse me, Ms Campbell, the car will be here in a minute to take us to the reception.'

'Okay, thanks Peter. I'll be with you in two minutes.' She sliced some more meat and quickly chewed.

He walked away and Megan winked at Natasha. 'Personal assistant?'

‘Yes. Something like that. He keeps me right.’

Megan stared after him. ‘He’s rather handsome.’

‘He’s not your type or mine either.’ Natasha laughed. ‘Which is just as well otherwise I’d never get any work done.’ She stood up. ‘I’m going to get indigestion after shoving that down so fast.’

‘I’ll fix the bill. You head off. Are you okay? You’re actually looking a bit pale.’

‘Yes, just a bit tired. Think I’m maybe about to hit the peri-menopause. Guess it’s getting to that stage,’ she said.

‘Well, thanks for this,’ said Megan, reaching over to stash the papers safely in her bag.

‘You’re welcome. We’ll talk soon.’

‘Yes, I’ll see you in the morning.’

‘Oh, and Megan . . .’ Natasha leaned down to whisper in her ear. ‘Strictly between you and me for the moment, but I spoke to some of my Swedish colleagues earlier and I’m going to push again for bringing the Nordic model in when we get back.’

Megan knew that if anyone could push through new legislation Natasha would.

‘Watch this space. See you later,’ she said and gave a small wave.

Megan sat for a moment, sipping her wine, processing everything that Natasha had just told her and wondering which angle to take.

Better Deal for Trafficking Victims in an Independent Scotland?

Government’s Plans to Undermine Westminster’s Trafficking Laws?

Minister Makes Justice Pledge for Victims of Trafficking in Scotland?

Her mind was whirring now, and she didn’t feel much like eating either, so she pushed her plate away. Yet she wasn’t quite ready to head back to her room. After settling the bill, she walked out of the restaurant and across the lobby to the bar where she ordered a Mackmyra Brukswhisky.

‘Do you want ice with that? Or water?’ asked the barman.

She looked up. ‘Neat, please.’ She took a small sip of the whisky and enjoyed the sensation of the warm liquid as it slipped down her throat.

‘Well, hello there,’ said a voice.

Megan bristled when she felt a hand on her back. Turning around, she smiled when she realised who it was. ‘Hello there.’

‘Mind if I join you?’ Tony McGinty sat down, not waiting for her to reply. ‘That looks good. The same for me, please,’ he said to the barman.

‘Cheers,’ said Megan when his drink arrived, and clinked her glass against his. ‘Katherine said you would be here. A meeting?’

‘Aye, that’s right,’ he said. ‘And you?’

‘The conference on human trafficking.’

‘Of course. That’s why the Justice Minister is here? I saw her earlier.’

‘Yes.’ Megan took a sip of whisky.

‘She’s quite formidable,’ he said.

Megan snorted. ‘‘What - because she has an opinion on things?’

‘No, no. Sorry, that’s not what I meant.’ Tony smiled. ‘No, I just think she’s quite impressive. Very good in her role and seems to actually get things done rather than just talk about them. Unusual for a politician.’

Megan relaxed slightly and sat back in her stool.

‘Are you going to write something then for the magazine?’

‘Yes and no. All the lines will be out and used by the dailies. I’m here for some background and to do a colour piece.’

He nodded. ‘I see. Sounds interesting. Though is trafficking really a problem in Scotland?’

Megan smiled. ‘I don’t know. You tell me. You must hear what’s going on.’

‘No. I’m afraid my life in oil and gas is very dull. I think Katherine must sometimes wish my job was more glamorous.’

‘Katherine’s great, isn’t she? She really keeps us going. If she wasn’t there the office would fall apart around us.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘She is pretty great.’ He paused for a moment and finished his drink. ‘She puts up with a lot.’

Megan couldn’t take her eyes off him. He really was very good-looking. ‘When are you heading back home?’

‘Not too sure,’ he said. ‘Maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day. It just depends on how things go.’

‘And these deals that you’re working on. Do they involve ridiculous amounts of cash?’

He nodded enthusiastically. 'Yes, they can do. The stakes can be high.'

'Must be stressful?'

'It can be, but if it all plays out then I do get quite a buzz.'

Megan glanced at her watch. 'I should be heading off soon. I've got quite a lot of preparation to do.'

He nodded his head towards the bar. 'Time for another quick one?'

She chewed her lip for a moment. 'Well, okay. Just a quick one.'

He smiled. 'Same again?'

'Perfect,' she said. 'I didn't realise Swedish whisky was so nice. Excuse me a moment while I nip to the loo.'

Some days the girl was raped by eight or nine men. Sometimes more. One after the other. There was a knock at the door and a youngish, overweight man skulked in. He had a paunch, a hairy chest and larger breasts than the girl. Then came the man with the pale, sweaty face covered in eruptions of pus-filled acne. The third man blew ragged, rancid breaths in her face. He had long hair, lips twisted into a sneer and a scarlet face. Then the man with the hate-filled eyes whose hands gripped her neck while he panted and gasped.

Some nights, the same two men came into the room together and took it in turns to watch. Both always stank of beer and body odour and were covered in tattoos. Sometimes she was allowed a break in between customers. She might be left for half an hour or so to be allowed to make herself presentable or use the toilet. It hurt when she peed and the girl could feel tears pricking her eyes. She bit them back. There was no point in crying. She knew she must do as she was told. But as she waited for the seventh man to come into the room, she felt a twist in her stomach. When the door opened and three men were shown into the room by the boss, she started to tremble and her mouth filled with saliva. The boss gave her a hard stare then turned and went out of the door, locking it behind him.

She scrambled back towards the wall as the men approached her and she began to shout 'no, no, no'. The biggest man grunted and clasped his sour smelling palm over her mouth. He wrapped his hand in her hair and held her head back, gagging her with a cloth. His friend pulled a rope from his pocket and tied her hands together while the third man dropped his trousers. Eventually she blacked out. When she woke up she was alone and naked, lying spread-eagled on the blood-soaked bed. Everything and everywhere hurt. Her eyelids were swollen, her neck, her stomach, her breasts all covered in welts, bites and bruises. But the worst pain was down below. She managed to push herself onto all fours then collapsed. Her lips were cracked and they stung when she licked them. She tasted dried blood. The boss unlocked the door and marched into the room but stopped abruptly. Jesus Christ, he shouted.

Chapter 23

Megan opened her eyes slowly, unsure of where she was. She couldn't lift her head off the pillow. Reaching out, she just about managed to click on the lamp. She looked around. She was in a hotel room. It took her a moment or two to remember which city the hotel was in. Stockholm, she was in Stockholm. Her head was pounding, her mind foggy as she tried to grapple with what had happened last night. She must have forgotten to set her alarm. What time was it? Shit. She couldn't get up. Couldn't move. Drifting in and out of sleep she eventually managed to haul herself up, grabbing the sides of the bed. What *had* happened last night? Why was she naked? And where was her phone?

Easing herself off the bed, she stumbled into the bathroom just reaching the toilet in time to vomit. Grabbing the sides of the bowl, she felt another wave of nausea sweep over her which competed with the now blinding pain behind her eyes. Her bare knees felt cold against the floor and she reached out to grab a towel. How did she end up naked? Had she eaten something? Or drunk something? Megan could hold her drink and the Swedish whisky had seemed okay. Hauling herself up to the sink, she splashed her face with cold water, then flinched as she saw her reflection staring back at her. What had *happened* to her? Her face was smeared with last night's make-up and her hair stuck up like a bird's nest. Tottering back into the darkness of the bedroom, she glanced around quickly, checking everything was there. Her laptop sat on the desk where she'd left it. Or had she left it there? Didn't she put it in the safe last night? Her handbag was slung over a chair. Reaching into it she pulled out her phone. The screen was dead so she plugged it into the charger and switched it on. Fifteen missed calls, thirty texts and forty-two emails. She dialled voicemail.

'Megan, it's Natasha. Where are you? We're waiting for you.'

'Sebastian here. Matthew wants to say good morning.'

She groaned and shook her head. How could she have forgotten to call her baby? Feeling nauseous again, she collapsed onto the bed letting her head sink back against the pillows. She dozed off and when she opened her eyes she noticed her clothes were strewn across the floor. A vague memory of a hand on her back steering her towards the bed flitted through her mind. But she couldn't grasp

anything else; the rest of the picture was fuzzy. Had she had a one-night stand with someone? But who? Sex with strangers was not Megan's style. When Megan looked at her phone and saw the time, she jumped out of bed. If she didn't hurry she would miss her flight home. What the hell had happened? How *could* she have lost so many hours? She picked up the phone.

'Can I have a taxi, please, for the airport . . . now. Thank you,' she snapped. Grabbing the clothes from the floor, she threw them in her bag. She longed to crawl back under the covers and sleep, or have a quick shower to wake herself up - but there wasn't time. She *had* to be on the flight. Having hauled on some clothes and pulled a hairbrush through her hair, she bent down to pick up her handbag - and that was when she noticed the wrapper in the bin. A bright orange piece of plastic. Looking closer, she felt the bile from her stomach start to rise when she realised what it was. And she ran off to the toilet to be sick again.

Megan sat in a corner of the departure lounge, her eyes down and fixed on her phone. She couldn't believe she had allowed herself to get into such a state. She felt utterly wretched and ashamed of herself. As she aimlessly scrolled through the *Daily Mail* site, which seemed today to be particularly focused on the Kardashian family more than usual, another few emails dropped. She passed her finger over her inbox and saw one was from the blogger. She clicked on the link which opened up another entry.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't spend your life keeping up appearances.'

I'm lucky to have a job, you know. He keeps telling me I should be grateful that he allows me to go to work. I know I am. I've heard about the poor souls whose men take their shoes and clothes away from them, so there's no way they can leave the house. I'm not like them.

Work is where I feel normal. I can put on my work face, my clothes and just blend in. People ask my opinion and then they actually listen to what I say. I like my colleagues. I really do. Sometimes I wish I had their lives. I know it's easy to think that the grass is always greener. The folk at work asked me if I wanted to go out for a drink tonight. But it's Friday and I always need to be back home sharp. I tell them I'm visiting my elderly aunt. Tonight was no different. I did need to be home. But not for my 'aunt'.

He said he'd ring me on the landline. It's because he cares. He doesn't always have time to hang around especially if he's in the middle of a meeting or a client dinner. He always likes me to pick up after three rings. I have to. Otherwise he'll be worried. I've been sitting waiting for the phone to ring. I stood for a bit in the kitchen eating a dry piece of toast, swirling some water around in my mouth. The phone rang and I grabbed it. But it wasn't him. It was one of those automated messages telling me I'm entitled to discounts if I switch to green energy. I slammed it down.

It was after midnight and I was so tired and on edge. I wish he'd phoned. I wish he'd phoned me and I could just get it over with. I mean I was worried about him and I hoped he was okay. I lay on the bed, fully clothed, and eventually started to drift off. I was dreaming, and somewhere warm and safe. It was lovely. I could hear music. Then I realised it sounded familiar. It sounded like the phone. I sat upright, all sleep fog gone. I grabbed the receiver by his side of the bed.

Hello, darling, he said. You had me worried there. I thought you weren't going to pick up. My tongue felt thick in my mouth. No, I'm here, I said as crisply as I could but my voice was croaky. I was wondering if everything was okay. I've been waiting for you to call. I could hear chatter and laughter in the background. Good girl. It's been a busy night, he said. But everything is just grand. You can go to bed now and I'll see you tomorrow.

I breathed out and lay back on the bed. I don't bother to change. I just wanted to sleep.

Megan could empathise with her need for sleep. She wanted to close her eyes and erase the past twenty-four hours. A voice came over the tannoy announcing that her flight was boarding. She couldn't think rationally about Trudy's entry. She'd have to deal with it later. Though she still had no idea what it all meant and why she was receiving them.

When Megan finally stepped through the door at Glasgow Airport she braced herself against the cool wind. Head down, she focused on walking as fast as she could to the taxi rank. There seemed to be people everywhere. She sighed in irritation as she tried to get past a crowd of older American golfers who had spread themselves and their clubs across the pavement. One backed into her as he tried to get a group selfie with his friends.

'Sorry, ma'am.'

Megan wanted to scream.

'Fancy seeing you here.' Megan flinched. It was him. Tony. She felt a mixture of embarrassment and guilt as she turned to look at him.

'How are you, Megan? Wow, you're not looking too good. Are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' she stuttered. 'Think I must be coming down with something.'

His face was earnest and she started to wonder if she was going mad.

'Do you need a ride?'

'Sorry, what?'

'A lift. Can I give you a lift?'

'No.' She shook her head. 'I'm fine, thanks. Just heading to the taxi rank.'

'Well, I'll just chum you along. I'm going that way anyway. Look, I just wanted to say thanks for last night.'

Megan's face drained of any remaining colour. 'What do you mean?'

'You were great company. It was interesting to hear more about your work.'

Megan was unable to say anything for a moment. 'No problem.' She kept walking. 'Nice seeing you.' Was it really, she asked herself?

'It was indeed. Megan, are you sure you're okay?' His face did look genuinely full of concern. 'You seem awfully jumpy.'

'Em, I'm okay. Honestly. Maybe just too much whisky.' Was she becoming paranoid? Maybe she was genuinely run down and coming down with something. She seemed to have lost a grip on what was making sense. Maybe they had just had a few drinks and she'd crashed out. Then she remembered the condom wrapper.

'Okay, well, look, I'd better let you go. Katherine's expecting me.'

'Of course.' Of course she is. Katherine. Shit. 'Bye then.'

He caught her arm, pulling her back. 'One thing,' he said quietly. 'Maybe don't say anything to Katherine about last night. She gets worried quite easily. She doesn't approve of me having too much to drink. Best keep schtum.'

Megan nodded. Then she hurried towards the taxi rank. Glancing back, she saw him watching her. But all she could see on his face was a friendly smile.

The girl was given some cream to put on her bruises and when they had healed, normal business resumed. Occasionally she and the blonde women were taken to house parties. Sometimes other girls would be brought along. The girl had stopped caring. Though she never again saw the girl who looked like a little boy.

Mostly the girl was kept in her room and men were shown in. Though sometimes she was allowed to sit in the living room with the others. Every morning she woke feeling sick and sore. Her hips jutted through her skin and her stomach was concave. She was given white bread to eat which tasted of nothing, bright red soups and sometimes a bruised banana or a bashed apple. One day she was given a sickly, fizzy orange drink from a can. She looked at the writing on the can. Irn-Bru. She'd never heard of it.

Sometimes she was let out of the room, under the bossman's supervision, and into the kitchen where he chain-smoked and slurped coffee. The girl preferred staying in her room. The only laughter she ever heard was when the blonde was talking to the bossman. The girl began to wonder if she was in fact a friend of his, rather than someone like her. But she had noticed bruises on the blonde, the lines on her arms, and wondered what had happened to her. She wondered if she had been tricked into coming here too.

The blonde knocked on her door before business started and came into the girl's room with some new underwea. It was red and lacy. The girl knew it would be scratchy. You put this on, said the blonde. Taking it from her, the girl asked, where are you from? Moldova, she said. Why you here? The blonde shrugged. Same as you. For your family, asked the girl. She nodded. Yes. I have daughter. She safe only if I work here. Have debt to pay. Debt, the girl said. Debt? Yes. Same as you. We owe money. I have no debts, said the girl, confused. The blonde looked at her and sighed. Yes. We all have debts. More work we do, make bossman happy and then maybe we get home. The girl shook her head. I do not understand. The boss. He is our owner. We belong to him. He decides when we get home. Best do as you are told. Best be a good girl. She pointed at the underwear on the bed. The girl knew there was no point in arguing. She would put it on. Maybe if she did as the blonde woman said, and worked harder and harder, then perhaps she would get home. It felt itchy against her skin. But she had to focus on doing her best. If she could focus on doing well for the bossman maybe he would let her go home soon. She grimaced

as she adjusted the bra strap. She knew there was no point in complaining. There was a knock at the door and the bossman showed in her first customer of the night. She wouldn't have to wear it for long anyway.

Chapter 24

The day after Megan flew back from Stockholm, she called in sick to work. She was too mortified to face Katherine. Feeling completely drained and confused, she knew she needed to talk to someone. The only person she felt she could tell was her sister.

When Megan arrived at the top of the stairs, Joanna was hovering in the doorway with a furrowed brow. 'Are you okay?'

'No. I think I'm going mad.'

'Come in.'

Megan watched her sister closing the door behind her and sliding the bolt across. She'd noticed it on previous visits but never mentioned anything.

'Do you always do that?'

'Yes. Just a habit. After Rod.'

Megan nodded only now just beginning to appreciate the fear that her sister must have lived under. Joanna's ex-husband was a bully. He'd served time for armed robbery and was found dead not long after his release from prison. The details of his death remained sketchy.

'Are you going to tell me what's wrong, Megan? You look awful. Your face is grey.'

Megan sat down. 'I don't know who else to talk to about this. It's a bit mad. I think I may be going crazy.'

'I've probably heard worse,' Joanna said gently. 'Don't worry. Try me.'

Megan gave her sister a brief outline of the trip to Sweden and her recollection of waking up naked and confused.

Joanna's face remained composed throughout. 'And how did you know this guy?'

Through work. His wife is part of the magazine team.'

'Right. And what's his name?'

Megan's voice was flat. 'Tony McGinty.'

Joanna took a sharp intake of breath.

Megan looked up. 'What? Do you know him?'

'Yes. His firm does some work for the refuge. Pro-bono stuff. Makes them feel good about themselves you know . . .'

'But he works in oil and gas.'

'Maybe he does, but his colleagues do family law and criminal law.' Joanna gave a weak smile. 'He's a handsome bloke.'

Megan ignored the comment. 'I don't understand how you would know him though.'

'He's been in a couple of times with his colleague. Said he's just auditing their work and checking all is above board. Apparently it's just part of their process. As you can imagine it's hard not to notice when someone like him walks into the building.' She shook her head in disbelief at what Megan was saying. 'Do you really think that you ended up in bed with him? And you can't remember any of it?'

Megan clutched her forehead. 'Joanna, that's the whole thing. I don't remember *anything*. And he's a married man. That's just not my style.'

'You wouldn't be the first, love. Blokes like him have usually got form.'

'But he's married to my *colleague*.'

'Hmmm. There is that.'

'But the point is that I don't *remember* anything.'

Joanna didn't speak for a moment. 'Do you think it could have been someone else?'

Megan frowned. 'Like who?'

'Another random bloke at the bar?'

'No.' She stared at the ground. 'The only other bloke I remember was the barman. Mind you, I wasn't exactly looking.'

'Jeez, Megan, I don't know what to say. Tell me what you remember.'

'I remember having dinner with Natasha. I had one glass of wine and then she headed off to a drinks reception. Then I sat at the bar and ordered a whisky. He joined me and I nipped to the loo while he ordered another drink . . .'

Joanna's face betrayed nothing but she shook her head. 'There you go. Do you think he slipped something in your drink?'

Megan's voice was quiet. 'How else do you explain it? I mean, how ridiculous though. I'm a grown woman. Not an under-ager at some club.'

'And you can't remember whether you slept with him or not?'

'Well, no. It did feel a bit sore to pee. But sometimes that happens when I'm rundown and not sleeping properly. Then there was the wrapper in the bin.'

‘Was there a used condom to go with it?’

‘I don’t know . . . I was kind of in shock and rushing to catch my flight and didn’t know what was going on. You’re right, though, I should have checked.’

‘Okay, well, at the moment we think you could have slept with either the barman or McGinty?’

‘I feel awful, Jo. Disgusting. How can I prove that anything happened?’

‘Seriously, Megan, I’m worried about you. Maybe you’re working too hard. All this going up and down to London must be taking its toll.’ Joanna paused for a moment, looking carefully at Megan. ‘You know, maybe having Sebastian here wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all.’

Megan gasped. ‘I thought you said he was a prick.’

‘I did. But you’re not with him any more. Is he a good dad?’

Megan wiped away a tear. ‘Yes. Yes, he is.’

‘It’s okay to accept help, you know. It’s not a sign of weakness, Meg.’

Megan stood up. ‘Maybe you’re right. Anyway, thanks for listening to me.’

‘You don’t have to thank *me*, Megan. Any time. At least let me make you a cuppa.’

Sinking back into the sofa she started to cry. ‘I just wish I could remember.’

‘Maybe a couple of days’ rest will do you good. Sleep and lots of water and good food. Do you want to stay here?’

Megan wished she had moved into the flat. She longed for her own space, somewhere she could be safe and alone. ‘Thanks, but it’s okay. I get the keys for the flat at the weekend. And it’s not fair on you.’

Joanna smiled. ‘It’s not a problem. If you change your mind let me know.’

‘I’d better go. I need to call Sebastian and . . . do you know what? I’ll email him, I can’t face talking to him.’

‘Okay, love. Watch how you go.’

Megan walked slowly down the steps and kept trying to push another thought out of her mind. If Joanna was right and her drink *had* been spiked, then did that mean she had been raped? She couldn’t allow her mind to go there. This couldn’t be happening to her. As she turned to walk home, her mind was whirring. She noticed a man crossing over to her side of the street. By the time she walked towards the station and then along Dudley Drive, she realised he was following her.

The girl crept into the kitchen. The blonde was sitting staring at the wall and smoking a cigarette which smelled of flowers. She glanced up at the girl and offered her a smoke. The girl shook her head. You should try it. Might make things easier for you. It helps me a bit. The girl went to the sink and rinsed out a dirty mug. She filled it with water then gulped. Sit down, said the blonde, pulling out another chair. Neither of them spoke for a few moments. The girl focused on the puffs of smoke coming from the blonde's mouth. She asked if she had ever tried to escape. She nodded and flicked her eyes around the room. Yes. One time . . . but not from here. She took another long drag on her cigarette. I am very stupid. I was okay. I escape in London. But they found me again, she said. How? They always watching. I thought I was safe. The police said I was safe. It was okay for a while. But then they found me. Said I had to pay off debt. Then they would let me go. I ended up here. Bloody cold. Did you ever try here to go? Yes. One time, she said.

The girl's eyes widened. The door was unlocked, she said pointing at the main door at the end of the hallway. Someone forgot to lock it. It was now or never, she said. I got out. To bottom of stairs. Then he came. The bossman. That was it. No point trying to run. What happened, whispered the girl. They beat me . . . they did other things too. I could not walk for a week.

Neither the girl nor the blonde spoke for a moment. Nobody cares. Nobody would help. We be put in jail, she said. We are bad. Not doing as told. We not supposed to be here. They own us. They take our passports. Documents. Everything. The blonde shook her head slowly. There is nothing left. Best do as told. She fell silent and the girl turned round to see that the bossman had come into the room. We are off out tonight to a party, girls. Both of you. Get a shower and make yourselves look respectable, will you, he said. The girl and the blonde shared a tense look. Make an effort. Big night tonight. It's a party night, he said.

Chapter 25

When Megan's phone buzzed she jumped. She was back at work this morning but had been on edge since leaving Joanna's flat the previous day. Convinced the man was following her, she had flagged down a passing taxi and asked the driver to take her into town.

Hope you're OK. Missed you at the press conference. Any progress on the trafficking report? By the way we're being tweeted about! #jacketgate

She clicked on the picture and saw a screen shot of Twitter. A TV journalist had copied a picture of Natasha and Megan wearing matching jackets while in Sweden and captioned it with: *They're all at it. Copying each other's style.*

'Busy day at the office then?' grumbled Megan under her breath. She knew the journalist in question. He was a patronising prick. She opened Twitter on her screen in front of her and saw it had been retweeted 500 times. Shaking her head, she typed Natasha a reply. *Wow. Two females wear navy blue jacket. Ground-breaking stuff!*

Natasha replied immediately. *Yip. Amazing. Don't worry. I'm about to sort it. Watch out!*

Megan watched her screen and then saw a picture of the journalist alongside David Cameron. Both carried leather satchels. Natasha had added the caption: *Look! Breaking news! Male journo and Prime Minister carry bags! Check out their shoes too! #manbaggate #jacketgate*

Megan burst out laughing. 'Brilliant,' she said out loud to nobody in particular. Then she noticed Katherine was watching her. 'Just having a bit of fun. Or Natasha Campbell is. On Twitter.'

Katherine was about to say something when her phone rang. She picked it up and nodded. 'It's Richard. You're wanted upstairs.'

'Thanks.' Katherine didn't maintain eye contact with her, and feelings of guilt and shame pricked at Megan's conscience.

Making her way up the stairs to Richard's office, she hoped she wouldn't bump into any of the marketing team in the lift. She knew that, given the way she felt this morning, she wouldn't be able to hold her tongue if any snide remarks were made.

She knocked on the door but didn't wait for a reply and went straight in. Richard was standing in the corner lining up a putt and jumped when he heard her voice.

'Oh, come *on*. Megan, you made me miss that one.' He frowned.

'Really, Richard. Putting in the office?'

'Yes - and I just wasted that shot. Haven't you heard of knocking?'

'I did.'

He scratched his head and gently placed his shiny club next to the bookcase. 'I'm just having a wee screen-break, you know. It's not good to be glued to a computer all day. Anyway, thanks for coming up so quickly. I wasn't expecting you to move so fast.'

Ignoring this, she sat down. 'Tell me - when you're not golfing, Richard, how do you spend your time?'

'There's no need to be sarcastic.'

'I'm not. It just seems to me that most of your journalistic work is done on the golf course.'

'It's all about networking, Megan. You know that.' Sitting down, he sighed. As he leant back, the chair groaned and squeaked. 'Look, this investigation you're working on, I just want to make sure we have it locked down. Rock-solid. The lawyers have been on to me. Their budget has been slashed and they're worried about us taking chances.'

Megan shook her head. 'But what chances have we taken since we launched? Bloody hell. I'm a *professional*, Richard. I'm not just having a wee play-around with this to keep me busy while my husband is out doing a real job!'

'Calm down,' he said in a soothing tone. 'I know that. They're just stressing that we can't be afford to be defaming anyone.'

'But who would I be defaming, and anyway, how would they know what I'm working on?' Megan's voice started to get louder. 'I mean, have they been talking to the trafficked girls or the folk behind it? Because unless they've been reading my copy then they don't know a thing about this. Unless they're trawling through my files, which would be highly unethical, don't you think?' She glared at Richard.

'They're just jittery at the moment. You know, with all the Leveson stuff.'

'Really? Who's been putting the pressure on you, Richard?'

'What, what do you mean?' he stammered.

'I mean that last week you were all gung-ho about cracking ahead with the trafficking investigation and now you're stalling.'

'Megan. You're so suspicious. You should be working for MI5. Actually, maybe not . . .'

'I've every right to be suspicious. I know how these things go. What's happened to change your mind?'

'My hands are, er, slightly tied here for the moment.' His cheeks reddened. 'Lord Bilston sits on the editorial advisory board and he's cautioned us to tread carefully in the current climate.'

Megan gasped. 'Really? And you're going to follow orders from that jumped-up wee shite who wouldn't know the first thing about newspapers other than the ones he reads when he's on the toilet? Just because he's now got some title he thinks he's some kind of god. Well, Richard, I hope you told him where to go?'

'Er, no, not exactly. Not in those terms anyway. I told him I'd take on board what he said.'

She stood up. 'He's probably a bloody client in this trafficking ring. The lawyers too. It's like Jimmy Savile. All these old farts covering up for each other.'

Shock stopped him in his tracks and Megan wondered for a fleeting moment if she'd gone too far.

'Megan, we can hardly go around comparing this to Savile.' His voice was terse.

'Why not? A cover-up is a cover-up.'

'All I'm saying is I'd much rather wait until we're totally watertight before we go ahead and print.'

Megan tutted. There was no point in this fruitless exchange. 'Do you know what, Richard, I'm starting to wonder why I took this job. The whole idea was that I was going to be allowed editorial freedom. That means not asking permission from a bunch of old cronies sitting around the boardroom.'

He didn't reply.

'I *will* make sure this is water-tight, Richard. And I *will* go to print with it, regardless of what they say. Don't you worry about that.' She started to walk out the door and

then stopped. 'I used to look up to you. You were my mentor. Now I'd like to give you some advice.'

'What's that?' he said wearily, rubbing his eyes.

'Man up and grow a set.'

When she got back to her desk she noticed there was another email from the blogger. She clicked it open and read: *Things have changed. I'll be in touch. Trudy*

'Megan, I have Richard on the phone for you,' said Katherine.

Muttering, she picked up the phone. 'Yes?'

'Come upstairs,' he said briskly.

She felt a flutter in her stomach. This time she had gone too far. 'Sure. Just give me a minute.'

'No. Right now.' He hung up.

Shit. 'Katherine, I'll be back in five minutes.' As she plodded up the stairs, her future raced in front of her again. So much for her great plans to settle here. She hadn't lasted five minutes. Would he blame the budget costs? Her heart was beating faster and her palms sweating. She rubbed her thumb and finger together and tried to breathe slowly.

'Richard.' She stood at his door.

He glanced up. 'Come in, shut the door.' He paused, waiting for her to close it. 'I need to show you something. I just got sent this email. For you.'

'What is it?' said Megan in surprise.

'I'll show you.' He clicked slowly at his inbox. 'Come on round here.'

Megan stood at his shoulder and saw the message on the screen. *Please pass this to Megan. Do not forward the email to her. Please print out the PDF.*

'Recognise it?'

'Yes. I have a feeling I know who it may be from,' said Megan. 'Where's the PDF?'

'Here, look.' Richard pointed at the screen.

Megan leaned in to look.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't expect life to be all sunshine.'

It was just after ten o'clock when I heard the taxi crunching over the gravel in the driveway, the low throb of its engine then the tinny slam of its door. He stumbled through the front porch, wobbly on his brogue-clad feet from an afternoon of corporate hospitality at Ibrox and probably curry and beer on the way home. My heart started to beat erratically and I felt a warm rash spread over my neck. I urgently needed to pee but couldn't move. He smiled as he clicked across the wooden hallway towards me, then his expression suddenly tightened and he caught my arm. Pulling me close, his fat fingers poked into my sides and his tongue licked my cheek. I shuddered and forced myself to try and breathe steadily through the stench of wine, whisky and pakora which leaked from his pores.

Come on, darling, he said, his breathing shallow and his grip hurting my arms.

I backed my way into the lounge and moved towards the TV to switch it off but he lunged at me, ignoring my cry of surprise. Grabbing my hair, he forced me to my knees, unzipped his fly and let his suit trousers gather around his ankles. I focused on the velour curtains to the right of his waist and vaguely thought about how glad I was that they were shut. What would the neighbours think? He thrust himself at my face, his hands grasping my head. I tried not to retch as the smell of excrement forced its way up my nostrils and I glanced down, clocking the skid marks on his pants. Counting slowly in my head, I felt a surge of anger rise from the pit of my stomach. He was panting and growling now and I could tell by the way his hands were gripping my head that he was nearly done. I sank my teeth into him. He screamed. I tried to rise to my feet but he grabbed at me and I fell, smacking my head off the coffee table, piled with glossy home decor and cookery magazines. I yelped as I tumbled to the floor and lay sprawled on the carpet. Clutching his balls, his face twisted in rage, he spat on me and booted me in the side. Blood was pooling behind my ear, it felt warm and sticky but I didn't worry about the carpet. I didn't give a flying fuck any more. I stared up at the framed photo of my freckle-faced child staring down at me from the bookshelf. I wondered if she had any idea of the kind of monster her father is and what he is responsible for. I know how it all works. There is no justice. Not for women like me who live in a nice house, with a comfortable lifestyle and a husband like him. I am a woman and he is a man. I am the one lying on the floor bleeding and bruised. He is the one who will wake up with a sore head in the morning, a tender dick, and will jump in his Audi and go to work as normal. Nothing will change. It's too late for me. Any dreams I have are gone. But something needs to change, Megan. I need to do something to help those poor girls.

‘Any idea what this means?’ said Richard, leaning back in his seat. ‘Apart from some bloke having very sore balls this morning?’

‘Kind of,’ said Megan. ‘The woman’s been emailing me links to her blog. Not sure why she’s emailed you this though.’ She leant in and called up a fresh Safari page. Typing in the Wordpress website she hit enter. The page appeared saying that the URL was unrecognised. ‘That’s strange. I was on the site just a while ago.’

‘Did you take copies of the links?’

‘Yes. I saved them to my hard drive and also printed off copies.’

Richard dragged his hands through his hair. ‘Let’s just keep it to ourselves for now. One thing is for certain, though, she wants you to read them.’

‘So why not just keep emailing me direct?’

‘Maybe she’s just worried about being traced. PDFs can be easier,’ said Richard. ‘That’s how the Panama Papers were leaked.’

Megan rolled her eyes. ‘This is hardly the biggest leak in history though. And she could still email me directly with the attachments.’

‘Well, whoever it is wants to remain anonymous. She’s maybe worried about your email account. Maybe feels safer going through a third party. And until she chooses to tell you who she is there’s not much you can do about it.’

Megan took the print-out of the PDF, thanked Richard, and went back down stairs feeling more confused than ever and worried about what was happening to the woman called Trudy.

The girl followed the blonde into the dark stairwell. She'd been told to keep her eyes down, follow the blonde and not to speak or look at anyone. The girl clung to the banister as she tottered down the stairs. The wood felt smooth under her rough, flaked palms. Her eyes were fixed on each stair and she tried hard not to stumble in the high, pointed shoes.

As they got to the bottom of the close the man ushered her and the blonde through the door. It banged hard behind them making the girl jump. She had to step round a puddle of vomit and dodge rubbish being blown along the street. There was a smell of urine at the door. As if someone had been standing there peeing into it for hours. It was dark outside and the street was quiet. The girl noticed a car with a flashing blue light passing by. The bossman linked his arms tightly through hers and the blonde's. He told them to keep smiling and walking. The flashing blue light sped past and the girl looked at the car, her eyes fixed on the bright colour. The bossman jerked at her, muttering to keep her eyes down, and she cried out in pain. The blonde gave her a hard stare and the girl knew to say no more. The car was waiting for them a few metres away. Parked on a double yellow line, the dull hum of its engine throbbing.

Get in, he said, opening the back door and pushing her in the back. The blonde got in behind her and the door slammed shut. It was warm inside the car at least. Warm and dry. The girl was always cold. What you parking there for, you daft cunt, he said. Polis just passed by. The driver laughed harshly. Like they give a fuck about that. They'll be on their way home for their tea. They don't have time to piss about wasting their time with yellow liners. The bossman clicked his teeth. Next time don't fuck around and take a risk, he said. Park further down.

The girl tried to concentrate on what they were saying. Sometimes she could understand what they said. Often she couldn't. They could have been speaking a different language altogether. The bossman turned up the radio and lit a cigarette. It smelled of flowers. He inhaled deeply and turned and passed it to the blonde. The girl watched her as she closed her eyes and sucked on it. Her eyes flicked open and she offered it to the girl. She hesitated for a moment then shook her head. The blonde shrugged then passed it back to the bossman.

The girl looked out of the window. Perhaps she should take the blonde's advice and just take what they offered her. Maybe it would help to dull the pain. At least it smelled nice. Maybe she would just take it.

Chapter 26

It was pissing with rain, blowing a gale and already growing dark. Megan sighed as she stood up and looked at her watch and realised it was only just after four o'clock. So much for spring. This weekend's investigation feature was on Italian crime bosses in Aberdeen. An old freelance friend had offered it to her exclusively and she was so incensed by Richard's current attitude that she had authorised a very healthy payment to him. She stretched and took a swig of water from the bottle which was a permanent fixture on her desk. Then the phone rang. It was Jeremy, the estate agent, crisply reminding her that she needed to collect the keys for her new flat. She clasped a hand over her mouth. With everything that had been happening she'd completely forgotten.

The next twenty-four hours passed in a blur as Megan busied herself with finalising the magazine and then moving into her new home. She spent the morning cleaning and arranging her few possessions. The flat felt cold and impersonal, but that would change when Matthew arrived. She was bleaching the bathroom when the buzzer rang. She jumped. Maybe it was Joanna. She had said she would try and pop round. And so, thinking it was her sister, she didn't even pause before opening the door.

'Oh,' she said in surprise, 'I wasn't expecting you.'

'Well,' said Harry, 'you've been ignoring all my calls. I thought I'd come to you.'

'Come in.' Megan swung the door wide to let him through.

He stood in the lounge looking around. 'Nice place.'

Megan blushed, realising that she was still wearing her pyjamas and her hair was tied up with a yellow handle she'd ripped from a bin bag. 'Come in, why don't you. Coffee?'

He laughed. 'I just wanted to check you were in. I'll nip down to the wee café around the corner and get us some takeaways. It doesn't look like you've got any milk anyway.'

'You're right.' She opened the door to reveal an empty fridge. Megan scratched her head. 'I was forgetting that I had to physically go and do the shopping. I'm too used to hotels.'

After Harry left, Megan quickly washed her face and pulled a brush through her hair. She looked down at her dusty pyjamas and shrugged. There was no point in changing them now.

When he returned with the coffee she showed him into the lounge. 'So what's been happening?'

'This and that. You know,' said Harry. He locked his gaze with hers. 'What about you though? You look like shit, Megan. Are you going to tell me what's going on?'

Megan took a sip of coffee, shifting away from him slightly. 'Cheers. You know how to charm a girl.' She wasn't planning to tell him what had happened in Stockholm. 'I've just been busy with work. Have you got any more leads on the lap-dancing bar?'

'Yes,' said Harry briskly. 'We're keeping our eyes on that situation and trying to piece the jigsaw together.'

'And what about the women there?'

'We can't do anything unless we have the evidence. It's a vicious circle.'

'What if I get you the evidence? I mean ... I may as well go into the club and check it out myself, seeing as you won't tell me anything.' She dug her nails into her palms.

'Megan, you steaming straight in there and blowing everything up would be a *disaster*.' His voice had a warning tone to it.

She sighed loudly. 'You're right. I should just resign. Get out of here.'

He looked at her in surprise. 'Megan, what in God's name is the matter with you?'

She sniffed. 'Sorry. Ignore me. I'm just tired.'

Handing her a tissue, he moved closer to her on the sofa. Then she started telling him what had happened. It was as though she was relating someone else's story, she realised, as she spoke. 'How could I have been so stupid?' Her voice was quiet. 'What is the matter with me, Harry? An old trick like that, and it didn't even dawn on me that things like that can happen at my age.'

Harry crouched down on his knees, so his eyes were level with hers. 'Megan, listen to me. First of all, you have to get the notion out of your head that you're somehow to blame for any of this. You didn't do anything wrong. Nothing.' He clasped her hands. 'Do you hear me?'

She nodded. 'But I can't remember what happened, Harry. I can't remember *anything*. I don't know if we were together. I don't even know for sure if we had sex.'

Harry stood up, his knees clicking as his legs straightened. He walked across the room and stared out of the window. For a moment he said nothing, and Megan wished he would just leave. Turning round, he frowned. 'Look, Megan, I'm here as your friend just now, okay? I'm going to push my personal feelings to the side and be objective about this.'

She nodded slowly.

'Talk me through everything that happened.'

Once again, she took herself back to the hotel bar, trying as hard as she could to remember herself sitting on that soft stool, thinking about her conversation with Natasha. 'God, I completely forgot,' she said, jumping to her feet. 'Natasha gave me some papers at dinner. Said she'd made some notes for me on them. And with everything that was going on I forgot all about them.' She ran to the bedroom to find her handbag and emptied it onto the bed.

'That thing's like a bloody Tardis.' Harry stood behind her, watching as a magazine, hairbrush, chocolate bar, tissues, a few raisins and pens fell onto the white sheets.

Megan rustled through the notepad and the piles of papers. 'They're here. Thank God for that.'

'Is there something in it for your eyes only or something?'

'Yes. Just a few exclusive lines on the trafficking plans.' She paused, flicking through them. 'But they're all here.'

'Okay: so, you were at the bar?'

'Yes. I was at the bar.' She sat down on the bed. 'I went to the toilet. I even remember thinking I didn't look too bad given how knackered I was. Then I went back to the bar, sat and had another whisky and told him about the magazine.'

'And then?'

She clasped her hands together in frustration. 'I just don't know.'

'Right,' he said. 'You don't remember how you got up to your room?'

She frowned. 'No. I've tried so hard but it's all . . .'

'What is it?'

'It was, I thought I could remember something there. Being in the room. And watching what was happening. I can see someone else there in the room. But it's that feeling of being stuck and being unable to do anything . . . I remember watching a film when I was a little girl. It was of a woman in a swimming pool. When she dived to the bottom a man pressed a button and a glass lid slid over the top. The woman could see what had happened but she was stuck. She couldn't do anything. She drowned. I felt like I was drowning . . .'

'Okay,' said Harry. 'One step at a time. Were you alone when you woke up?'

'Yes. Alone. Naked and alone. And there was a condom wrapper in the bin. You must think I'm such a stupid cow,' she whispered. 'I'm so embarrassed.'

'Can you remember anyone else being in there with you at all at any point? Even to undress you?'

She squeezed her eyes tightly together. 'No and that's what's so bloody frustrating about it all. I have that feeling of being there but not being there. I can see myself on the bed but I'm not really there . . .'

'Like an out-of-body experience?'

'Yes,' she gasped. 'Exactly like that.'

'And you were confused and disorientated when you came around?'

Megan nodded.

'And you can't remember anything funny going on that night? No scratches to your arms? Or jags anywhere?'

'No, I don't think so. Why?'

'Because ketamine is the latest drug of choice for this kind of thing.'

'What?'

'Horse tranquilliser,' he said quietly.

Megan shook her head in disbelief.

'I think, though, in your case your drink had been spiked, Megan.' He paused. 'Rohypnol or ketamine.'

Megan's shoulders slumped and she began to sob quietly. Huge, fat, salty tears spilled onto her clasped hands.

Harry looked around and noticed a kitchen roll lying on the coffee table. He reached over and ripped a piece off then handed it to her. 'The guy at the bar. Let's go back to him. Had you met him before? Or was that the first time you'd seen him?'

Megan wiped her nose. 'God, of course. See, my mind just feels mangled. That's the most important part, Harry. Though I don't think you'll believe me when I tell you.'

'Why? Who is it?'

'The guy we met at the airport that night. You know, the night you picked me up after I'd been in London.'

Harry frowned, puzzled. 'What?'

'That lawyer you introduced me to.'

'Tony McGinty?'

'Yes. Him.'

Harry gave a low whistle and sat back.

The girl woke up drenched in sweat. She gagged and choked on the stale taste in her mouth. She tried to sit up but her arms were spread above her head. She couldn't feel her feet. It took a few moments to realise she was tied to a bed. Her heart started to race in panic and she tried to breathe slowly and count inside her head. It wasn't the first time this had happened. Snippets of the previous night started to flicker through her mind and she shuddered. She hated that man. Maybe he was gone. Then she heard the sound of the toilet flush and knew he was coming back for more. He flicked on the light as he walked back into the bedroom. His paunch hid his private parts. His chest was hairy and his head bald. The girl's mouth was dry and she tried to lick her cracked lips. Taking it as an invitation for more, he came to the foot of the bed and untied her. Then his phone rang. He tutted. I'm a bit tied up at the moment, he said. Can this wait for later? Yes, I'll be at the meeting. Two? Righto.

He untied the girl, then climbed on top, forcing himself onto her. Her whole body shuddered and she bit down on her top lip, tasting blood. A trickle of saliva pooled at the edge of the man's mouth, his eyes rolling back into his head. The girl muffled her screams as the man continued to grind his way into her body. He grunted and then grinned, biting down on her shoulder, as if she was a ripe pear. Afterwards, he collapsed on his back and groaned. The girl managed to roll onto her side, curling herself in a tight ball. She stared at the wall ahead of her, wrinkling her nose at the smell. She stared at the picture on the wall, an ocean on a stormy day. The waves were inky blue and foaming, the sky was dark. There was nothing inviting about the scene, it looked eerie hanging there on the orange wall, but the girl wished she could fall into it and sink beneath the waves. She tried to imagine what it would feel like to have the icy water rush into her lungs, and to gasp for breath. Maybe there would be sharks in the sea too. Their sharp teeth ripping at her flesh, devouring her in a few bites. Death by drowning, being eaten by sharks, surely that had to be better than this. At least her life would be over for good.

Panic gripped the girl again as she felt the man move behind her, his breathing heavy and laboured. The mattress sagged and she bristled as she felt the hairs on his chest brush against her back. She pressed her forehead into the pillow, then choked as she felt the man's hands gather around her neck. Spluttering for breath and reeling from pain, she thought that she was about to die. Images of her mother

and her brothers flashed before her eyes, of her home. She'd never see them again. The man's grip was getting tighter and the girl started to grow limp. Then abruptly he let go and she fell forward, smacking her face on the headboard. By that time she had blacked out.

Chapter 27

There were another two PDFs waiting for Megan when she walked into the office on Monday morning. Richard hand-delivered the print-outs, in an envelope, to her desk.

‘See what you make of these?’ he said. ‘I’m going to get a coffee. A proper one instead of the shite you get upstairs. Can I bring you one back?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Megan. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen you doing the coffee run before.’

‘Well, you may never again.’

Megan looked at him in surprise, and was about to probe further, when Katherine arrived.

‘Morning,’ she said brightly. ‘Everyone have a good weekend?’

‘Mmmm,’ said Richard. ‘My golf was terrible. Think I may need to take up something else.’

‘Like gardening?’ suggested Megan.

‘I was thinking more of squash.’

‘Oh no, not at your age.’

‘Anyway,’ said Richard, ignoring her comments, ‘I’m off to get some coffee. Katherine, can I get you something? A latte maybe?’

She blushed. ‘That would be lovely, thank you, if you don’t mind.’

‘Course not,’ he said. ‘Back soon.’ He strode out of the office leaving a trail of aftershave behind him.

Megan watched Katherine watching him and smiled. She knew Richard used to have a way with the ladies when he was younger. Obviously, for some, he still retained some charm. She reached into her desk for a ruler, slit open the envelope, and pulled out the sheets of paper.

Trudy’s Blog

‘Don’t lose heart when life seems hard.’

I watched from behind the bedroom curtains as he reversed his gleaming car out the driveway. Then I turned to check my make-up for the last time. My cheeks were hollow. I’m starting to

look gaunt. A couple of people at work have asked if everything is okay. But I just blame it on my age, on my busy schedule. It's easy to make excuses. I put an extra dab of blusher on my cheeks. No wonder he thinks I'm ugly. This morning he didn't speak to me at all. He spent longer in the bathroom than normal. I heard him swear and knew he'd cut himself shaving. I hovered in the downstairs loo. It's become my refuge and now he's threatened to take off the lock. He didn't say goodbye or slam the door behind him. He slipped out silently. Something must have happened last night. Things are starting to get to him. I watched him open the boot. I saw the bin bag. I know what's in it. I know and I want to be sick. I squeezed my eyes tighter.

I can't leave him though. He's my soulmate. We've known each other since we were students. I noticed his eyes straight away. Huge and brown and focused all on me. I think I probably knew straight away he was the man for me. I'll never leave him. He always tells me that we're made for each other. That if I ever leave him he'll find me. I don't doubt him. When our daughter was small he used to taunt me. Said nobody would believe me if I tried to leave. Said social work wouldn't believe me. They'd take her away from me. They'd see I was crazy and section me and I'd be all alone. Anyway, will you listen to me? It's not *always* awful. My mother used to say I was such a pessimist. She's right. I shouldn't dwell on the negative. The good times are great and that's when I start to question myself. Is it my fault? Am I imagining things? Everyone loves him. He's a 'great guy'. One of the best. I need to focus on the good stuff.

It could always be worse. And I have my job. That keeps me going. I think it suits him, though, me working where I do. He's always grilling me for information. Especially if it's something he's interested in. Sometimes I worry he's taking too much of an interest in my work. The questions are casually dropped into conversation during dinner. Or when I'm in the bath. We no longer have a lock on the door. Then there are the times he logs into my work account and reads my emails. He knows everything about me. Everything. I don't know all his secrets. Though I'm starting to find out. I know I shouldn't have but I've been listening in on his conversations. I overheard him last night on his phone: 'they', 'she', 'the girls', 'bidder'. When he came out his study, his face was flushed and his eyes bright. He told me was going out. He had an important business deal.

I won't call you, he said, almost as an afterthought. There won't be time. Then he caught me looking at his thumbs as they scrolled through the messages on his phone.

But I might try and make time, he said.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't be everlastingly trying to change your husband's habits, unless they are very bad ones.'

I sat in my car watching and waiting. I've tried my best to avoid him since the other night. It's surprising how easy it's been even though we live in the same house. He's been working long hours, leaving early and coming in late, if at all.

He has no idea I know. Thinks I'm daft. But I know all about him and his secrets. I can be clever like that. I just need to gather some more evidence together before I decide what to do next. I daren't risk being seen around here in my own car, someone would definitely clock me, especially as it has a personalised number plate. I pay cash for a hire car, a dark blue Honda, which I leave parked in one of the leafy streets in Hyndland. I make sure I change the street I park in each time as the residents there can get quite precious about parking spaces. Since I started watching him I've made notes in my diary of times and people going in and out of the flat. I think it's probably the top one in the block. The windows were boarded up from the inside.

I shivered and turned the heater up in the car. But my eyes started to feel heavy in the warm car, so I switched off the heater. I can't risk snoozing through this. I stretched out and looked in the rear-view mirror and then I saw him. He wasn't exactly dressed inconspicuously. He was wearing his pin-stripe suit and swinging his briefcase - like a wee boy off to his first day at school. He walked along the pavement, checking out his reflection in the window of a hardware shop, and then paused to throw a few coins at the beggar in the doorway. Trying to make himself feel better. That's what he does. Throws cash at the problem. He stopped outside the door and buzzed, glancing at his watch. To anyone else he looked like a businessman running late for an appointment. But I knew better. The door swung open and he was swallowed up by the darkness. I glanced down at my notepad and lightly rolled the pencil over the pattern these visits were creating. I knew I wouldn't have to wait long for him to come out.

Megan read through the blogs again, and then a third time, before placing them carefully back into the envelope and into her handbag.

'Two coffees for two lovely ladies,' said Richard placing the cardboard cups onto Katherine's desk.

Megan blew through her mouth. 'What do you think?' she asked, pointing at the envelope.

'I'm not sure. I think she might be building towards something. Just have to be patient and keep with it. I'll let you know if I get anything else.'

'Thanks.'

'Better dash,' said Richard. 'Catch you later. Morning, Ronnie. Or should that be good afternoon? These two have been in for hours.'

Ronnie muttered 'hello' to Richard and then scowled when he was sure Richard couldn't see his face.

'You missed the coffee run,' Megan said, picking up her cup and taking a sip of the strong black coffee. 'How are you? Good weekend?'

'So- so,' he said.

Megan stood up and walked over to stand between their desks. 'Having any luck with that email or website address?'

'No,' said Ronnie frowning. 'The website has been shut down and the email is foolproof. I just can't get to the root of it. I'll keep trying.'

Megan glanced back over at Katherine who was now on the phone. She had planned to speak to her this morning. She needed to try and clear the air. There had been a definite switch in Katherine's mood since Megan had returned from Sweden and she was convinced that Katherine knew. When Katherine finished her phone call, Megan noticed the woman was crying. 'Everything okay?' She spoke quietly, not wanting to draw attention to Katherine's red eyes.

'Yes, yes, I'm fine. Just my allergies. I had some red wine last night and it's making everything water,' she said, dabbing her eyes.

Megan studied Katherine's expression but she showed no signs of anything else other than a streaming nose and watering eyes.

'Are you looking forward to seeing Matthew at the weekend? Not long to go. You must be excited.' Katherine's face showed nothing but friendly concern. She wore a red dress and jacket with chunky silver bangles and her hair was, as always, immaculate.

She was beautiful, thought Megan. How could her husband play away? 'Er, yes. Yes, I am,' she said trying to keep her voice neutral. 'It's just tricky.'

'I'm sure it will be fine when you see him,' said Katherine, smoothing over the awkward silence. 'You must be missing him.'

Now it was Megan's turn to fight back the tears. She smiled apologetically at Katherine and turned away. A few moments later she felt a hand on her shoulder. Pulling a piece of paper from her pocket, Katherine placed it on her desk. 'Just in case you need it.'

Megan unfolded it to see the name and number of a top Glasgow lawyer.

'She's one of Tony's colleagues,' said Katherine when she saw Megan looking over at her. 'She's the best family lawyer in the country.'

'Thanks,' said Megan quietly. But she knew there was no point in pursuing things just now. Not while Sebastian and Matthew were living in England and she was here. She shoved it in a drawer on top of a pile of papers and began typing an email.

Hi Sam,

Fancy a freelance job?

Need a background check done.

Call me.

Megan

She pressed send. She'd not had a chance to call him as she'd promised.

Katherine looked up and saw Megan looking at her. 'Is everything okay?'

'Yes, sorry - I'm just a bit dozy this morning. The coffee hasn't kicked in yet. Richard *has* been known to buy decaf. How do you fancy going out for a coffee to that wee deli across the road, Katherine?' Her phone began buzzing. 'Oh, hold on a sec. Hello?'

'Megan, Sam here.'

'That was quick.'

'Aye, well, we need to chat. When you free to meet?'

'That sounds ominous,' she said. But when Sam didn't make a sarcastic comment back, she felt curious. 'Okay. Tinderbox?'

'Aye, that's fine. I'll be there about three.'

'See you then,' said Megan and put down the phone. 'Sorry about that, Katherine. Looks nice out,' she added, gesturing to the window.

'Yes,' said Katherine.

'Come on, let's go.'

The women didn't speak as they walked down Ashton Lane, a small cobbled street tucked off the main drag. A homeless man, sitting cross-legged in a doorway, wolf-whistled at them.

'Good morning to you too,' said Megan, nodding at him.

He rewarded her with a smile, showing his three front teeth.

Megan led Katherine into the small café, ducking to avoid the flowers cascading from the hanging baskets by the door. They sat down by the window and Megan watched as Katherine folded back a corner of her napkin and stroked it with her long, elegantly manicured fingers.

'Is everything okay?' asked Megan, trying to keep her voice steady.

Katherine stared at Megan. 'No, not really.'

'You can tell me if there's anything wrong.' Megan began digging her nails into the fleshy part of her palm.

'Well,' she said.

Here we go. 'I didn't realise . . .'

'No, no, it's okay,' Katherine interrupted. 'You're not to know . . . I mean I've only just found out myself.'

'Really?'

'Yes.' Her dark eyes were moist with tears. She was smiling apologetically.

'I don't know what to say,' said Megan. 'I'm just so sorry.'

Katherine reached over to her bag, pulled out a tissue and dabbed at her eyes.

'Here's your coffee, ladies,' said the waiter.

Megan quickly gulped the scalding liquid down, telling herself she deserved to burn her mouth.

'The doctors . . .'

'Doctors?'

'Yes,' said Katherine. 'They want to get treatment started as soon as possible.'

Megan took a sip of coffee and forced herself to think. 'Do they know what it is?'

'Yes. It's a type of blood cancer.'

'Right,' said Megan, reaching over to pat Katherine's hand. 'I am so sorry. I had no idea.'

'I know,' said Katherine. 'He looks so normal, doesn't he? He looks so fit and healthy.'

'How did he know something was wrong?'

'He didn't. He was just having one of these private health tests in a clinic in the town. Think he was wanting a bit of an MOT to check all was okay.' Katherine smiled. 'A couple of his colleagues have had it done. Said it would give him peace of mind. You know what men are like.'

'That must have been a shock, then?'

'Yes. I think he's still in denial. He's been working long hours and won't slow down.'

Megan nodded her head slowly.

'Megan, can I ask how he was in Stockholm? He mentioned he had a drink with you at the bar.'

'Yes,' she said. 'It was just a quick drink and he seemed, er, he seemed okay. I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary.'

'I mean, he's been tired at night,' said Katherine, now sitting back in her seat. 'Has dinner and flakes out in front of the TV by about nine. I think it's all catching up with him.'

'Yes,' said Megan softly. 'I'm sure it will be.' She tried to remember how many drinks they had at the bar. It had just been one, hadn't it? And if Tony was ill he was hardly going to sexually assault her, was he? Megan's mind felt jumbled with thoughts. If only she could make sense of it all.

Katherine interrupted her train of thought. 'He starts treatment soon.'

'Well, that's good. That's positive, Katherine. And you need to be positive. Does your daughter know?'

'Yes, she knows. She's being very brave. She's always been positive and optimistic about things . . . I guess she's at that age.'

Megan briefly thought back to being twenty, when life seemed full of colour and possibilities. Everything and anything seemed possible. How things had changed.

'What about you, Megan? Sorry I've been doing all the talking. How are you?'

Megan frowned. 'I'm okay, thanks.'

'How's Matthew?'

'He's great . . . I just really miss him you know.'

'It's a fun age that he's at.'

'I know. Hopefully it will all work itself out,' she said doubtfully. 'Being a single mum, with a child hundreds of miles away, wasn't really something I had planned on. But hopefully he'll be here soon.'

Katherine squeezed her hand. 'It will all be better when he's here, dear.'

Megan forced a smile. 'You're right. In the meantime, you focus on your family, Katherine. Don't worry if you have to go to any hospital appointments with Tony. Just take any time off you need.'

'Thanks, I will.' Katherine glanced at her watch. 'I'll just nip to the Ladies' and then I guess we should get back to the office.'

'You're right.' Megan swallowed the last of her latte. She sat back and sighed. To think she had been about to accuse Tony of something he hadn't done. Tony was ill, not an adulterer or a rapist. Katherine was obviously devoted to the man. To her family. And once again, Megan felt profoundly alone - and confused about what had really happened in Stockholm.

The girl hadn't seen the blonde woman since the night of the party. She knew the blonde must have upset the bossman. He'd slammed his fist into her nose then spat on her as soon as they arrived back at the flat. Then he pushed her into her room, followed her in and slammed the door shut. The girl knew what he was doing. She could hear the blonde's screams of agony. The girl had been kept locked in her room since. She didn't dare ask questions.

She dozed on and off, never quite sure if she was dreaming or hearing things outside. She heard doors being hammered. Maybe it was the police. Were they breaking down the door and rounding the girls up? In her head she could see them all. None of them spoke. They stood huddled in a corner staring at the ground. The bossman screamed, his eyes wide and bulging, and the veins throbbing in his neck. The girls were ushered down the stairs. There was a puddle of vomit in the doorway. A policewoman coaxed them gently over it and towards the flashing blue lights. The girl shivered in the night air, pulling her thin cardigan around her shoulders. She winced as she stood on a piece of broken glass. She wasn't wearing any shoes. She never wore any shoes. Not unless she was given them to wear for customers. The girl watched bossman being led across the road as a small crowd gathered to watch. Just before he was put into the police car he turned round and stared at her. The girl wanted to crumple with fear. Staring at her, his eyes searing through her, he made a gesture. Using his hand, he mimicked a slitting motion across his neck. He shouted at her. Osato. Dmiklo. Osato. Dmiklo. His voice cut through the night air and above the din and chatter from the crowd. Osato. Dmiklo. Osato. Dmiklo. The bossman made the slitting gesture once more then the policemen bundled him into the back of the car. It drove off, taking him away but he kept watching her. His eyes didn't leave her. The girl was petrified. There was nobody to trust. Nobody to help. Osato and Dmiklo. They would never be safe. Not if she disobeyed. She realised the nightmare was far from over. She tried to turn back and go inside. She walked across the pool of sick, the sticky liquid sticking to her cut and bloodied feet. She tried to walk up the stairs but her legs were heavy. She couldn't breathe. Then she woke up. She'd been dreaming. She was still in her cell.

Chapter 28

'I need to nip out,' said Megan, pulling on her coat. 'Will you keep my diary free, please?'

'No problem,' said Katherine, who was typing.

When Megan reached Tinderbox on the corner of Byres Road she ordered a green tea and sat down facing the door so she could see Sam come in. There was a constant clatter of cups in the background and the whirring of the coffee grinder. Then, when the door opened, the noise of a bus trundling past.

'Alright, Sam,' she said as he approached the table.

'Aye,' he said, looking more flustered than usual. His face was bright red, he looked like he'd lost weight since she last saw him, and there was a line of sweat where his moustache used to be.

'Going for a different look?' said Megan, raising an eyebrow.

'Aye something like that.' He wiped away the sweat with the back of his hand. 'Let's not beat round the bush, Megan.' He glanced around as he sat down. 'What is it you're wanting?'

'Background information on Warren McGregor.'

He sat back in his seat and eyed her warily.

'The nightclub owner.'

'Aye, I know who he is.'

'You okay, Sam? Come to think of it, you're actually not looking that great.'

'Thanks, Megan. Trust you to cheer me up.'

Megan studied his face which had suddenly gone pale. 'Can I get you something?' she said, pointing over at the counter.

'No. It's okay. Just my back giving me gyp.'

'What's wrong?'

'Cancer.'

Megan looked across at him and shook her head. 'Crikey, Sam. Not you as well.'

'What do you mean?'

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just you’re not the first to tell me bad news today. I’m so sorry to hear that.’

‘Aye well. Probably serves me right and all that. For all the shitey things I’ve done in my life.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Megan wished she could think of something else to say. ‘What’s the . . .’

‘Type? Prognosis?’

She nodded.

‘It’s a tumour. Not sure how long. Things in the hospital are changing all the time. New treatments. Just got to focus on one day at a time.’ He shrugged. ‘I know we’ve had our differences but I’ll help if I can. It’s the least I can do.’

‘Are you feeling up to it though, Sam?’

‘It’s fine. I’m between treatments just now anyway so actually I feel okay. Despite looking like shit. I need to keep working, The bills won’t pay themselves. I’ll make a few calls and see what I can find out. He’s a fuckin’ shady bastard.’

‘I know that.’

Sam frowned. ‘What are you wanting with him, Megan?’

‘Proof that he’s trafficking girls into the country.’

He sat back and sighed. ‘Jesus, not a tall order then.’

‘Can you?’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ he said.

‘And what did you want to tell me about?’

‘Eh?’

‘You called me to tell me you had a tip-off.’

Sam looked over his shoulder uneasily. ‘Aye. As I said, there are a lot of folk not happy with all this sniffing about you’re doing on this trafficking article.’

Megan’s eyes widened. ‘But how do they know?’

‘You know how these things work.’ He shrugged. ‘Word spreads. Look — my sources have told me that there’s some new police project about to be launched.’

‘To do what?’ Megan leaned in frowning. *Why hasn’t Harry told me any of this?*

‘To keep an eye on the west coast in case folk are being brought in that way.’

'And do you think they are?'

'Aye, probably. I mean there's shitloads of coke being brought in on tug boats. Nothing to say why women and kids can't be brought in that way too. Supply and demand.'

Megan didn't speak for a minute as she processed the implications of what he was saying. 'When's it being launched?'

'Very soon. Any day now. Surprised there's not been a release out about it yet.' He stood up and winced. Megan moved to stand up too. 'It's okay. You finish your tea. And Megan,' he added, 'you watch yourself.' He paused for a moment. 'There are some vicious bastards out there. And not just in the police.'

Megan raised an eyebrow. 'That's a bit cryptic even for you, Sam.'

He patted her on the shoulder. 'I mean it, just watch yourself and those around you.'

'Thanks, Sam. I will. And I'm sorry.'

'Aye well, we're all going to die sometime aren't we?' He shrugged. 'I'll be in touch.' He waved at her over his shoulder as he sauntered out the door.

Megan sat there for a moment thinking about what he'd said. Her phone vibrated. It was a text from Harry: *Fancy a drink later? Have an update for you.*

Megan ran her fingers through her hair and sighed. She was going to drown if she drank anything else today. And her head was pounding. But it could be important. It could give her the cover story and, well, she actually did want to see him. *OK. A quick drink after work. 7 at Cottiers?*

Megan watched the three young mums who had just come into the café and sat down at the table next to her with their toddlers strapped into their push-chairs. She smiled as one of the little boys reached over to hold the hand of the girl in the buggy next to him. The women were all slim with glossy hair and, she noticed, wearing sparkling engagement rings and wedding bands. They chatted easily amongst themselves and Megan felt a pang of envy, as she knew she could never be so carefree on a morning out with Matthew. She thought about the last time she'd been in a café with her son and a group of other mums and toddlers. But she couldn't think of any, because she'd never made any friends at antenatal classes. She hadn't even gone to them, because she had been so busy working. When Matthew was born she suffered such bad postnatal depression she could barely drag herself from bed.

Sebastian had been the one to take him to the parent and baby group at the community centre or the music lessons at the church. She sat thinking about the one time she had taken him to the baby group, and even remembering it made her start to feel quite sick. Getting Matthew out of the house before eleven had been a major achievement in itself. When she'd finally plucked up the courage to go into the centre, all the other mums, who knew each other well, had blanked her. Then Matthew had started screaming and so Megan had made a hasty exit and had never returned. A large splash of water landed on her cheek and she looked over to see the cute little boy not looking quite so adorable. His mother, whose face was flushed, mouthed 'sorry' and then quickly lowered her eyes as the boy started to wail. Megan stood up. It was time to leave.

After work, she headed straight to the bar to meet Harry. She called to speak to Matthew as she walked.

'Is that you just leaving the office?' said Sebastian, his tone accusing.

'No,' she lied. 'Can I speak to Matthew now, please?'

'Quickly. I'm just about to bath him.'

Megan wanted to reach down the phone and grab him by the collar. She forced herself to smile, and then spontaneously beamed when she heard her son's deep breaths in her ear.

'Hello, darling. How are you today?'

'Good. Good. Good. Mamamama.'

'Are you going to have your bath?'

'Huh.'

'Have you been playing with Thomas?'

'Huh.'

'What did you have for tea?'

'Huh.'

'What did you have for tea, darling?'

'Fingers.'

'Fish fingers?'

'Huh.'

She stared at the pavement as she walked along having a one-way conversation with her son. This was just useless.

'Think that's enough. His bath's ready,' said Sebastian, coming back on the line.

'I'd like to say goodnight,' said Megan tersely.

'Say night to mummy,' he said. She could picture him handing the phone over to Matthew, who was probably standing in his nappy by the bath. Wouldn't it be funny if he threw the phone in the bath, she thought, then chided herself. That would definitely be the end of their communication.

'Goodnight, sweetheart,' she said. 'Remember how much I love you.'

'Ba,' he said. 'Ba.'

She ended the call. She didn't want to talk to Sebastian again. Not until she had a clear plan in her head of how to approach his custody demands. She sighed and pushed it to the back of her head for the moment.

As she walked into the bar she spotted Harry at a table. 'Hi.'

'Sparkling water. That okay?' He gestured towards the glass.

'Thanks, but I need something stronger.'

'One of those days?'

'Aye. You could say that.' She went to the bar, ordered a gin-and-tonic, and took a swift gulp.

'Want to talk about it?' he said, as she took a seat next to him.

'Not really. Apart from telling you that Tony McGinty's probably not a baddie.'

'How do you know?'

'I spoke to his wife today. He's ill.'

'That's a good thing? Not that he's ill.' Harry looked embarrassed. 'I mean that it wasn't him who you spent the night with.'

'I guess so. Though it doesn't help me. If it wasn't him, who was it? Look, I didn't come to go over that again. You said you had an update?'

'Yes. Off the record just for now though, okay?'

'Of course. So tell me.'

'A woman walked into a police station in the South Side a couple days ago. A Thai woman. A punter apparently dropped her off there.'

'Why would he do that?' said Megan, her eyes widening in surprise.

'More common than you think. Probably wants to be her knight in shining armour. My guess is he took pity on her and offered her the chance to escape.'

'And how is she?'

Harry scratched his head. 'Hard to tell. She's a bit disorientated. She thought she was in New York.'

'Why?'

'That's what she'd been told. And why wouldn't she believe it? Especially if she's never been out of her village before. She would've believed anything she'd been told.'

'Is she saying much?'

'Not right now. That'll take time. I don't know how long. But at least it's a start.'

Megan tried to slip in the next question casually. 'So where is she?'

'In a safe house. There's an agency working with her to make sure she's okay. It'll take them time to reassure her that she's safe.'

Megan leaned in towards Harry.

He shook his head. 'No.'

'No what?'

'I know what you're going to ask. Would she talk to you?'

Megan looked slightly shame-faced.

'No. Not just now,' said Harry. 'It's not quite as straightforward as that. We can barely get these women to talk to the police. They're terrified.'

'But she must know she's safe now.' Megan clenched her fists in frustration.

Harry shook his head. 'No, Megan. That's the whole point. Especially with the Nigerian girls. They're scared to death that evil spirits will come and get them.'

'What do you have to do to reassure them they're safe?'

Harry gave a dark laugh. 'It's not a quick-fix solution, Megan. It's a nightmare. These girls have been to hell and back. Several times. Everyone has fucked them over. They trust nobody.'

'Okay, so how do you get them to trust you? With the Nigerian ones how do you get round the juju thing then?'

'It takes time to build any kind of trust with them,' he said.

'They don't have time though, do they? Not with that forty-five day recovery-and-reflection period.' Megan took a sip of her drink.

'I know previously, if the woman's been Nigerian, the agency workers will tell her that they have colleagues in her village who can go to the shrine and remove the things that are hers. They tell her it's not them that have broken the oath. It's the traffickers.' Harry drained his pint. 'They've been promised a job in a shop or as a nanny. The traffickers haven't been honest with them. We need to reassure them that it was the traffickers who broke the oath.' He rubbed his thumb over his chin. 'The main thing is, this Thai woman has come forward and asked for help. That's a start. She may be able to tell us where she was being held and who else was there with her. And it will maybe help us start to solve the pieces of the puzzle before . . .'

'Before what?'

'Nothing. Doesn't matter.'

Megan glared at him. 'What are you not telling me, Harry? Apart from the new project being launched to keep an eye on what's coming in on the west coast?'

'How do you know about that?'

'Doesn't matter. Just shows you're not telling me everything.'

'I have to remember who I'm talking to. I can't tell you everything.' He paused. 'And that's not yet definite, by the way. As far as I know it's still in the early stages. But it's the same with you, Megan. *You* don't tell *me* everything.'

Megan bit her bottom lip and wondered, for a moment, if she should tell him about the blogs from Trudy. 'Do you want another drink?' she said, pointing at his empty glass.

'Pint of Best, please. But don't think you're going to get me drunk so you can get information from me.'

'Watch me,' she said, and winked.

Megan stood at the bar, rummaging in her bag. She had the blogs with her in the envelope. She just didn't know if she should trust Harry with this or not. She glanced over at him. He was tapping something into his phone.

'Is there any news on the Tinkle Club?' she asked when she returned with their drinks.

'There's not a lot we can do just now, Megan, other than keep a close eye on them. The guys behind these places are smart. We're watching them. But unless the women in there talk to us then it's our word against theirs. They're too frightened. Their passports have been taken, they don't trust anyone, so why would they risk talking to us?'

Megan tapped her foot slowly against his chair. One, two, pause. One, two, pause.

'Are you trying to annoy me?'

'No,' she said quietly. 'I just want to know what happens next?'

Harry frowned. 'That's a very good question.'

The girl heard screaming and stood trembling by the door, her hands heavy and clammy and hanging uselessly by her sides. She knew she should try and help. She wanted to. But she just couldn't bring herself to reach out and touch the handle of the door. It was always locked anyway. But she couldn't just stand there listening and waiting. Then there was another piercing wail which reminded her of the sounds of the goats being slaughtered in her village. She wanted to vomit but she needed to do something to help. The girl grasped the handle and turned it. Gasping, she felt it open easily. She fell into the hallway, squinting her eyes to adjust them to the light. Then the screaming turned to pleadings of no, please, no, please, no. Then silence. The girl saw another door off the hallway start to open. As quickly as she could she backed into her room and quietly pushed the door, leaving a tiny gap. She pressed herself up against it, holding her breath as she watched the bossman walk out of the room, the blonde slung over his shoulder like a dead dog. The girl's legs trembled as he walked past the door. He swore. She stood there unable to move, though she knew she needed to get away from the door. Taking a deep, ragged breath she tried to pad as quietly as she could back to the corner. But she couldn't stop shaking. Then the bossman suddenly kicked her door open and stood there, in the doorway, watching. The girl felt her insides liquify and she tried her hardest to hold everything in. But in a flash he had a knife at her throat and she emptied the contents of her bladder. He pushed her onto the bed and she lay there, her wet leggings and pants sticking to her legs. She could hear his heavy breathing, smell the metallic scent of blood. Then someone else came into the room.

You didn't lock up properly, you daft fuck, said the boss to whoever else was in the room. Silly, silly girl, he said in a low voice. He knelt down and wrapped his mouth around her ear. His skin felt clammy against hers and she could smell his aftershave, feel the stubble from his chin. You really shouldn't have done that. The girl heard a zip. You need to do as you are told. You know we can't look after you properly unless you are doing as you are told. He swore under his breath and shuddered in disgust. Then he stood up and she heard the zip again. You better do as you're told or you might find yourself like your wee pal across the hall there, he said squeezing her cheek hard, his hands rough and calloused against her skin. Now go and clean yourself up, he said. You stink of piss.

Chapter 29

Megan gazed across the *Daily's* newsroom, listening to the dull hum of chatter in the background, hands tapping at keyboards and a few phones pinging every so often. In the old days the noise was deafening. Fax machines, phones, loud and constant expletives. Megan let her thoughts wander to Sebastian and their earlier chat.

'Why won't you answer your phone, Megan?' he said.

She didn't want to admit that after spending the evening with Harry she had fallen into a deep sleep, the first in weeks.

Sebastian's words rang in her ears. 'You can't have it all, Megan.'

As she sat waiting, she flicked through pictures of Matthew on her phone. She longed for the grasp of his wee hands around her neck, to bury her nose into his soft hair and to be his mum, whatever that meant. Sebastian was right. He had won. Who did she think she was? Rubbing her thumb and finger together, she glanced down at her nails. The varnish was chipped and they were in need of some attention. She licked her lips, nerves making her mouth dry, and hoped that it didn't look suggestive.

'They're ready for you, Megan,' said Richard's PA, opening the door to the boardroom. Megan slipped to the head of the packed table, suddenly conscious that she was the only woman in the room. Clutching her papers to her chest, she purposefully strode in and put them down on the table in front of her. Smiling, she made a point of looking at each and every one of them. A circle of men in suits. Several nodded at her, but others ignored her and remained locked in their conversations about the previous night's football score.

It's all about perception, she told herself as she placed her bag on the floor, took off her jacket and smiled at her audience. She quickly clapped her hands together. 'For those of you who don't know me, I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Megan Ross, editor of *Enquiry*. I know you're all board members, however, I'd be grateful if you could all introduce yourselves to me.' She smiled. 'I like to know exactly who I'm divulging my secrets to.'

A silence descended on the room and there were a few sniggers. But they all did as they were asked. Each of the eight took it in turn to proudly announce his name and position on the board.

‘Well, it is lovely to meet you all at last. And I’m sure you’ll be interested to hear about what we are doing at *Enquiry* and how we are bucking the current media trend. Before I start, do you have any questions?’

Richard winked at her as the rest of the men looked back, either too frightened or stunned to respond.

‘So,’ said Megan, walking over to the screen. ‘I have some visuals here to show you just how well we’re performing.’ She spent the next twenty minutes talking in great detail about how she had cultivated a loyal readership with *Enquiry* magazine and how the team had worked hard to develop brand loyalty. The men were captivated as she smoothly talked them through rising circulation figures and healthy advertising revenues. ‘If you look at this competitor analysis here,’ she said, pointing at the image on the screen, ‘you’ll see that there really *is* no competition. We completely clean up.’ There was a ripple of applause. ‘I’d like to thank you all for your continued support and look forward to working with you again in the future. Thanks for helping to make the *Enquiry* such a success.’ She smiled. ‘Now, does anyone have any questions?’ She watched Lord Bilston raise his podgy hand.

‘I must say, that was fantastic,’ he said spitting out the Ts and leaving Megan in no doubt he was lying. ‘Thanking you very much, Miss Ross. You’ve obviously been very busy, working hard to bring your little magazine out.’

Spit it out, you patronising prick, she thought as she forced herself to smile at him. ‘Thank you. Did you have a question?’ Megan’s voice was neutral.

‘Well, yes. I wondered about your editorial control and input. What direction do you see the magazine taking in future editions?’

‘I would say the same as previous editions,’ she said. ‘Well-researched, thought-provoking features and investigations which shine a light on the socio-economic problems in Scotland today.’

‘Which sounds great,’ said Paul, the editor of the *Daily*. ‘How about sharing resources and pooling these stories together so we can maximise their coverage in the *Daily*?’

Megan kept smiling through gritted teeth. ‘But that would mean your journalists wouldn’t have anything to do.’

There were a couple of chuckles and she saw Richard nod in encouragement.

'No,' spluttered Paul, 'that's not what I mean at all. I just meant we could maximise your coverage by trailing some of your stories at the weekend.'

'I hear what you're saying, Paul. But I'm not convinced that would work.' She smiled and turned towards the rest of the group. 'Now does anyone else have any questions?'

'I would like to suggest that we are given a list of stories in advance of publication,' said Lord Bilston, 'given that you are still, effectively, on a trial.'

Megan nodded, doing her best to remain calm. 'That *would* be ideal, wouldn't it, Lord Bilston?' she said, and flashed him a bright smile. 'However, quite often we don't know what we're running until the last minute. I think that would just confuse things. And it doesn't really fit with the idea that, as editor, I am supposed to have editorial independence.'

He looked as though she had suggested something sexually inappropriate. 'In theory you are,' he said, 'but *we are* the board after all.' His voice was low and slightly menacing. 'And *you* are on trial.'

'Well, yes, so you keep saying. However, I do believe the figures show we're doing a good job. Though I suggest perhaps you take a vote on it?' She looked around the room. Megan locked her eyes onto his and kept smiling. 'Lord Bilston,' she said in a playful tone, cocking her head to the side. 'Is there something you're worried about? Should I perhaps be looking into your affairs?' There was a ripple of murmurs around the table. Lord Bilston forced a smile but Megan knew she was treading on dangerous ground. 'Maybe you should wait until I leave the room before you continue this discussion,' she said, forcing a laugh. 'Thank you for your time.'

Richard stood up and came to the front of the room. 'We'd like to thank Megan for taking time from her busy schedule to come and talk to us about the success of *Enquiry*.'

'You are all most welcome. I look forward to meeting with you again.' She walked slowly out of the room, holding her head high. Richard walked to the door with her.

'There's some mail on my desk for you,' he said.

Megan kept smiling until she had picked up the envelope from Richard's desk. Her legs were wobbling but she kept walking until she reached the downstairs toilets. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was white, her skin clammy and she suddenly felt faint. She went into a cubicle, closed the toilet lid and sat down with her

head between her knees, breathing slowly. She knew that things no longer looked good for the future of *Enquiry*. Not while that prize prick of a man, Bilston, was anywhere near it. He was up to something. He was a nasty piece of work and she had a gut feeling that her days as editor were numbered. She ripped open the envelope and started to read.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't grumble because his idea of work differs from yours.'

I've managed to work out how to unlock his phone. That's one of the benefits of working with younger colleagues who are all tech-savvy. He assumes I have no clue and he's got lazy with it. Leaves it lying on the kitchen worktop or by the side of the bed. Tells me I'm stupid. I play along with it. Let him feel like the one in charge. He doesn't know that I flick through his messages when he's in the shower or on the toilet. I stand, my fingers trembling, my heart thudding, as I look for something, anything, to give me evidence. The messages are about golf, business. All perfunctory. Nothing revealing. I recognise most of the names. Those I don't, well, there's nothing in the texts to suggest anything is afoot. If the water goes off I know he's coming out the shower. I quietly put the phone back and get on with sorting laundry. Tonight he was whistling as he went out. Said that he'd had a good day and was having dinner with contacts to celebrate. And me, the dutiful wife, I smiled and nodded. He said he'd call me. He said he wouldn't be late. That I should wait up. I was yawning as he told me this. He squeezed my arm, hard.

As soon as he left I started doing a Google search for dating apps. I must be careful though. I don't want to get into trouble with work. I have to hope that nobody is ever tracking what I'm doing online. I stayed close to the phone in case he called. My hard work pays off. I'll ask my colleague tomorrow, just casually off the cuff. I'll ask him about the app I've found. Then I'll just need to wait for the right opportunity to get hold of his phone.

Megan took a moment to steady her breath. Then she stood up and went over to the sink. She washed her hands and walked back to her office.

'Any luck?' she said as Sunita looked up and met her gaze.

Sunita frowned. 'With what?'

'The blog site. The email address.'

'No, I'm still struggling with it.'

'What about apps? Can you look into these locked sites?'

'Like the ones that perv in Malaysia was caught on?'

'That exactly.'

'May be more up Ronnie's street.'

'What's that?' said Ronnie as he walked back into the office.

'Are you able to get into one of those dark sites?'

'You mean the dark web?'

'Yes.'

'Charming,' he said huffily.

'It was Sunita who suggested it,' said Megan.

'Cheeky cow. I can have a go but it'll take some time. These sites are protected by passwords and encryption and specialist software.'

'Right,' said Megan.

'Luckily for you, though, my current man is a dab hand with it all. Leave it with me and I'll see how I get on.'

She thought she was dreaming. She could hear her auntie talking to her mother who sat at their kitchen table at home sobbing and rubbing her hands over and over. She is a good girl, said Auntie. She will be okay and make you proud. But she is only a child, said Mother. Why did I send her away? Because you needed the money, said Auntie harshly.

The piercing sound of her mother's wailing woke her up. The girl sat up abruptly, shaking in the bed. The pain in her arms was burning. She felt as though she'd been split in two. The screaming was still there. She could still hear it. Auntie's voice too. This is too risky, she said. I'm not coming here again. Next time you meet me somewhere. Very slowly, the girl swung her legs from the bed and tiptoed across to the door. She bent down to put her ear as close to the frame as she could. The wailing had slowed to snivels.

Oh be quiet, said the woman impatiently. Go home, want to go home, whispered a voice. A new addition to the family thought the girl. Shut up, said the woman and then the girl heard a slap. Then a gasp. Shoving, a thwack, door slamming and the key turning. I'll deal with her later, said the bossman.

The girl was certain she could smell Auntie. That cloying scent of her perfume. The smell of cherries. Feeling a surge of anger, she threw herself against the door. What the hell is going on in here, said the voice. Sounds like a zoo. The priest won't be happy when he hears about this. He won't like it at all. There was a pause and the girl froze, her breath short and rasping. She tried to breathe slowly and calm herself down. She must not anger the spirits. Never. She had to do this for her family. If she didn't then she knew they would be in danger. The girl rocked back and forth in a corner of the room, trying to soothe herself as much as she could. But all she could think about was Auntie. And the streaks of blood on the hall carpet. She'd been her only friend and now she was gone.

Chapter 30

Megan's heels caught on the ragged edge of a cobble and she grabbed at Joanna's arm.

'Anyone would think you'd be drinking,' Joanna said.

They passed a young boy who had just stumbled into a doorway to vomit. His friend urinated on a lamp-post as he watched his friend.

'Lovely,' said Megan. 'The young of today, eh?'

'Thank God we're sober,' muttered Joanna as they quickened their pace, walking along Gordon Street and following the curve past T.G.I. Friday's and onto Buchanan Street. 'To think that could have been George . . .'

Megan linked her arm through her sister's. Joanna was right. Just before he'd died, he had started mixing with a bad crowd. Who knows what he would have been like if he'd still been here?

'Sometimes I think it's a blessing he was taken from me when he was,' said Joanna.

'Really?' said Megan, in surprise.

Joanna looked embarrassed. 'Yes. It sounds awful, I know, but sometimes it's the only way I can rationalise it.'

They walked in silence for a while, Megan unsure what she could say to make Joanna feel any better. 'Thanks for agreeing to come with me tonight, Joanna. I don't think I could do this without you.'

'Mmm, I was hardly going to let you do this on your own, was I? Does anyone else know you are doing this?'

Megan gave her a sideways glance. 'No.'

'Not even Harry?'

'No. It's better that we don't complicate things. Come on.' She gestured ahead. 'We can cut through this way.'

Joanna ran a hand through her hair, patting it at the back. 'Actually, I could do with a cigarette. It's been a while since I felt like this.'

Just then a woman walked past sucking from her e-cigarette. She blew a cloud of tangerine-flavoured smoke into the air.

Megan coughed. 'I know what you mean. But I'd like the proper stuff. Nicotine.' Her eyes narrowed as they walked past the Gallery of Modern Art. 'I just hope this doesn't fall off.' She smoothed her hands over her wig. She giggled at the traffic cone on the equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington, pointing it out to Joanna.

'Love how it's so jauntily positioned.' Joanna laughed. 'During the Referendum there was a Saltire draped over it too.'

Megan glanced back at the illuminated building with its grand pillars. 'Strange to think I missed that, eh?'

'Aye, well, you've got the European one around the corner. Then no doubt there'll be another one here before too long.'

'True,' said Megan. 'Look, it's just over here.' She pointed towards the lane.

'Do we have to stay long?'

'Just a drink or two. A quick recce and then we're out of there.'

'Do you think we'll get in?'

'I hope so,' said Megan. 'Just leave it to me. Here we are.'

The entrance to the Tinkle Bar was down a cobbled alley. It was flanked by two burly men, both with shaved heads. 'Evening, ladies. How are you?' said one, his pale blue eyes fixing on Megan.

'Aye, alright, thanks,' said Megan, flashing her best smile.

'Dying for a drink,' said Joanna.

'In yous go.' He stood aside to let Megan and Joanna pass.

Megan felt his eyes linger on her backside for a moment more than was necessary. Bristling, she almost turned to say something but kept walking. The women passed the cloakroom and the cash machine. An unsmiling security man opened the door into the club. Megan exchanged a brief look with Joanna. It was dark and it took a few moments for Megan's eyes to adjust. She walked confidently towards the bar.

'Didn't realise you got ATMs in clubs these days,' said Joanna.

'Yip,' said Megan.

'This place actually looks okay.'

Megan looked around casually while also catching the eye of one of the girls at the bar. It wasn't at all the dive she had been expecting. She had had visions of it being

dark and sweaty with too many bodies pressing into her. In fact, it looked like its owners had invested quite a lot of money in making it look like a quality establishment. Chandeliers were strung across the lowered ceiling, the floor looked like it was made of granite slabs and the seats at the bar were covered in dark brown leather. Even the bar staff looked like they should be working in a fancy hairdresser's with their black jeans and T-shirts and heavily made-up faces.

'Wasn't what I was expecting,' Megan said. 'What are you drinking? Prosecco? Gin? Wine?'

'A vodka and tonic please.'

A blonde woman leaned over the bar to Megan. 'What can I get you?'

'Two vodka tonics please.' Then she frowned. 'Don't I know you?'

The blonde woman threw her a blank look and shrugged.

'You look like someone . . . you look like Anastasia.'

The blonde shook her head. 'I get you drinks.'

'What is it?' Joanna asked.

Megan frowned. 'She looks like someone I used to know.' She laughed. 'But that would be too much of a coincidence. And a tragedy. She looks like a girl I interviewed once, who had been trafficked to London.' When the blonde handed Megan the drinks she realised the woman was older than Anastasia, and smaller. Her eyes were dull and flat. Megan wondered if she'd seen the same things as Anastasia.

'Where are you from?' Megan asked her.

'Poland.' The blonde flicked her eyes at someone behind Megan.

'It's okay,' said Megan. 'You just remind me of someone I know. Thanks. Keep the change.' She picked up the glasses. 'Come on, let's sit over there.' Megan pointed to the booth in the corner.

The music, a Calvin Harris track, was loud, and Megan and Joanna struggled to hear each other speak.

'So now what?' shouted Joanna. 'What happens next?'

'Well, firstly, cheers.' Megan clinked her glass against Joanna's. 'Thanks for coming along.' Megan didn't speak for a moment as her eyes flicked around the room. 'The dim lighting is handy, eh?'

'Do you really think we're going to find out anything by being here?'

Megan had suddenly become aware of someone watching her from the bar. 'I just don't know.'

'That's Rhona over there. Rhona from the refuge. She's collecting glasses.'

Joanna stood up.

'The nail girl?' started Megan. 'Jo, Jo, don't try and talk to her,' Megan tried to call casually after her, but Joanna had already stood up and walked away. Megan watched as her sister made her way towards the bar, which was now busier, sliding past several men to make her way towards Rhona. Megan tried to appear relaxed as she looked around the club, taking in as much detail as she could. The colour of the walls and the floor, the number of bouncers lining each door, the number of girls serving at the bar. She tried to record as many mental pictures of the punters as she could. They were a well-dressed bunch. Businessmen in navy suits, with open-necked shirts, older men in jeans and blazers. You couldn't exactly describe the place as a dive.

'Bloody hell,' said Joanna, sliding back into the booth. 'That was an expensive round. Twenty quid for two drinks.'

'London prices.' Megan shrugged. 'Did you get a chance to talk to her?'

'No,' said Joanna. 'She looked at me like she'd seen a ghost and then disappeared through a door. Not sure what that's all about.'

'Maybe she didn't recognise you?'

'Hardly. She knows me.'

'She's maybe just a bit thrown seeing you here out of the blue.'

'Maybe. I thought I should at least buy a round while I was there, otherwise I would be too conspicuous . . . so what are we going to do now?'

'Well, not dance,' said Megan nodding her head in the direction of the poles just to the side of their booth which two women were sliding up and down.

'Jesus Christ. Where did *they* come from?'

'Well, they're not local by the looks of it,' Megan said drily.

'Jeez, I didn't realise it was *that* kind of place. I feel about ninety.' Joanna watched as one of the women thrust her leg around the shiny pole. 'Clubs weren't like this in my day.'

'That's because you didn't go to clubs, Jo.' Megan laughed, feeling the vodka starting to relax her.

'Aye, that's true. See what being a teen mum did for me. Saved me from these places. Did you do much clubbing in Edinburgh?'

'A bit,' said Megan. 'But it wasn't like this. The clubs in George Street were full of posh students. Girls in pearl stud earrings, hoping to snare a royal. The pubs full of rugby types. So, not my cup of tea.' She wrinkled her nose.

'What *is* your type then, Megan? I mean, apart from Sebastian, have you ever had anyone you were serious about?'

Megan took a swig from her tumbler. 'Mmm, there was someone once. But it didn't really work out.'

'Why, what happened?'

'Just not meant to be. Do you think those girls over there look okay?'

'Do you mean the ones on the poles?'

'Yes.'

'Hard to tell,' said Joanna. 'The girl who served me at the bar was definitely not a local though. Neither was her friend.'

Megan glanced over at the bar. It was the same girl who had served her when they arrived. 'Where do you think she's from?'

'Pretty sure Moldova.'

'But she said she was from Poland. What makes you say Moldova?'

'Just from some of the words I've picked up in the refuge. They sounded familiar. I've become quite the linguist, you know.'

Megan looked over at the women dancing. They were pale and far too skinny, and Megan noticed that they were avoiding all contact with the punters.

'So what were you saying about that bloke?'

'I wasn't saying anything, Joanna,' said Megan and smiled. 'You look well. Your hair suits you like that.' Joanna was wearing her hair loose over her shoulders with a black shirt and trousers.

'I've always fancied being blonde. Anyway, stop trying to change the conversation.'

'So, listen, don't freak out but I think we're being watched.'

'Who by?' said Joanna, keeping her voice neutral and her eyes fixed on Megan.

'A couple of guys at the booth across the way. They're wearing suits, expensive ones, and I have a feeling that one of them may be the owner. Just keep calm, and if they come over then just be yourself.' Megan's cheeks flushed as she tried to work out what to do. There was no point in leaving abruptly. That would create suspicion and they would draw more attention to themselves. Instead she concentrated on chatting to Joanna, raising her voice when the volume of the music was increased. She flinched when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

'Good evening, ladies,' said the taller man. He smiled, his white teeth luminous in the dark club, and sat down. 'Mind if we join you?'

'Eh, I think you already have,' said Joanna. Megan kicked her under the table.

'Of course, be our guest.' Megan tried to remain calm as the man ran his eyes across her chest and back up to her mouth several times.

'What brings you here?' he asked.

'Just fancied checking it out and seeing what all the fuss is about,' said Megan.

'And?'

'And it's okay. It's quite nice.'

'Thanks, Tom,' he said to his companion who had arrived back from the bar with a bottle of champagne on ice.

Megan could see Joanna trying not to snigger.

'Thanks very much,' said Megan, 'but we're actually just about to leave.'

'No,' he said. 'You must stay. I insist.' He gestured to Tom to sit down on Joanna's other side, trapping them in their seats.

'Stay and have a drink with us. Then we'll let you go,' said the man.

'Okay. Well, only if you introduce yourself,' said Megan.

'Of course. I'm Warren. Warren McGregor,' he said, reaching out a hand and grasping hers. 'And you are?'

'Sophie. This is my friend Roslyn.'

Joanna smiled and held out her hand. 'Pleased to meet you.'

'What about your wee pal there,' said Megan pointing at Tom. 'He doesn't have a lot to say for himself. Is he mute or something?'

Warren smirked and nodded his head. 'Aye, sometimes. He's not the brightest. I'm sorry, ladies, let me introduce you to Tom. This is Tom.'

'You look familiar,' said Joanna. 'Have we met before?'

Tom shook his head. 'Nah, would have remembered.'

'You sure?'

Megan kicked her sister under the table again.

'Aye.'

'Hi, Tom,' said Megan, extending her hand and fixing her eyes on him. She couldn't believe this was happening. What on earth was Harry playing at? Why was he pretending to be called Tom and acting like he and McGregor were best friends? 'It's lovely to meet you.'

'Sophie,' he said. 'It's a pleasure to meet you too.'

Megan watched as Warren opened the bottle and poured everyone a glass. Her head was starting to feel slightly woozy. When she looked across at Harry she gave him a hard glare.

'What do you do, Warren?' asked Megan, pretending to take a sip from the flute.

He laughed. 'Oh, this and that.'

Harry interrupted. 'He's the manager here.'

Megan had already checked out the exits, which were guarded by security, and she knew there was no way of getting out of there until Warren decided they could go.

'What about you, Sophie? What do you do?'

'I'm a teacher.'

'What do you teach?'

'Modern studies.'

'And you're out on a school night?' said Warren, reaching for the glass and swallowing the rest of his champagne. Topping his glass up, he said, 'A bit of a naughty girl, are you?'

'Yes.' Megan forced herself to giggle.

'And you?' He turned to Joanna.

'I'm a counsellor,' she said. 'People tell me all their problems.'

'That's good to know,' said Warren.

'You've got some pretty staff in here,' said Megan. 'Are they all Poles?'

'A few of them. But we like to mix it up,' said Warren. 'Get them from all over. Why, you fancy any of them? Choose whoever you want and I'll sort it out, sunshine . . . as long as I can watch.'

Megan resisted the urge to smack him across his shiny forehead. 'Ha ha. Maybe next time, I'm not really in the mood tonight.'

'Excuse me for a minute,' said Warren, who was staring towards the bar. His eyes narrowed and a flash of fury crossed his face. Megan jumped as he abruptly stood up, then marched towards the bar where another man was standing. Two bouncers seemed to appear out of the shadows to flank him.

'What's happening?' said Megan, glancing at Harry. His eyes were locked on Warren too. His jaw was tense and he spoke in a low voice. 'You two need to get out of here *now*.'

Megan watched as Warren slapped his hand across the man's back. He spun him round and pressed his face right up to the man's. Then suddenly he backed away and grinned, snapping his fingers at the girl cowering behind the bar. She handed him a glass. The other man began to edge away from Warren but the bouncers closed in at his side. Warren took his time to drink his whisky and then signalled for another.

Megan gulped, her throat dry and raw. She felt Joanna's leg tense next to hers.

'What's going on over there?' Joanna's voice had dropped to a whisper.

Megan looked over at Harry. His face was grey as his eyes flicked between Warren and Megan. Her heart was racing now, and she knew that she and Joanna needed to leave. Just then there was a scream from behind the bar as Warren smashed down his glass. He then held the glass to the man's throat. The bouncers grabbed the man and hauled him towards an exit at the back of the club.

Harry didn't move or utter a word. He sat very still and watched. When he could see Warren was out of sight, he said, 'I think it's time you were on your way.'

'Yes, you're right.' Megan stood up shakily.

'Your friend Roslyn isn't looking the best,' said Harry.

'I'm fine,' said Joanna, her face tense.

'You're not. You look a bit pale,' said Megan, digging her nails into her sister's arm as she pulled her to her feet.

'Oh yes, of course,' said Joanna, coming to her senses. 'God, I feel awful, now you mention it. Maybe had too much to drink.'

'Yes, do thank Mr McGregor for the drink, Tom.'

'I will do, Sophie,' he said, ushering the women to the exit. His arm was holding Megan's a little more firmly than was necessary, willing her to move fast and get away. 'Get in a taxi and go straight home,' he whispered in her ear. Then more loudly to both of them, 'See you then.'

'Bye,' said Megan.

'You sure I don't know you? We've not met?' said Joanna.

'I'm sure,' he said, turning to walk away.

'What do you think was going on there?' They walked briskly back out towards the main road.

Megan looked around desperately for a cab with an orange light. 'Something dodgy.'

'The champagne was a bit tacky, wasn't it?' Joanna shivered.

'Yes, it was. Look, there. Thank God for that. A cab,' she said, flagging it down. Neither of the women spoke until the taxi pulled up at Joanna's door.

'I'll call you tomorrow. Get a good night's sleep, Jo.'

'Will do, love. Same to you. I can't wait to get this off me. It's really itching.'

'I know,' said Megan, tugging at her own scalp.

'I'll call you tomorrow. Hope I was of some help,' said Joanna, covering her mouth to stifle a yawn.

'Yes, you were. Thanks for coming.'

The taxi driver turned to Megan. 'Where to now, hen?'

'Just up the road please, Dowanhill.'

Megan pulled her phone from her bag and quickly sent a text. *What the fuck are you playing at? TOM? The taxi was sitting at red lights on Clarence Drive when her phone buzzed. I can explain. Can you? SOPHIE? Are you home yet? Megan* bashed her reply. *Almost.*

Megan asked the driver to stop at the end of her street and she walked the last few hundred metres home. What was Harry playing at? Why hadn't he done anything to stop Warren attacking that man? And what else wasn't he telling her? The thoughts were whirling around her head as she put her key in the lock and turned it. Swinging the door open, she stepped onto a large brown envelope on the doormat. Picking it up she realised it was Richard's handwriting. It must be some more entries from Trudy. Throwing it down on the kitchen worktop, she THEN filled the kettle and switched it on. She was trying her hardest not to rip the envelope open straight away. Trudy was spending far too much time in her head at the moment, which wasn't helping her mood. She still felt shaken from the incident at the club. She shivered when she thought about the man who'd been hauled out the back. Sam Martin was right. Warren McGregor had a vicious streak and didn't care who witnessed it. What she needed to do was talk to Harry. She heard her phone ping and snatched it up. But it wasn't from him. It was a message letting her know her phone bill was ready to view. Frustrated, she slammed down the phone, grabbed the envelope, and tore it open. She sat on the kitchen floor, the tiles cool beneath her, as she started to read.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't say bitter things when you are angry.'

This morning when I was walking to work I couldn't stop staring at the white patches of gum dotted all over the pavement. Thousands of pieces of gum. Filthy. Spat from someone's gob like a bit of phlegm and trodden over again and again until they become part of the slab. And so it goes on and on. And it will continue to go on.

I read an article at work about a new women's refuge in the West End. It's full of middle-class women. It makes me realise that there are all types of victims. People like me, too. Women in posh houses which look fantastic on the outside but inside they're just dealing with the same old shit. It's going on everywhere. The refuges will open but will they really make a difference? I'm not special. I'm just like millions of other women. Used and abused. And there's nothing I can do about it. Not now. It's too late for me. I don't think it's too late for the others though. They deserve a chance. I hope my own kids will forgive me. But I'm ready to tell *you*. I'm ready to tell you what I know. I think.

This morning it dawned on me that I can leave. I can walk out. My house, my home, my life. I can leave it all behind. My daughter is old enough now not to care. It won't affect her life. My father had a drinking problem. He used to be my perfect man. He wasn't. He would come home from the pub, absolutely bloated, every weekend. But that was what men did then. That's how men coped with life. They drank. And I just assumed that was what they all did. Especially when I watched how my husband behaved in the early days. He reminded me of my dad.

I don't know where to go now. Should I just run? Or wait until everything is out in the open? When everyone knows? Or maybe I could just leave when things have quietened down a bit. When he's in jail and the heat is off.

The phone is ringing. I need to answer it.

It was him. Checking up on me. Making sure I'm okay. I'm lucky he still cares enough to call. An old bag like me. I have this house, this lovely kitchen. This computer to write on. If I left I would lose it all. I would lose everything. Would I cope on my own? Where would I go? A refuge? I don't think so. I'd be too embarrassed. What would people think? Who would care anyway? People aren't really interested in what goes on. They just want soundbites to answer their questions. How are you? How was your weekend? Did you watch *Strictly* at the weekend? Where are you going on holiday? Are you well? They don't want the doom and gloom or the deep and meaningful chats. He keeps a close eye on the bank accounts. Knows what comes in and goes out. There's no way I can start squirrelling away money. Mind you, I know everything about his bank accounts now. The ones he doesn't tell me about. He doesn't realise I know how to log in to his accounts when he's out. I cover my tracks. And I've managed to find out about a few interesting transactions. Could I leave? I don't know, I just don't know. I'm scared of being on my own. Who says it'll be better anyway? It could be worse. Better the devil you know. I don't think I'll leave yet. I still love him. My life with him is all I know. I'm too old to start again.

Megan tucked the papers back into the envelope. She was glad she hadn't told Harry about this the other night. Not after what had happened earlier. Maybe she should talk to Joanna about this. Maybe she would be able to help.

Being slapped, kicked and punched was part of the girl's routine. She'd had clumps of her hair ripped out and whenever she caught her reflection in the mirror she shuddered. She'd been told plenty of times she was past her best. That she was an ugly bitch. It didn't stop the bossman using her himself though. When he was forcing himself on her she wondered why he didn't just do it into a hole in the wall. He'd started to wear condoms. Called her a dirty cow. Some of the men paid more to go without. She didn't like that. She didn't like the way, when they'd finished, that it would all slide back out of her and down her legs. It didn't matter how many wipes she used in between the men, she never felt clean.

She knew the bossman was up to something. She'd heard him talking in hushed tones about a delivery being made in exchange for that black one. For her. She didn't know why he'd lowered his voice when he was talking about her. It didn't make any difference. She listened, her ear at the door, and heard him talking about a ship and cargo. Then she couldn't make out what he said as he started talking quickly. Then he mentioned cargo again. Value added cargo. Going to its final destination.

She stared at the swirls on the curtains when she heard him say that. Maybe she would be taken back home. Maybe she'd paid off her debts and she could go home. She was struggling to remember what it was like. Would her mother still be there? And her brothers? When she heard footsteps, she moved away from the door. A cold gust swept through the room when the bossman flung it open. He stood in the doorway for a moment, his face hard.

A woman walked in straight towards the girl, her high-heeled shoes catching in the ragged carpet. The girl couldn't help staring at her. Had she come to rescue the girl? Had she come to help. The girl's knees wobbled and she collapsed to the ground, her eyes pleading with the woman. The woman looked so out of place standing there, in her black dress, a waft of flowery perfume trailing behind her. She shot the girl a look of disgust. The bossman shouted at her to get back up on her feet. There was no emotion in her eyes. No sympathy or concern in her face. The woman circled her and then slowly clicked her teeth together. She grabbed the girl's face in both hands and turned it left and then right, scrutinising her for something. Then she lifted the girl's top up, her lip curled into a cruel sneer. The woman didn't make eye contact with the girl. She stuck her finger inside the girl's mouth, felt her

teeth, then turned and walked out. The bossman shut the door and she heard the woman telling him that 'she would do'. The girl wondered what she meant.

Chapter 31

Megan woke to hammering at the front door. She sat up abruptly, rubbing her eyes with her knuckles. The room was in darkness and her heart was thudding. The banging on the door was getting more urgent. Glancing at the clock, she saw it was just after four o'clock.

'What the hell is going on?' she muttered and sprang out of bed, pulling a fleecy sweatshirt over her pyjamas. She crept to the door of the room, her teeth chattering. The pounding had stopped but her phone started to ring. She ran to the bedside table and picked it up. Eight missed calls. *Oh God, Matthew?*

'Hello.'

'Megan, it's me. I'm at your door. Let me in.'

She ran to the hallway. Through the small rectangle of glass in the door, she could see the outline of someone standing on the step. She unlocked the snib and opened the door. Harry practically fell in.

'What are you doing, you idiot?' she shouted.

'Trying to make sure nobody spots me.' Harry shut the door behind him.

'Unlikely at this time in the morning.' Megan scowled at him. 'Anyway, you're the one making all the noise with that banging.'

'I tried calling you. Several times. But you were obviously dead to the world.'

Megan turned and walked towards the kitchen. 'Okay. Cuppa? Or something stronger?'

'Aye, a cup of tea would be good.' Harry yawned and raked his hands through his hair. 'Are you going to tell me what the hell you were playing at tonight?'

Megan spun back to look at him. She narrowed her eyes. 'Are you having a laugh, Harry? Or, sorry, should it be Tom? What am I playing at?' She slammed the kettle down on the worktop and forcefully flicked it on. 'I'd like to know what exactly *you* are playing at. And just who you are.'

He sighed and shook his head. 'Megan, this isn't a game, you know. It's not just about you dipping in and out of these places and playing games.'

Megan resisted the urge to throw something at him. 'I was out with my sister for a drink. That is it.'

Harry raised an eyebrow. 'Is the Tinkle Club one of your regular haunts?'

Megan shrugged, the muscles in her jaw tense.

'Why did you give false names?'

'I felt like it. And *you* can't exactly talk.' She reached to get two mugs out of the cupboard. 'Coffee or tea?'

'Tea, please.' He perched on a stool and crossed his arms.

'Well, are you going to tell me what's going on?'

Harry sighed and shook his head. 'You're playing a dicey game, Megan . . . I can't tell you everything.'

'Well, tell me what you can then.'

'We've been watching the club for a while now. And the owner. Warren.'

'I see,' said Megan, dropping the teabags in the mugs and pouring on the boiling water.

'Megan, I'm not sure you do, actually. Which is why you need to tread carefully. You're lucky he didn't recognise you.'

'What do you mean?'

'Because he seems to know that the press, and you in particular, are sniffing around him.'

Megan's face paled. 'And how would he know that?'

'Because he has contacts everywhere, Megan.' He paused for a moment. '*Everywhere.*'

She gave a wry smile. 'It's lucky I wore a wig then, isn't it?'

'Aye. Probably the most sensible decision you've made in a while. And those clothes too. Even took *me* a while to work it out.'

'So how did you, then?' she said, handing the mug to him. 'How did you know it was me?'

'I just know the way you move. You walk in a certain way.'

'Is that right?'

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

'And what about you, Harry? Why are you in there cosyng up with him and calling yourself Tom?'

'Police stuff.'

'Really?'

'Aye.'

'So why the fake name?'

'I'm hardly going to tell him my real name, am I?'

'I don't understand.'

Harry chewed his bottom lip. 'Look, I'm not supposed to tell you any of this.'

Megan swallowed some tea. 'Is that the real reason you're back in Glasgow then?'

He nodded. 'Yes. For this job. It's undercover. They need someone who's from Glasgow and can fit in. I've been away for long enough that nobody should recognise me. And I've got the accent.'

'But how do you know he won't work out you're a cop if he's got these contacts everywhere?'

'Just have to keep my fingers crossed.'

'You sure?' said Megan dubiously.

'I'm not in there that often. I've another guy who goes in a lot, has his ear to the ground more than me. I just wanted to do a wee check. I said to Warren I've been away for a while.'

'You look different too with the glasses. And that suit?' she said, pointing at it. 'Did you get yourself down *Slaters* or something for that?'

He frowned. 'Anyway, the point is, Megan, that I don't want to hear that you've been in there again.'

'Why would you? Nobody knows it was me.'

'Promise me you won't go back there. There's some nasty stuff going on.'

'So why can't you arrest him?'

'There's stuff you don't know about.' Harry put down his mug on the worktop and folded his arms. 'There are operational details that I can't go into.'

'Why not?'

'Because you're a journalist, Megan, I'm undercover and I would be breaking the law.'

She glared at him and gulped down a mouthful of lukewarm tea to stop herself from speaking.

'It's not as easy as just arresting him. It's not just him. It's like a bloody spider's web. You would not believe it. The girls won't speak. Believe me, we've tried to get them to. I told you before, they're terrified. They don't have their passports. They don't trust anyone. You should know this from your London days. Best we can do for now is get him where it hurts - and that means his assets.'

'What is the point in all of this? It's just going to keep on happening and happening. What's the point in the bloody legislation if it can't be used?'

Harry didn't reply.

'Sometimes I wish I hadn't come up here, you know. I'm starting to wonder what the point in it all is.' She shrugged Harry off when he walked over and tried to slip an arm round her.

'What do you mean?'

'Richard's getting cold feet about the trafficking feature. Says he's getting pressure from above. From the editorial board.'

'Anyone in particular?'

Megan gave a brittle chuckle. 'A few.'

'Can you tell me who?'

Megan shook her head. She wasn't going to tell Harry anything else about the feature. Not tonight.

Harry yawned and belatedly covered his mouth.

'You must be knackered. You should go.'

'Aye,' he said, 'you're probably right.'

She hesitated for a moment, then walked towards him as he made to leave. He leant down and kissed her on the cheek. 'Take care of yourself. I'll see you soon,' he said.

After he'd left she tucked herself back into bed, hauling the duvet up to her chin. Once again she'd considered telling him about Trudy, but something held her back. Megan didn't know if she could trust him. Was she becoming paranoid? She tossed and turned until six o'clock and then got up. She needed to talk to someone about the blog entries and Trudy. But who could she trust? Who was Trudy?

The question niggled away at the back of her head as she stood in the shower, hoping a sharp burst of cold water would give her some clarity. It didn't, so she dried herself, then pulled on her running leggings and a long-sleeved top and rummaged in her wardrobe for her trainers. Ten minutes later she was running towards Hyndland Road. It was light out but not bright. The sky was grey and oppressive, and she shivered, focusing on her breath as she forced her feet along until they found their own gentle rhythm. Then her breathing steadied. The streets were quiet apart from a few folk coming off night-shift or making early deliveries. She thought about Joanna's work and what she'd said about the women who used the refuge.

'It's not just physical abuse, Megan. It can be all sorts. Emotional. Controlling. Bullying.'

Megan thought about the man who had banned his wife from playing music in the house. He smashed the radio and the CD player. The woman who had her clothes and shoes taken away so she couldn't leave the house. The woman who wasn't allowed sanitary products. The woman whose husband called her from work every day and went ballistic if she didn't answer the phone. Joanna's words raced around her head as she ran down Byres Road towards Partick Road. She caught her reflection in a shop window but she didn't recognise herself. She no longer knew who she was. Was she like one of these women? Allowing Sebastian to bully her and call the shots? She thought about Matthew and being a mum. What must it be like to lose a child? Could she imagine never seeing her son again? Would her life go on as before?

A man, his head down, hands buried deep in his pockets, brushed against her and tutted. Megan gasped in fright, then muttered an apology and then mentally shook herself. He was in the wrong, not her. She turned to make sure he was still walking in the opposite direction. He was. Since the day she'd thought she was being followed, after leaving Joanna's flat, she had been more vigilant about which routes she took. She glanced over her shoulder again, then continued running. She was at Argyle Street now and almost at the Kelvingrove Museum. The sky was turning paler, highlighting the red sandstone of the museum. She kept running on, no idea of how far she had come or where she was going. Thoughts swirled inside her head. She found herself running in a loop up towards Charing Cross and back down Great

Western Road. It was busy with cars and busloads of commuters, and Megan knew it was time she was home and getting ready for work.

This time, when she stood in the shower, her thoughts began to crystallise and she began to formulate a plan. She dressed quickly and grabbed a brown banana from a bowl in the kitchen. She stood looking out the window, admiring the garden in the different light. She watched a bird hop across the shared green. Maybe this would feel more like home when Matthew was here. She could cover the magnolia walls with his crayon drawings and paintings. There'd be a trail of Rice Krispies across the worktop and splashes of milk on the floor. Little piles of baby wipes dumped by the sink. She was going to fight Sebastian for their son. For her son. She wouldn't let him take Matthew away.

The man was different to the others. He looked at her properly. He wore tatty jeans, a grey sweatshirt and dirty white trainers. His hair was dark and thinning and the girl glanced at the tattoos on his hands. When he was shown into her room, and mouthed his thanks to the bossman over his shoulder, she slowly stood up and started to undress. Her head hung to the ground so she didn't see him shaking his head. She glanced up only when he began to talk. No, he said, shaking his head. Stop.

The girl paused for a moment. She wondered if this was a trick. Was the bossman testing her? She watched as he walked towards her, his hands tucked firmly in his pockets. She felt her heart start to race. It wasn't the first time a customer had pulled something out of a pocket. But she was surprised when he walked over and sat down on the bed. She nervously flicked her eyes to the door.

It's okay, he said quietly. I don't want anything from you. I just want to talk. She remained standing, unsure of what to do. The room was eerily quiet for a moment then he spoke. Where are you from? he said. She didn't reply. It's okay, he said, looking at her. You can just nod. You are from Africa? She nodded. Can you tell me where? Nigeria, said the girl. Whereabouts? She bit her lip. It's okay, he said. His tone reassured her. Where is your home? A village in Edo, she said quietly. He smiled. I have been to Lagos. This focused the girl's attention and she looked properly at the man. Why are you here? he asked. I work, she said. There must have been a better job? She started to shake. She didn't know what to do or say. This hadn't happened before. She glanced at the door. I here working, she said. He stood up and walked towards her. It's okay, he said. I want to try and help you. You want sex, she said flatly. No, he said. I want to help. Can I help you? The girl bit her lip and felt a tear trickle down her cheek. She could hear soft cries coming from the room next door, a thumping and then a howl. She watched the man's distressed expression as he listened. He looked at his watch and sighed. I need to go now. But I will come back. I promise. I am here to help. Can I take your picture, please? It may help, he said.

The girl's heart sank. He wasn't here to help. He was the same as the others. Maybe worse. She nodded as he slipped a phone from the inside of his jeans. He held it up and she began to unhook her bra. No, he said. I just want a picture of you. What is your name? Itohan, she whispered. They call me Mercy. I promise you,

Mercy, I will come back and help, he said, tucking the phone away again. He took some money from his jeans pocket and counted out several notes. For the boss, he said, gesturing at the door. He smiled at the girl, then turned to walk away. He slipped out of the door and didn't look back.

Chapter 32

Megan stood at the kitchen sink gulping from a glass of water. Then she refilled it and quickly swallowed it all. She was trying to make up for the lack of liquid in her daily routine. The radio provided some background chatter, a bit of company, which distracted her from her thoughts of work and Matthew.

‘Good morning. It’s the nine o’clock news,’ said the newsreader. ‘A man has been killed by a train at Partick Subway Station in Glasgow. The incident, which British Transport Police said is not suspicious, happened at ten thirty on Tuesday night. Emergency services were called but the man died at the scene. Subway services were suspended for four hours but normal service has since resumed. In the rest of the news . . .

Megan switched the radio off and grabbed her bag. She was meeting her sister in Byres Road in five minutes. Picking up the mail from the mat, she quickly flicked through it. Bills and pizza leaflets. Then she saw a small white envelope. She stared at it for a few seconds before bending to pick it up. She gave herself a shake mentally. It had a stamp, a postmark and her full address. The postman had been. She used a knife to slit it open.

Megan,

I don’t trust emails. Especially when I realised someone was following me when I left you in Byres Road that day. So I thought I would deliver this direct.

You know I’m ill and I don’t know how it’s going to work out, which is probably making me a bit more ballsy than usual. I’ve done some digging on WM. Fuck me. He’s a sneaky bastard. I wouldn’t go anywhere near him. But then when have you ever listened to me? Seriously though, watch yourself. Yes, there are women coming in from all over the place. Mainly Eastern Europe. And if anyone asks any questions then they disappear. The usual story. This’ll interest you most. One of his cronies is running an offshoot. An online business. Like a VIP online escort service with online auctions and all sorts. That’s where the African girls seem to be. Nasty stuff. There are some big names involved. Some people you know. Megan, the truth is closer than you think. You’re a clever girl. You’ll work it out. I’ll get in touch if I hear any more. My next bout of treatment is about to start so I’ll be laying low for a bit. I’ll be in touch.

Sam

She automatically reached for her phone and called him. It went straight to voicemail. Why hadn't he been more specific? Who did she know that was involved? Did that mean she now had to suspect every man she was in contact with? Richard? Harry? Her colleagues? Slipping the note in her handbag, she slammed the door behind her and started walking briskly towards the café where she knew Joanna would already be waiting.

'Hi, love, how are you?' said Joanna, glancing at her watch. 'Time-keeping was never one of your top skills.'

'Sorry, sorry.' Megan sat down. 'Are you ready to order?'

'Yes,' she said to the waitress. 'A latte and a bacon roll, please.'

'The same,' said Megan. 'Actually make that two bacon rolls. I'm starving.'

'What's giving you an appetite?' said Joanna.

'All the sex I'm having,' said Megan drily.

'Really?'

'No. I was being facetious.'

'Well, at least you've still got your sense of humour. So tell me really. How has your week been?'

'Do you really want to know?'

'Yes,' said Joanna. 'Try me.'

Megan filled her in on what had happened with Sebastian. Then she told her about the conversation with Katherine.

'So it wasn't him?'

'No,' said Mega, her voice quiet. 'At least I'm pretty sure it wasn't.'

'Wonder who it was then?'

'I don't know. Maybe the barman slipped something in my drink. But then how do I go about asking that or proving that?'

The women didn't speak as the coffees and rolls were placed in front of them. Joanna opened hers to squirt ketchup on the bacon. 'I don't know,' she said, licking her greasy fingers. 'You may just have to move on from it for the moment.'

'Yes, I think you're right.' Megan's stomach sank as the reality of what her sister said started to make sense. 'I may never know what happened.' She heard her phone ring and reached down to grab it. 'Seb,' she mouthed to Joanna. 'Hello.'

'Hi, Megan. Have you thought any more about what we discussed?'

'I'd hardly call it a discussion,' she said sharply.

'This isn't great for Matthew. It's very unsettling.'

'I'm aware of that,' she snapped. 'But you're the one who brought it up.'

'Because I want to resolve the situation. I want what's best for my son.'

'For our son,' she said.

'Anyway, Megan, I want you to let me know how I should be proceeding.'

'Why are you sounding so efficient and formal, Sebastian? Why the change in tone all of a sudden? Is it because I rejected you the other night?'

Sebastian didn't reply.

'Thought so. Really? How old are you?'

'My lawyer will be in touch,' he said and hung up.

She dropped her phone into her bag.

'What did he want?'

'To let me know his lawyer would be in touch. Jeez,' she said, shaking her head, 'how did it get to this?'

Joanna reached over the table and grabbed Megan's hand. 'You'll get through this,' she said fiercely. 'You will.'

Megan looked back at her older sister who had been through so much more than she had. She'd lost her son, for God's sake. 'I know.' She forced herself to smile. 'Thanks, Joanna. I know it'll be okay.'

Soon the tables around the women were packed and Megan could hardly hear what Joanna was saying. She was talking about work and budget cuts to women's services. 'I think they may need to let some of the workers go,' she said. 'Which is a shame. As we have such a great team.'

'Do you think the funding will come through?' said Megan.

'It just depends. On a number of factors. We've got some of our trustees to put funding applications in. But you know how these things work. Nothing is guaranteed anymore. I feel bad for some of the younger girls. They're on contracts and they

can't get mortgages. They've got no financial security and they end up moving on elsewhere to a place where their job is guaranteed.'

'But is any job guaranteed anymore?'

Joanna shrugged. 'I guess not.'

'How's Rhona, by the way?'

'I've not seen her for a while. But that's not unusual. She tends to come and go.'

'Did you find out why she ran off that night at the club?'

'No.'

Megan glanced around. 'I need to tell you something.'

'God, you're not pregnant, are you?' asked Joanna, drawing her hand to her mouth.

'Nooo. Don't be daft.'

'Then what?'

'A woman has been emailing me at work. Blog entries. Like diary entries. She's a domestic abuse victim.'

'What's she saying?'

'Basically she's talking about her relationship with her husband. Rationalising why she's still with him. Questioning whether it is actually abuse or not.'

'Right, well, that sounds very normal. Do you have any idea who she is?'

'She calls herself Trudy. That's all I know. And so far I haven't been able to trace the email address.'

Joanna drained the rest of her coffee. 'Why do you think she's contacting you?'

'She must want me to do something about it.'

'Can you? Is there a story?'

'Well, to begin with I didn't think so. But there's a bit more information in each entry. Though she's stopped emailing them to me.'

'Why?'

'Not quite sure. She's been sending them as PDFs to Richard, you know, my boss?'

'Yes. But why would she start emailing you and then stop all of a sudden?'

'Good question. Other than Richard you're the only other person who knows about this.' Megan suddenly felt very exposed and vulnerable.

'Megan, I'm not going to say anything to anyone.'

'Yes, I know. It's just, well, it's just that I don't know who I can trust right now.'

'What about Harry?'

'I haven't told him about it.'

'Why not?'

Megan squirmed in her chair. 'I just don't trust him enough. And I want to get the story first. Before him.'

'But couldn't he help?'

'Not at the moment. This woman seems to know something about girls being trafficked,' she said, lowering her voice. 'She said in one of the blogs that there's more to come. I think if I'm patient she'll start to tell me more.'

'Right,' said Joanna. 'It still doesn't answer the question though. Why is she no longer emailing you directly? Is she worried about something? Does someone have access to your emails?'

Megan didn't reply. The silence was thick with questions and she had a moment of clarity. She gave a loud sigh. 'You're right, Joanna. Of course. That's it. She doesn't trust someone or something. She must know my emails are being monitored. Remember I told you I had a feeling I was being watched?'

'Yes,' said Joanna.

'The question is, how does this Trudy woman know what is going on? How does she know to be careful?' A fleeting frown crossed Megan's face and she pulled out her phone. 'For all I know, my calls have been monitored too. Maybe someone knows I was meeting you here. Maybe they know about my meetings with Harry.' A feeling of uneasiness settled in her stomach and she began to wish she hadn't eaten two bacon rolls. She glanced around, her voice tense, and said, 'Do you think anyone heard us?'

'No. You've been talking quietly. And the only people next to us were pensioners so they were probably hard of hearing anyway. Come on now. Don't get paranoid.'

'You're right. I just need to be careful. Maybe drip-feed some information and see what happens. Work out where the leak is and who is watching.'

'Just be sensible,' said Joanna.

The girl listened to the rain hitting off the windows which rattled in the wind. She longed for the sound of the rain battering off the corrugated iron roof at home. Her nose constantly streamed a clear river of mucus. Not that it put any of the men off. They probably didn't notice anyway. The girl had forgotten what it felt like to be warm. She longed for dry, dusty heat. For the earthy scent of her mother's kitchen. Here, the smell of cooking oil seemed to always linger in the air, mingled with the cheap perfume the girls were told to spray on. The girl missed the blonde. She had been kind to her. The girl didn't want to talk to any of the others. They were still being kept locked in their rooms anyway. When they were taken out in the car to the parties, they were the first to be won and taken away.

She heard the key turn in the door. The bossman walked in and came right up to the bed. His cheeks were red and had a map of broken veins stretched across them.

You've got a customer, he said. Get dressed. He grinned at her, his tongue lolling from his mouth. The girl hastily brushed her hair, which had started to thin, applied some lipstick and pulled the nightie over her head. The bossman watched. She stood waiting. In you go, said the bossman when he walked into the hall. She's all yours.

When the man entered the room she felt a faint flicker in her stomach. Not fear, something else. He was older, well-groomed and wore a suit and tie. He looked vaguely familiar. He was the first black man she had seen in a long time. She could smell his aftershave as soon as he stepped over the threshold and walked his polished shoes towards her. The bossman shut the door, leaving them alone.

She stood still as he slowly circled her, his lips pursed, his arms folded and with a finger to his mouth. He was behind her and out of sight but she daren't turn to look. Instead she braced herself waiting for a thwack or the sound of a zip and a prod from behind. She stood there waiting and waiting, her eyes fixed on the door. What was he doing? Her legs started to feel stiff and her neck ache. She was cold too in the flimsy nightdress. Then she heard something click and the man started to slowly move again. Click. Click. He held up his mobile phone and took her picture. Was he like the other man? Was he going to help? But then he told her to undress and took more pictures. The other man told her not to undress. She was confused and tense, ready for the man to pounce. But he didn't touch her at all. Just kept clicking his phone. Then he put it in his pocket, walked towards the door and left the room.

Chapter 33

Megan was apprehensive as she sat down at Richard's desk. Even though she'd known him for years, his dark eyes could bore into her,, making her feel queasy.

He leaned forward. 'I wanted you to transform the company, Megan. That's why I gave you the job. Advertising revenues have plunged, circulation of the daily is falling and there's so much online competition that we may as well tell them to shut up shop now.'

Shit, thought Megan, here we go. He's going to fire me. No job, no son and nowhere to go. Washed up before I've even hit forty.

He smiled, showing his perfect white teeth. 'The thing is, Megan, you're doing something the others aren't.'

Megan sighed. She could no longer be bothered to suppress what she was thinking. 'It's okay, Richard. Shall I just make this easier for you?'

His smile wavered. 'What do you mean?'

'Do you want me to quit?'

'Why would I want that?'

'Because all of a sudden it seems that I am doing this job on a trial basis.'

He sat down and clicked his fingers. 'No, that's not what I said. Or what I want. The fact is, the board were impressed.'

'Really?' Megan's voice was doubtful.

'Yes.'

'Even that old codger, Bilston, who clearly can't stand me. And Paul?'

Richard coughed. He wouldn't meet her eye. 'Well, maybe not everyone. But they aren't the majority. Anyway, they've given us until the end of the year to turn things around.'

'I don't understand. You just said I *had* turned things around and I was bucking the trend.'

'Yes, you are,' he said quietly. 'That's why they're giving you another chance.'

Megan snorted. 'Richard, would you please stop talking in riddles? You said they're impressed I'm doing a good job but they want to give me another chance.'

What does that mean? And what happens to the daily if the circulation is dropping? Do they get until the end of the year?’

Richard sat back and folded his arms. ‘Look, Megan, you know how it works. It’s all game-playing. You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.’

‘In other words play the game by our rules or don’t play it all? And I’m assuming that Paul and *Lord* Bilston are in full agreement with this?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry, Megan, but I don’t see what alternative there is.’

‘I just don’t understand why there’s such reluctance over this article. Unless certain board members have something to hide.’

Richard didn’t reply.

‘Well, do they?’

‘Don’t be silly.’ Richard dismissed her question with a raised hand.

‘Then why the intervention?’

‘They just don’t think it’s the sort of thing people want to be reading. Might put them off their coffee and croissants if they think things like that are going on under their noses.’

Megan gave a harsh laugh. ‘Right. So they want me to stick to nice, safe little articles on how to apply lipstick properly or how to give the perfect blowjob? Even better: what about I run a fashion spread on what punters like their trafficked hookers to wear?’

‘Well, I think you’re being a bit melodramatic.’

Megan bit back the tears of frustration that were welling up.

‘Have a think about it and we’ll chat later.’ He looked at his watch. ‘I’ve a meeting to get to.’

‘Okay.’

He got up and walked her to the door, then jogged back to his desk. ‘Have you had any more thoughts on those little envelopes I’ve been passing you?’

‘Not really.’

He handed her a large brown envelope. ‘I feel like your PA. Here’s another one.’

Megan turned and snatched it from him. ‘What exactly do you want me to do with these? I mean, do you actually care? Maybe we could run them as the ideal wife’s

diary entries. Maybe that would keep the old codgers happy.’ She didn’t wait for a response.

When she got back into the *Enquiry* office she walked straight to her desk and slammed her bag down hard.

‘What’s up?’ said Sunita.

‘Nothing. Where’s Katherine?’

‘No sign of her yet,’ said Ronnie. ‘Mind you, she did post pictures on Facebook last night. Looked like she was going for it.’

‘Eh? Katherine?’

‘No. I’m just joking.’ He giggled.

Megan noticed a couple of texts on her phone. One was from Katherine: *Sorry Megan. Have a terrible migraine. Won’t be in today. Hope to be back tomorrow.*
Katherine

She sat down and opened the envelope from Richard.

Trudy’s Blog

‘Don’t be out if you can help it when your husband gets home after his day’s work.’

He arrived home tonight with a huge bunch of flowers and box of Hotel Chocolat truffles. He asked about my day and offered to cook dinner. He rustled up a bowl of carbonara, poured me a glass of wine and insisted I sit down. He looked tired. His face was white and his eyes like two dark slits. He was twitchy, jumping every time his phone vibrated. He didn’t eat much. Said he was tired from being away and wanted an early night. He switched off all the downstairs lights. I was also having an early night.

He curled his arm around me and stroked my hair. He was tender and loving and I can’t remember when he was last like that. I was tense as he pushed my nightie up and entered me. I closed my eyes and just moved my hips against his. It’s easier that way. He used a condom. I can’t remember when he last did that and I wondered, why now? But I couldn’t ask. That would make him angry. When he started to snore I relaxed a little. I know what’s happened. I know why he’s being like this. I turn over and cry silent tears. Because I know I can’t ever escape this life. Not now. It’s too late.

Trudy's Blog

'Don't go to sleep feeling cross with your husband.'

Today started off as a good day. I think if I was to give it a score, I would say it started out as eight out of ten. This morning, he told me he wouldn't be back home tonight. He said he was going to a conference in Edinburgh and he wouldn't have time to call. So I could just relax. I knew that he was lying. I knew he was not in Edinburgh. But I also knew he was telling me that I was off the hook. For one night. I could relax at home without that horrible sense of anxiety and dread weighing down on me, threatening to suffocate me, while I waited for him to call.

But while I should have been at home watching *EastEnders*, enjoying a ready meal from Marks and a glass of wine, I went to my usual spot and waited and watched. I didn't have to wait long. He was very much there and present in Dumbarton Road. The door swung open and he disappeared inside. I wondered how long he would take tonight and I looked over my notes from previous evenings. Sometimes he was there for over an hour, other times just twenty minutes. I flicked the radio on and listened to a phone-in on Radio Scotland while checking the door. The panel were discussing Scotland's flourishing gaming industry. It's not something I know anything about or am even remotely interested in, but I focused on what they were saying. It was a good distraction. Apparently Scottish developers contributed £99m to the UK GDP offering something for everyone. Blasting of zombies and the series where gamers can have their wicked way with poor, defenceless women. It's not exactly an export I think Scotland should be proud of but then what would I know?

He didn't take long to reappear. He walked out of the door, slamming it shut, and strode down the street, disappearing out of sight. I was just about to start the car up and call it quits when he reappeared around the corner with another man. His head was down and his hands thrust deep into his pockets. I couldn't see the other man clearly but there was definitely something familiar about him. Oh dear God, then the blood rushed to my head and I felt a wave of nausea slam into my mouth. Surely not? I gripped the steering wheel, forcing myself to stay where I was. I couldn't get out now. It would ruin everything. I hated him even more then. Fucking bastard. The man he was with is my brother. My stupid baby brother.

Megan gulped loudly. She felt her pulse quicken and tore her eyes away from the page. Now there's a brother too, she thought. What else was Trudy going to tell her? Megan slapped the papers on the desk and drummed her fingers impatiently against

them. She grabbed a pen and pulled her large desk-pad towards her and started to make some notes. She *had* to work out a way of joining up the dots.

The girl glanced over the bossman's shoulder. They were in the kitchen and she felt the cold air whoosh through from the hall outside. He grabbed her wrist and caught her chin roughly in his other hand. I wonder how your wee brothers are getting on, he said, his face ugly and twisted. He let go of her abruptly, then the door banged shut. He sat back and lit a roll-up. Sucking greedily at it, he blew a smoke ring in her face. It stung her eyes and she wiped them with the back of her hand. Don't get any silly ideas, love. Remember that wee pal of yours.

The girl wondered what they had done with the blonde. Where had they dumped her body? Not that anybody cared, she reminded herself. The bossman stood up and walked over to the cupboard. He pulled out a bottle, sloshed some clear liquid into it and passed it to her. The girl knew better now than to argue. She swallowed it quickly, feeling the burn at the back of her throat. When he passed the cigarette, she took it and inhaled. The edges of her mind became woozy again.

Let me tell you a wee story, he said. A wee story about one of our girls. Worked here for us. Had a huge debt to pay off before she could go home to her family and her wee baby. He paused to belch. Stupid cunt decided she'd had enough. Did a runner. He leaned forward suddenly and the girl shrank back. She got away, he said. But we knew where she was. We knew she was gonna testify against us in court. Stupid bitch. He took another drag from the cigarette. She was sent a wee present in the post from home. He smiled at her, baring his yellow teeth. Her wee man's foot.

The girl's eyes widened in shock and she hung her head, rubbing her fingers together quickly. Over and over.

Fancy another drink, doll? You look like you could use one, he said, standing up and turning to fetch the bottle.

The girl wished she was stronger and braver. How she wanted to launch herself at him, scratch at his eyes and hit the bottle over his head. She watched him pour another glug of the liquid into the glass. This time when he handed it to her she swallowed the lot at once.

Want to know the ending to the story? he said, not waiting for her to respond. He sat down nearer her this time and the girl could smell his rancid breath. She missed us so much that she decided she'd come back and join us again, he said. She was a

pretty wee thing, he said. Shame she didn't last much longer after that. She moved on to greater things. Know what I'm saying doll?

Chapter 34

Any further forward on the trafficking stuff? NC

It was the fifth text she'd received from Natasha since she'd returned from Sweden and she knew her friend was getting impatient. She'd given Megan an exclusive, and Megan was stalling. She didn't want to piss her off any more than she had done already. *Getting there. In meantime hoping to cover domestic abuse. Happy?* Megan glanced down at her watch. It was time she was at work. Her phone buzzed again. *Sure. Keep me posted. Have some update on NM.* NM? What did that mean? Megan couldn't think who she was referring to and was about to text her back when the doorbell rang. 'Coming,' she called as she grabbed her coat. It was probably the postman with a delivery. She'd ordered some books for Matthew. She opened the door. It was Harry.

'Sam Martin is dead,' said Harry, not waiting to be asked in.

'What do you mean?' She stepped aside as he pushed past her.

'He's dead.'

'Already? But what happened?'

Harry looked confused. 'What do you mean already?'

'Well, I thought he had more time.'

'Eh?'

'The tumour,' said Megan. 'He was having treatment. Said he didn't know how long he had. But that was just last week.'

'Tumour? So he was ill?'

'Well, yes. But he was having treatment. He was just starting another round last week.'

Harry sat down on the stool in the kitchen. 'I see. Well, that makes sense then.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that would all make sense. He got hit by a train at Partick. Must have thrown himself in front of it. Maybe it was all too much.'

'No,' shouted Megan. 'No way. There's no way Sam would've done that.'

'How do you know? I thought you didn't like him.'

'He wasn't my favourite person - no - but I had a soft spot for him.' Megan gasped. 'He told me he was being followed. I saw him last week for a coffee and told me he was being followed.'

'Who by?'

'I don't know. But you need to look into this. There's something very dodgy about this, Harry.' She thought about the note he'd posted through her door and wondered if she should mention it.

'It doesn't sound dodgy. Unless you're not telling me something, *again*.'

Megan felt a flash of anger surge through her. 'I'm telling you that Sam did not jump in front of a train. Someone pushed him. Someone to do with Warren McGregor. He warned me.' She hit her head with her hand. 'Of course, that would make sense. How else would they have known he was meeting me?'

'What are you talking about?' Who's "they" and how would they know he was meeting you.'

'My emails and my phones. They've been tapped. It makes sense now. I couldn't work out why everyone seemed to know what was going on at work. Then they knew Sam was meeting me that day and followed him. I've been followed too.'

'When?'

'The other day. I came out my sister's flat. I was being watched. Sam must have known. He told me to watch my back.' She threw Harry a strained look. 'Are *you* watching me, Harry? Do you know about this? Is that why you knew I'd be at the club the other night?'

'Calm down.' Harry walked towards her.

'Get away from me,' she yelled. 'If you don't believe me then get out of here.'

'Megan, I didn't say that. I said you need to calm down. You're hysterical. Come on, let me get you a cup of tea.'

'I don't want a bloody cup of tea, Harry. I want you to take me seriously. Sam told me he was being watched. Said he didn't trust emails or the phone. That's why he sent me that letter . . .'

'What letter?' Harry's voice was urgent. 'If he sent you a letter and you think he didn't commit suicide then you have to show it to me.'

'No, no, look, please just go.'

He grabbed her wrist. 'Megan. You *have to* tell me what's going on. If you think there's more to this then you have to tell me. We could be dealing with a murder.'

Megan's heart was racing and her teeth started chattering. 'Trudy knew I was being watched. That's why she stopped emailing.'

'Who's Trudy?'

'The woman who's been sending me blogs. She's been drip-feeding me information about a trafficking ring in Glasgow. Then she stopped suddenly and started sending the documents to Richard's email.'

'Can I see them?'

'Why not? May as well show you. Though maybe you've already read them.'

He looked as though she'd slapped him across the face. 'Why would I have read them?' A shadow crossed his face. 'I told you that you can trust me and I meant it.' He stared at her and was about to say something when her phone rang.

Megan saw the office number flash on the screen. 'I'd better take this.' She turned away from him. 'Katherine, sorry, I won't be long.' Her face paled. 'Police? What do you mean?' Megan stared at Harry, the phone clamped to her ear. 'Okay. I'll be there as soon as I can. Can you call Richard and let him know, and contact the lawyer. I'll be with you in five minutes.' She ended the call.

'What is it?'

Megan glared at him. 'I need to go. It's Ronnie. He's been arrested. But maybe you know that already?'

'I have no bloody idea what you're talking about. Slow down.'

'Ronnie, my colleague at work. He's been arrested.'

'Why?'

'Seems like someone from the police knows exactly what's happening in our office. I would love to know how.'

'Why has he been arrested?'

'He's been accused of trying to hack into a paedophile site on the so-called dark web.'

'And has he?'

'I need to speak to him. He was trying to investigate something for me, Harry. Something linked to the trafficking ring. We're obviously getting a bit too close for comfort.' She gestured to the door. 'You need to leave now.'

'Come on. I'll give you a lift to the office and I'll make some calls and find out what's going on.'

'Thanks,' said Megan, 'but I think I'd rather walk.' She pulled the door shut behind her and strode off. She knew Harry was standing watching her but she didn't look back. She pulled out the pay as you go mobile she'd picked up in town the other day - in an attempt to foil the phone-tappers - and called Richard.

'It's okay,' he said. 'The lawyer is with them now. She's confident that it will all get thrown out. Seems to have been over the top with the way the police came in mob-handed. They've seized their desktops too.'

'Jeez,' said Megan. 'What are they hoping to find?'

'Just procedure, I guess.'

'Don't they want to talk to me? It was me they were working for. I gave them instructions.'

'Well, let's not get into that just now. The lawyer's sharp. She'll sort it and if she needs you she'll call you. Try not to worry.' Richard's voice was reassuring and Megan started to calm down. 'I do need you to come straight up though when you get in. These bloody documents are coming thick and fast. A few came in just five minutes ago. I think you need to see them A.S.A.P.'

'Okay.' Megan suddenly felt she was being watched. She looked around but there was nobody behind her or across the street. She shivered. 'With you in two minutes.' She ran up the steps into the office and went straight to the lift. 'I've an appointment to see him,' she called to Richard's PA, who was on the phone. She nodded and waved her in.

'That was quick,' he said. 'Here you go.' He handed her several bits of paper. See what you make of it. It's the last one that worries me.'

Trudy's Blog

'Don't let him coop you up while he is away. You must live your life; you cannot vegetate.'

It doesn't matter what happens to me now. I'm past it. But these girls. They're someone's children. Being treated like cattle on a farm. I'm not sure what the answer is. That's where I'm hoping you can help. I'm going to provide you with as much evidence as I can gather. Hopefully you can expose them for what they are. What he and his cronies are. And my brother. My brother who I haven't seen for years. Who I thought was living in London.

I shudder when I think of my own child. My own daughter. Our daughter. Does he think about her? Oh God. What if she finds out? I mean - she will. There's no getting past this. If you can tell the world what he's really like then they will know. Everyone will know. It will ruin her. She'll be utterly mortified. Devastated. Oh God, can I do this? It will be my fault if this comes out. I'll be the one held responsible. Will she ever forgive me?

He's auctioning the girls off to the highest bidder in these sordid little parties he's having. He tells me he's off to Aberdeen or Edinburgh. But he's not. He's been constantly sniffing around the property in Partick. Who would have thought it? An extension onto the posh West End, with its Victorian buildings and fancy delis and tree-lined streets? Who would have thought it's happening in a building overlooked by a Montessori nursery and a fine wine shop? Where a townhouse will set you back over a million? I was there and I got shots on my phone. I'll send them to you soon. Let you see him and let you see what's going on.

He thinks he's superior. Smarter and better than me. He will pick up my phone and check my messages. He thinks he has the upper hand. He doesn't. I'm ahead of him. And I know all about mobile phones. Apps, memories. I watch and I learn. I've copied all the information you'll need. It's all there. Plenty to expose him. You'll see it soon enough. When I'm ready and I think it's time, I'll send it to you.

But I can't complain about my lot. I need to remember to count my blessings. Because my life could be so very much worse. And it's nothing like these poor victims. I need to get a grip of myself. Things could always be worse.

'Bloody hell,' said Megan.

'Pretty grim, eh?'

'What do you think we should do?'

'Still have to sit tight. Until there's specific detail there's not a lot we can do. She's not accusing anyone specific of anything. Yet. I think it's just a matter of time though. He glanced down at his mobile. 'That's the lawyer . . . hello,' he said smoothly. 'Yes.

I see, I see.’ He turned away and Megan was unable to see his face or read his expression. ‘That’s great. Thank you.’ He grimaced. ‘No wonder we pay her as much as we do. The woman is a legend. She’s got the police to drop the charges. Some technical hitch or something or other. Anyway, Ronnie’s on his way back into the office now.’

Megan’s shoulders dropped in relief and her body sagged into the seat. How could she have let this happen? Ronnie would be mortified. She knew how humiliating it was to be arrested in front of colleagues and marched out of your workplace like you were a common criminal. It had happened to her once in London because she wouldn’t reveal her source for an exposé she had done.

‘Right, I’d better go down and let Katherine know. And Richard, thank you.’

‘No problem.’ He picked up his putter and was just about to take a shot when Megan remembered the other news of the day.

‘Sam Martin is dead,’ she said.

Richard missed the shot. ‘What?’

‘Fell in front of a train.’

‘Oh dear.’ Richard lined up his next putt.

‘Apparently.’

Richard looked up. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I just think there’s more to it.’ Megan was suddenly exhausted. Sam was dead and she felt partly to blame. ‘I asked him to make some enquiries for me. I think because of that someone pushed him in front of the train. Richard looked up and, again, missed his shot.’

The girl dreamt the man came back for her. He'd crept into her room, roused her from her sleep, and beckoned her to follow him. The door of her room was ajar. When she hesitated he held out his hand. The girl grasped it. He clutched her tightly and gently tugged her alongside him. She tried to warn him about the bossman but the words wouldn't come out of her mouth. He looked at her and jerked his head towards the front door. Everything was quiet and still. She did as he said and followed, feeling the grit from the floorboards stick to her bare feet. She had nothing to take with her anyway apart from the memories. They would be etched inside her mind forever. A sense of calm fell over her as the man opened the front door. This was it, she thought to herself, she was really leaving. She was going home. Then a hand yanked her shoulder back and she woke abruptly. She was still there. In her bed, in her prison. The bossman stood glowering at her.

Having sweet dreams, were you? He yawned. You look awful happy when you're sleeping. He laughed and dug his hand deeply into his pocket, pulling out a small foil packet. He threw it at her. Your tablets, doll. Make sure you take them. We dinnae want any accidents, do we? He walked away, whistling, then suddenly stopped and turned. Mind you that might do it for some. He rubbed his hands together. I'll do a wee bit research and get back to you on that. Take them the now. He turned, slammed the door behind him and turned the key. The memory of the dream was so vivid the girl couldn't believe she was still there. She reached out for the foil and clutched it in her palm. Pushing out a tablet for day one, she swallowed it. She'd always dreamed one day of having her own family. But not like this. Panic gripped hold of her chest and her breathing became shallow. Could they really do that to her? Force her to get pregnant? She needed to think about what to do if they took the pills away. She needed the man to come back for her. It was her only option right now. Yet he would surely turn out to be a liar. Just like everyone else.

Chapter 36

Megan hadn't slept well. The wind had howled around the windows all night and she couldn't stop thinking about Sam. Poor guy. Bloody Glasgow weather, she thought, as she opened the blinds in the lounge. Megan had never imagined that she would miss London, but she was beginning to long for its weather. At least the people here made her laugh. That did something to make up for the rain and gales.

She padded through to the kitchen to make some coffee, and stopped when she saw the jiffy bag on the mat. She frowned. Even when she was in London she didn't receive this amount of mail. Bending down to pick it up, she realised it must have been hand-delivered as there was no address or stamp on it. Just her name. She ripped it open and reached her hand inside. It was wet and she recoiled in disgust, pulling her hand out quickly. She nearly vomited when she saw her fingers were covered in blood. Reeling back in shock, she screamed and dropped the envelope back onto the doormat. Her heart was racing and her mouth had gone dry. What the hell was in there? Her legs started to shake. She reached for it again and saw there was a letter. She eased it out but it was covered in blood. As she read it, her whole body started to shudder.

Stop causing problems and sticking your nose where it's not wanted. That wee boy of yours, Matthew, has a cute nose. You don't want anything happening to it, do you?

Megan ran back to her room, grabbed her phone and dialled Sebastian's number. She thumped her foot against the ground as she waited for him to answer.

'Sebastian, it's me. Is everything okay?' She tried to keep her voice calm. 'Good. That's good. And Matthew? Is he okay?'

'He was the last time I checked,' said Sebastian.

'What do you mean?' said Megan, clutching at the bedcovers. 'Where is he?'

'Em, he's just out.'

'What?' she shrieked. 'Where is he? Where is he?'

Sebastian's voice was muffled as he spoke to someone.

‘Sebastian, where the fuck is my son?’ she shouted.

‘Megan, what’s the matter? You sound hysterical. Stop shouting. He’s right here. Felicity just took him to the park.’

Her whole body sagged in relief and she started to cry.

‘What’s the matter with you? He’s fine. Stop worrying. I am quite capable of looking after him.’

‘But you weren’t, were you?’ Megan’s voice was ragged. ‘*She was.*’

He didn’t respond for a moment. ‘Why are you calling from this number?’

‘It’s a new number. I lost my other phone.’ She dug her nails into her palm and clamped the phone to her ear. ‘I need you to listen to me. I’ve been doing some thinking.’

‘Are you okay? You’re sounding a bit unhinged.’

Megan tried her best to stop her voice from trembling. ‘I think you’re right. I’m working so much right now I don’t have the time or energy to devote to him. I can’t give him what he needs.’

‘That’s a bit of an abrupt turnaround,’ he said.

‘I’ve just been thinking about what you said.’

‘Don’t you want to wait until we come up at the weekend to discuss it, though? In fact, I was going to suggest Felicity came too.’

‘No,’ she shouted. ‘No, that will make it worse. You mustn’t come up at the weekend.’

‘You don’t want us to come up?’

‘No, I don’t want you to come up. Please, don’t come.’ She squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

‘What’s the matter? I mean if it’s about Felicity then there’s no need to be awkward about it. She gets on very well with Matthew.’

He may as well have hit Megan on the head with a hot iron. As if this wasn’t hard enough, he was now telling her that Matthew had a substitute mum. ‘Um, there’s been a problem with the flat. Damp.’ She opened her eyes and looked at the freshly painted magnolia walls. ‘It’s damp and cold, and I need to get the landlord round to sort it. I wouldn’t feel right having him here.’

Sebastian’s voice softened. ‘Are you sure?’

She could hear Matthew in the background, his infectious giggle and the sound of Peppa Pig. She wanted to reach down the phone and hug her son, her baby.

‘You still there?’

‘Um yes. I’m fine. Just a bit stressed about everything, you know, and I wanted the flat to be perfect. And work is the usual . . .’

‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘You’re doing it. Looking after Matthew is the most important thing.’

‘Do you want to talk to him?’

‘Nope. It’s okay. Really. I’m sure he’s quite happy watching telly. I’d better go anyway. Got to get to work.’ She paused. ‘And thank you. And thank Felicity.’ She hung up then walked through to the living room and slumped onto the sofa. Curling herself into a ball, she stared at the picture of Matthew which she had put on the mantelpiece just the other night. Eventually she sat up and reached down for a tissue from the box on the floor. She blew her nose nosily and mopped her wet face then took a deep breath and picked up her phone. ‘I need you to come now,’ she said. ‘I’ll explain when you get here.’

Harry was wearing his running gear when he arrived. His face was flushed and he was out of breath. ‘What’s going on?’

She pointed at the bloody envelope and letter on the worktop.

‘What’s this?’

‘Read it,’ she said.

‘Is there something in there that I’m not going to like?’ He pulled a pair of thin gloves from his zip pocket.

‘Just read it.’

Harry looked at the piece of paper Megan had dropped on the floor. After he’d read the contents he whistled through his teeth. Then he stooped down to pick up the envelope. Peering inside, he reached in and pulled out a fleshy, bloody stump.

‘You don’t recognise anything about it?’

‘Nothing. It’s just the Ariel font and normal paper. The stuff every office has. Nothing out of the ordinary. Harry, how would anyone here know about Matthew? I don’t exactly walk about telling the world I have a son.’

Harry shook his head. ‘Did you check that he’s okay?’

She nodded. 'Yes, he's fine. What do you think that is?' She pointed at the stump he still held.

'Probably an animal part. We'll get forensics to test it. Let me go and make some calls.' He rested a hand on Megan's shoulder. 'And I've some contacts in the Met. I'll let them know what's going on so they can keep an eye on the wee man if need be. They owe me one. When did you find it?'

'This morning when I got up to make some coffee. Maybe seven thirty.' She sighed. 'Everything's gone wrong since I moved here. I'm starting to wish I'd stayed in London. Maybe it was a mistake coming here . . .'

'Whoa, come on now. What else has gone wrong?'

'Sam is dead. Ronnie arrested. What happened in Sweden. Not to mention the fact that I never see my son. And now this. They're threatening my son's life.' Megan pointed at the letter. 'God, this is fucking awful. Just because I'm doing my job.'

'Because that's the kind of scummy folk we're dealing with. I'm going to have to call this one in, Megan. Might be an idea now to show me Sam Martin's letter. Not that the boss will like that. She was quite pleased it was an open-and-shut case. She's not going to be happy if it's another murder enquiry.'

'Who would do this to me?'

'Think,' he said. 'Is there anyone obvious at work?'

She shrugged. 'Newspapers are full of two-faced bastards. But I don't think any of them would stoop as low as to threaten the life of my son. It's the McGregor guy, isn't it, from the club?'

'You've obviously ruffled someone's feathers. You must be getting close with your investigation. And it's amazing what depths folk will sink to if something they value is being threatened,' he said. 'Normally their empire.'

Megan moved towards the kitchen. 'I need a cup of tea. I can't stand the sight of blood.' She added a heaped spoon of sugar into her mug.

'Any chance of one of them for me?' he said.

'Sure.' Megan turned her back to him. At least Matthew was hundreds of miles away from her right now. Maybe that was a blessing after all. What if he had been here with her? She started to shake uncontrollably.

'Can I call anyone? Your sister?' Harry was standing behind her.

'It's okay,' said Megan, wishing he would hold her. 'I'll call her in a bit. Get the police stuff out of the way first of all. Here's your tea,' she said, handing him a mug. Something had started to niggle away at the back of her mind.

'Thanks.' He took a sip. 'You even remembered how I take it. I'm touched.'

'Black with two sugars.'

In her mind Megan could hear herself telling Richard that she had had enough. That she was resigning. This was the final straw.

Harry looked at his phone which had beeped. 'They won't be long. Did I tell you about my wee argument with the boss the other day?'

'No.'

'She's getting impatient about the two Nigerian girls. Wants to shut it down. Says we've had plenty of time to get to the bottom of it, and having the deaths unsolved, as she put it, was not helping us reach our targets.' He shook his head bitterly. 'She sat there behind a big pile of papers on her desk and said that some of the city councillors were starting to ask questions. That they were complaining there was too much negative attention surrounding the force just now. That we needed some good news. Something positive to focus on.'

'What, so she wants you just to write them off?'

'Aye, can you believe it?'

'I can, actually. Nothing surprises me.'

'I told her she was being short-sighted and that these investigations take time.'

'How did she take it?'

'Um, not so well. Said that with no witnesses, no sightings, nothing to go on then we can't be seen to be wasting our budget. Everyone's having to watch their spending right now.'

'It always comes down to money, doesn't it? Even with the police.'

'Aye, well, I haven't told you the latest development. That soon shut her up.'

'What's that?' Megan's interest was suddenly piqued.

'My contact in the lab called me last night. The blood tests are back.'

'And?'

Harry drained the rest of his tea. 'Looks like both women were HIV positive.'

The girl pressed her clammy forehead against the car's tinted window. She stared at the sky heavy with dark clouds, rubbish blowing across the pavements, and a man who had stumbled into a doorway to vomit. A blur of glowing colours flashed in front of her eyes and she turned to take a long, deep drag of her cigarette. The boss sat in the passenger seat talking quietly to the driver. The girl shifted uncomfortably in her seat, her bare legs sticking to the cool leather. Earlier, when she'd been to the toilet, she'd wiped away thick, dark clots. She was sore everywhere. Constantly aching and dirty. Her mind was woolly, she wasn't sure how long they had been at that party. A few hours maybe? Or even days? She picked at a scab on her knee. How much had she had to drink? Where were the others? Suddenly the driver jerked the car around, ignoring the blaring horns, and sped back the way they had come. The girl shrugged and gazed at the street and its dirty tenement buildings looming against the slate-grey sky. A few buses wheezed past and a police car, its siren blaring, raced past.

What you playing at? shouted the boss. I'm going back, said the driver. The boss didn't speak for a moment. The girl's breath quickened and she looked down, tracing her thumb over the bracelet of bruises around her wrist. Pull over, said the boss in a sour tone. The driver glanced at him but didn't stop. The girl's eyes widened as she stared at the driver. I said pull over, repeated the boss, now jabbing a gun into the driver's neck. The car skidded to a stop. The girl held her breath. She knew the boss wouldn't hesitate to shoot him. Alright, said the driver. No need for any of that business, he said, jerking his head towards the gun.

The girl watched the driver's shoulders tremble beneath his leather jacket. The boss clicked the gun and the smell of piss filled the air. Think you call the shots, do you? said the boss. Naw . . . I just thought we should get the others, the driver said, his voice trembling. Did you now? Silence. The others? The boss gave a hard, brittle chuckle. 'There are no others, you fuckwit. They're all gone. Gone, whispered the driver. Aye. Gone, said the boss with a click of fingers. Just like that. But that wasn't part of the deal, the driver slowly said. With a smile, the boss jabbed the driver again with the gun. Deal. What deal? You stupid fuck. There is no deal. The boss pointed ahead. Bet you wish you'd stuck in with the train driving, eh? Now do as you're told otherwise we'll be making a detour past the Clyde. The driver turned the keys in the ignition and gripped the steering wheel. The girl stared at his white knuckles, then turned to watch the raindrops which were now sliding down the window. She knew

the clock was ticking. She was damaged goods, with her cold sores and bruises and her straggly hair. I could just get rid of you now, the boss had told her earlier. But someone else can do that for me. And they'll pay me lots for the privilege. The girl shuddered. The blonde woman had talked about that. How men would pay to watch girls like her die. She thought about her friend, the blonde. She closed her eyes and thought about home. She had happy, sunny memories of being a child. Never could she have imagined that this is what would become of her. She wondered if her family would ever want her back after what had happened to her. She would bring shame on them if they knew what she had done. How could she even get back home?

She opened her eyes and watched as the boss muttered to the driver. She couldn't make out what they were saying. The car turned down a side street that she didn't recognise. Where were they going? Why weren't they going back to the flat? The car slowed and stopped. The girl looked up at the boarded windows on the red sandstone block above the row of shops, with heavy grilles on the windows. A sunbed salon and a grocer's. Maybe the boss needed more cigarettes. Drop us here and wait for me. Moving closer to the driver, the boss's mouth was pressed against his ear. And don't ever fuckin' try anything like that again. The girl caught the driver's gaze in the rear-view mirror and she felt the familiar surge of nausea rise from the pit of her stomach. She trembled and clenched her fists, trying to steel herself. Was this it then? She had to do something. But what? How could she get away? He had a gun. The bossman slid out of the car and she frantically looked back at the busy street they'd come from. Would anyone notice if she screamed? Would they care? The bossman turned, waiting for her to follow as usual. The girl sat there, her knees knocking together, her teeth chattering. This was it. She would never see her family again. She was going to die. She looked pleadingly at the driver. Then she glanced down at her spiky-heeled stilettoes. Could she make a dash for it when she got out of the car? Should she try to run? She watched as the bossman sneezed, then reached to open her door. Then his mobile rang. He paused and snatched a hand back, reaching into a pocket to pull out the phone. The girl stared as he started to laugh, his mouth wide open, exposing the mercury fillings in his molars. The girl looked again at the driver, and in that split second she knew this was her chance. I'm gonna talk to him, he said. I'm not going to lock the doors. The girl slipped off her

shoes, moved as quickly as she could out of the other side of the car. Then the girl ran.

Chapter 37

Megan gulped in the fresh, damp air as she jogged down Hyndland Street away from her flat. She needed to get away from the smell of that cloying scent of blood. She wanted to clear her mind. Harry had stayed until the police took the envelope and its contents away for examination. When he offered to clean up the sticky mess streaked across the floor, she nodded, grateful to have it dealt with. Then she pulled on her trainers and ran. The rain was falling in steady sheets and she turned into Dumbarton Road where a bus, lurching in and out of a pothole, sprayed her with dirt. The words threatening her son kept creeping into her mind. She ran harder and faster, slapping her feet beneath her. Wiping the beads of rainwater from her face, she looked up at the red sandstone flats above the rows of shops ahead. A sunbed shop, with a luminous yellow sign, a shabby looking medical centre and a grubby looking sandwich shop. She felt a quiver of panic when a drunken man banged into her, then pity when he mumbled 'sorry' and stumbled on. She dodged an elderly lady pushing an empty supermarket trolley.

Her chest felt tight as the threat against Matthew swirled around her head again. She thought about Joanna and the way in which she had coped with the loss of her son. Since having her own child she had gained an even greater respect for her sister. Perhaps I should stop trying to be Superwoman, she thought to herself. Maybe I should think about working in a more mundane job where I can get home at a normal time. Just then, Megan saw a commotion ahead. Someone ran onto the road. Why weren't they stopping? It was a girl. And she wasn't stopping. Neither was the orange double-decker bus heading straight towards her. It bounced in a pothole, someone shouted, there was a scream, a squeal of brakes, then a thud. A moment of silence. Then more screeching brakes and a crunching noise. The sound of a car driving into the one in front. Then another shout. 'Someone call an ambulance. A lassie's been hit.'

Megan twisted round to see a man frantically shouting in his phone. Shopkeepers were gathered in the doorways, watching the scene.

'It's okay. They're coming. They're on the way,' shouted the man to anyone and everyone.

Rain dribbled down Megan's face. She made herself walk on, people were out of their cars now, there was nothing she could do. As she passed the spot where the girl had been hit she glanced over. All she could see was a crumpled heap on the road. A woman was beside her, cradling her head. Someone had covered her with a jacket. There was a dark shadow on the road. Megan wondered if it was oil, or rain. It seemed too dark to be blood. Not like the blood she'd just had all over her hands. She needed to go home, wanted to get away. Horns were blaring, help would soon be here. An elderly woman ahead of her stood staring, then gave a gargling sob. Turning away, Megan retraced her steps and returned to Harry.

'You're not too bad with a mop,' she said as she walked in the front door.

'One of my many talents.' He pointed at her wet trainers. 'Watch your feet.'

'You'll make someone a good wife one day.' Megan regretted the words as soon as they were out of her mouth.

Harry's face was red but she wasn't sure if it was from his enthusiastic cleaning or from embarrassment. 'Feel any better?'

'Not really.' She sat down and pulled off her shoes. 'I saw a girl being knocked over on Dumbarton Road. Looked pretty bad.'

'For fuck's sake. What a morning.'

Megan shrugged. 'Guess I'd better get ready for work.'

'Do you think that's a good idea?'

'Yes. Otherwise I'll just sit about here and mope. I may as well get on and do my job. That's what I'm here to do. Now that I'm no longer a mum.'

'Of course you're still a mum, Megan . . . for what it's worth, what you've done makes you an even better mum.'

Megan cast her eyes to the floor.

'At least let me drop you there?'

'Really, it's fine. I could do with the fresh air. And no, I'm not. I've practically told Sebastian he can have full custody.'

'He'll understand later when you explain what's happened.' He glanced down at his running leggings and trainers. 'I'd better get home and have a shower. I'll call you later and let you know if they find out anything about the package.'

'Thanks, Harry,' she said as she stopped to hug him. He pulled her to him and she let him kiss her. Suddenly she pulled away. 'Come on. Off you go. I'd better have a shower too.'

Half an hour later Megan was about to walk up the steps to the office when a teenager cut in front of her. She had her iPhone plugged into her ears and Megan could hear the thump of the bass. 'Watch where you're going,' she muttered.

'Megan Ross?'

Megan turned round to see the teenage girl looking at her warily.

'Who wants to know?'

'I've got something for you,' she said. 'Delivery from Sam.' She reached into the Morrisons shopping-bag she was carrying and held out a padded envelope.

Megan's pulse quickened. 'From Sam?'

'Aye.'

'But he's dead.'

'Aye. I'm just doing as I'm told. Do you want it or not?'

Megan reached to take the package from her. 'Thanks.'

'No bother,' said the girl. 'See ya.'

The yellow envelope was thick. Her name was written in Sam's spidery handwriting. She ran in through the doors, nodding at the security guard, dumped her bags on the floor by her desk and ripped the envelope open.

'You okay, boss?' said Ronnie from across the office.

'Mmm.' Megan didn't look up as she shook the contents onto her desk. Her hands spread out several photographs, her fingers sticking to the glossy paper. It was a series of shots of people, men, going into and coming out of a building which looked as though it was somewhere in the West End. A tenement building with a close, which looked familiar. Megan frowned. Where was it? And a picture of a girl. A young black girl. Then she noticed the memory stick which had also fallen out of the envelope, and a note with a scribbled message on it.

Megan,

If you've got these then you know something has happened to me. I asked a pal to post them to you if I happened to kick the bucket. I know I was taking a big chance going in there.

But I had nothing to lose. The girl is one of several. She said her name was Idoto or Ito something. I couldn't make it out. Then she said she gets called Mercy. She said she was from Nigeria. I promised I would go back and help her. Please help her. I've written the address on the back of one of the photos. The others, well, you can work out who they are, can't you? Dirty pricks. Hope they get all that's coming to them. Good luck with it. See you on the other side.

Sam

Megan felt a prickle down her spine and she shivered. She had been right about Sam. Poor, poor guy. She sat there for a moment, too stunned to speak. She rubbed her eyes, knowing they were bloodshot and swollen. Then she picked up the memory stick and was about to slot it into her computer when she remembered her system was being monitored. She stood up and took it to Ronnie.

'What you doing?' he said huffily, shutting his Facebook page down. He had been forced to use his own laptop since his desktop had been seized by the police.

'I've got some pictures here. I need you to see them,' she said.

'You've already got me into plenty of trouble with dodgy pictures. Do you have to do it on mine?'

'Yes,' she said, pleading. 'I don't trust mine and this is what we're waiting for, Ronnie. Pictures for the trafficking piece.'

He rolled his eyes, snatched the stick from Megan and slotted it in. Then he began clicking on the folder of the images. They were copies of the pictures on Megan's desk.

'Fuck me,' said Ronnie.

Megan stood in silence and watched as Ronnie clicked through the images of men including Bilston, an MSP and a few other faces who looked familiar but which she couldn't immediately place.

'What do you want me to do with them, boss?'

'Can you make copies, please. And not a word to anyone for now. I need to think.' She waited for Ronnie to save the copies, then he handed her the memory stick. She walked over to her desk and logged in. 'Where's Katherine?' she said, looking over at her empty seat. 'Not like her to be late.' Straight away she saw the email from

Trudy. She frowned and clicked on it, briefly wondering why Trudy was emailing her directly again, especially when Megan was convinced her system was bugged.

Trudy's Blog

'You have a right to be heard.'

The doctor called me this morning. She told me she had my results but wouldn't give them to me over the phone, she insisted that I went into the surgery. When I asked if I was pregnant, it was meant as a joke. She didn't laugh. On my way to the surgery I wondered if she would tell me I have cancer. That worried me a bit. What if it was terminal? What would I tell my daughter? Mind you, she never comes home anyway. She's at that stage. She wants to be with her friends and concentrate on her studies. I need to remember she's not a kid anymore. She'll be fine. She will go on regardless of what happens to me. I just won't tell her. I'll keep my illness to myself. Go to the Beatson. They'll look after me.

I pushed the door of the surgery open and smelt disinfectant and bleach. The receptionist avoided eye contact which made me think it was bad news. Definitely cancer. I sat down and picked up a magazine which told me how to make the perfect Christmas cake even though it was April. When the doctor called me through to her room, I tried to put her at ease. It's okay, I said. I know what you're going to say. She looked confused. I told her I knew all about the statistics. I mean one in three people these days get it and there were lots of different treatments.

That was when she told me the good news. That I didn't have cancer. I looked at her then smiled with relief.

Then she told me the bad news. You're HIV positive.

HIV positive? As in AIDS? Bizarrely, all I could think about was Freddie Mercury. His moustache; that white vest. The doctor's mouth moved but I may as well have been underwater for all I heard. Glug, glug, glug. Death. I am going to die.

He's given me a time-bomb. Tick tock. I've done everything to make things right. I've tried to be patient, kind and understanding. The traits of a good wife. It's all been for him. He's my life. But now he's taking it away. Selfish, selfish bastard. It feels better to write that down. I was always told not to swear. Ladies don't swear. But I'm not a lady. I'm a stupid cow with a scumbag of a husband. He's a bastard. With his dirty bell-end.

I hate him. I want to kill him. I can leave him. I will leave him. Now I have no choice. My mind is made up. It is time to tell the truth. Tell you about his dirty secrets. The games he

likes to play. And it's not just him. It's his cocky, arrogant friends too. Pontificating to their families and friends about what big men they are. They think they're all hotshots. Like to be seen on the Glasgow scene. Well their airs of false superiority will vanish in a second when everyone knows what they're really like. What they really do behind closed doors. I need to think about how I tell you this. How exactly I should describe what a sordid bunch they are. I need you to know something, Megan. I need you to know that you weren't attacked that night in Stockholm. You didn't have sex with anyone. You'll have worked out that someone slipped something into your drink. It's a horrible feeling, isn't it, when you can't remember the night before? When you don't know what you've done or what's been done to you.

He used to do it to me because he wanted to make me vulnerable, he wanted to have the upper hand. He wanted you to think someone had violated you, so he would be in control. It was me, Megan. It was me who slipped it into your drink. I am sorry. I am sorry I let you think that the Clooney lookalike had attacked you. Do you want to know what else happened that night, Megan? When I was in your room? After you were stripped and put in bed? I took out your laptop and your mobile and downloaded everything I could. He wanted to know exactly how much information you were privy to and be one step ahead. He made me bug your mobile and your emails. He knew everything you were planning and everywhere you were going. And the condom wrapper? Just a wee trick to try and play with your mind. And the body in the Botanic? It was me who made the call, Megan. I phoned you to tip you off. It was the only way I thought I could do anything to help. The police wouldn't have listened to me. Or if they had it would have made it worse for me. He's too clever to let himself be implicated. I would come off worse.

When you found that second body, Megan, I knew you would do something about it. I just had to work out how to feed you the information. He was furious. Said work was causing him problems. But I knew why he was livid. His little hobby was being curtailed.

You're brilliant at your job, Megan. A great hack. I know you'll tell the truth. The details are all here. I've tried my best to gather it all for you though he does a lot of it online now. Uses that Bitcoin currency – I've struggled with that. I hope the police will help you. I've given you everything I can think of. You have it all. *Please* do something with it, Megan. Please make a difference. I just want to apologise. I'm sorry that I won't see you again. Don't bother trying to find me. It's too late.

Megan gasped, catching her breath. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself a moment. 'I don't believe it.' Pushing her chair back, she stood up and started to pace.

'You okay, Megan?' said Ronnie, looking over.

She looked blankly at him, then raced back to her desk and hit 'print'. Snatching up her phone, she called Harry.

'There's something you need to see. Can you come into the office?'

'Yes, I'll be there as soon as I can. What's going on?'

'I have some pictures I need to show you. Urgently.'

'Okay. Is this me acting on official police business?'

Megan exhaled loudly through her mouth. 'Yes . . . and there's something else. I have a feeling I know who Trudy is.' She put the phone down and stared at Katherine's empty seat in disbelief. How could she not have known?

Chapter 38

Something about the body in the Botanic was niggling at the back of Megan's mind when she arrived home later that night. She reached up into the kitchen cupboard and poured herself a large measure of Macallan. The pale liquid slid down her throat and she stood there for a moment enjoying the burning sensation trickling down her throat. Kicking off her shoes, she sat down at the breakfast bar. It had been a long day. Harry had come to the office and looked at the pictures. His face revealed nothing as he looked at image after image implicating several well-known men. He had taken the pictures away and told Megan he would be in touch. She'd heard nothing from him since. As she sat nursing her drink, she reached for her mobile and called her contact at the morgue.

'The nail-varnish,' said Megan. 'Was it the same colour on both feet?'

'I can't remember. I'll check and call you back.'

It didn't take him long. 'Pink. It was bright pink.'

'Thanks,' said Megan. 'I owe you one.' She finished off her whisky, poured another, then called Joanna. 'It's me. What did you say Rhona did at the shelter?'

'She comes in and does wee treatments for the women there.'

'Does she paint their toenails?'

'Yes,' said Joanna. 'Why are you asking?'

'I'd just like to talk to her,' Megan said impatiently.

'She's here just now.'

'Don't let her leave,' said Megan, pulling her shoes back on. 'I'll be there soon.' She called a taxi and, while she waited, looked longingly at the drink sitting on the kitchen worktop. It would have to wait.

Ten minutes later she was pacing the reception area at the refuge, waiting for Joanna to come downstairs and sign her in.

'What's the matter?' Joanna tugged at her lanyard.

'I've got some pictures. I just want to show them to her.'

'Okay . . . well, take it easy. I don't want you freaking her out. She's prone to anxiety.'

Megan shook her head. 'I won't. This won't take long.'

'Come on. She's having a break in the kitchen.'

She followed Joanna back up the stairs into a stark white kitchen, made even harsher by the strip-lighting, where Rhona sat dipping a biscuit into her mug of tea. It crumbled into the mug as she looked up and saw Megan.

'Don't worry,' said Megan. 'I just want to show you some pictures. Just want to check if you recognise anyone.' She reached her hand into her bag, not taking her gaze off Rhona's pale face.

'Megan, come on,' said Joanna. 'Do we have to do this right now?'

'Yes. It's important.' She stared at Rhona. 'Can you tell me if you recognise this place, Rhona? Or any of the people?'

Rhona bit her lip and looked up at Megan. She reached out and took the pictures from her. Megan watched her reactions as she looked through all the shots. She handed them back and nodded.

'Do you know where that is?'

Rhona nodded.

'Have you been there?'

She nodded again.

'Why did you go there?' asked Megan gently.

Rhona looked at Joanna. 'Am I going to get in trouble?'

'No.' Joanna frowned at her sister. 'Not if you tell the truth.'

'I went there. Just to do some nails and things. I needed the money.'

'Who asked you to go?'

'The man.'

'Which man?' Megan was trying desperately to keep her voice calm.

'At the club.'

'Do you remember his name?'

Rhona nodded.

'Can you tell me?'

Rhona glanced over at Joanna, blinking hard.

'It's okay, Rhona. You can tell her if you know.'

'Warren. Warren McGregor,' she whispered.

Megan's heart was thudding. 'Thank you.' She pointed at the other picture with Bilston and the MSP. 'Do you recognise these men?'

Rhona nodded. 'I, I saw him on the telly the other night.' She pointed at the politician.

'Thanks, Rhona. That's all I need to know for now.'

'Are you going to tell the police?' she said, her voice cracking.

Megan didn't reply.

'Because I don't want to talk to them. I don't want any trouble.'

Megan pursed her lips together. 'I can't force you to, Rhona. But these are bad men. You might be the only witness.'

'I'm not saying anything.'

'It's okay,' said Joanna. Her voice was soothing. 'Megan, come on. That's enough. It's time you went.'

Megan couldn't argue, especially as Joanna now had her hand on her arm and was steering her towards the kitchen door. 'I'll trust you to see yourself out,' she said curtly.

'Okay. Thanks, Joanna.'

But she gave Megan a tight smile. 'Please go.'

The next day Harry called Megan to tell her the police were re-examining the circumstances of Sam's death, thanks to the note he'd sent to Megan.

'Finally,' she said. 'Let's hope they nail someone for it.'

'I'll keep you posted.'

'Okay. Thanks.' She wanted to say more but didn't know where to begin. Instead she sighed. 'I need to go. I've a meeting with Richard in a minute.'

'Good luck. Bye.'

She put down the phone. She didn't have time to dwell on Harry just now. Megan had to find a way to move this story along, though she knew there was no way Richard would agree to printing the allegations or the pictures. Not when one or more of their own board was involved. It was far too messy, not to mention the potential links to the owners of the media group. No wonder the board had been keen for such tight editorial control.

Katherine placed a cup of tea in front of Megan.

'Thank you,' she said. 'It's good to have you back. We missed you.'

'I know. I'm sorry. It's not like me to get ill. I think it must have been all the stress with Tony.'

'I'm not surprised. You've had a tricky time.'

'Well, I think we all have,' she said looking over at Ronnie.

Was it really only last week that he had been arrested, thought Megan. And now? Megan glanced at her watch. It was time to talk to Richard. As she predicted, when she walked into his office he could barely meet her eye. He stood, leaning against his desk, attempting to look relaxed as he rolled a golf ball around in his hands.

'Playing with your balls again?' Megan strode in and took a seat, not waiting to be invited.

'Sit down, make yourself comfortable.' He placed the ball on his desk. He tried to smile, but was showing too many teeth - always a tell-tale sign.

Megan frowned. 'This doesn't bode well.'

'Well,' he said, scratching his chin, 'the lawyers are having none of it. It's all far too defamatory without actual proof.'

Megan snorted. 'But you have the proof. You have emails, pictures, an address. What else do you need?' She wanted to tell him that she had found a witness who could confirm she had seen the men. But she knew there was no way Rhona would talk to the police.

'I know.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'It's just not tight enough for them to allow us to run with. I mean, it's all a bit bloody embarrassing, isn't it?'

'Are you losing your nerve, then?'

'No. I just think you need to let go of this.'

'As I expected.' Her voice was steady but venomous as she spoke. 'Though I have to say, Richard, this is so unlike you. What happened to the old Richard? The one who loved the chase of a story and getting to the truth?'

Richard sighed. 'He got old.'

'Who's putting pressure on you though? I mean, surely you have the upper hand here now?' Megan's face paled as the pennies started to drop. 'Unless . . . Richard, were you there?'

'What do you mean?'

‘Did you go and use these girls for sex? Was it part of a work junket or something?’

He shook his head. ‘For fuck’s sake, Megan. How can you think that of me?’

‘Richard, I don’t know what the hell to think about you anymore. Plenty of your so-called buddies were there. Bilston. Jeremy.’

A flash of anger crossed his face. ‘Look, Megan, I was not there. I promise you I have nothing to do with this. But I am telling you that we can’t run with this. Please leave it and trust my decision.’

Megan felt any last remnants of respect she had for her former mentor disappear. ‘It’s okay. I get it. You’re due to retire any minute and if you don’t rock the boat then you’ll get your lovely, big, fat pension.’

‘Megan, even if I did fight it wouldn’t make any difference. It’s not up to me. It’s the powers above. They have the final say.’

‘And they want to cover their sordid tracks? God, it’s like the Westminster old boys’ network.’ Megan eyed him up and down. ‘Nothing ever changes, does it?’

He had the grace to look embarrassed. ‘It’s not the old boys’ network, Megan. I think you’ll find there is a very powerful woman at the head of it.’

Megan pulled a face. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ve said enough.’

‘Of course you have. Whereas you have in fact said bugger all. You’re talking in riddles, Richard. Who are you talking about?’

‘I’m not saying anything else. Megan, listen to me. You need to leave it now. There’s a lot going on behind the scenes that you don’t know about. Trust me when I say leave it.’

‘Fine. But I hope you do realise that you leave me with no option, Richard? I quit.’ She stood up and turned to leave.

He coughed. ‘Ah well, that was the other thing I needed to talk to you about. The board has decided that *Enquiry* is no longer commercially viable.’

‘What?’ Megan stopped in her tracks.

‘You’re not worth their while.’

‘What - and it’s taken them a few days to come up with that decision? After the roaring success of our last meeting? Funny that, isn’t it? Perhaps you could’ve told

me that first before I begged you to run my story.’ She threw him a look of disgust. ‘I’d better go and tell the team. How long do they have?’

He looked at his watch. ‘HR will be in touch, but I would give everyone a heads-up. You’ll need to clear your desks and the office quite fast.’

Megan grabbed the golf ball from his desk and grasped it in her hand. She watched Richard wince as he waited for her next move. ‘To think that these are the only balls you have, Richard.’ She raised her arm swiftly, as if taking aim for a throw. He crouched down by his chair, shielding his head with his hands, Megan gently placed the ball back on the desk. She threw him a withering look, turned and walked out.

Megan took the lift back down to the *Enquiry* office in silence. She couldn’t believe what was happening. How could Richard let it? She watched from the door as Ronnie buffed his nails. Sunita was chewing gum and listening to music through her headphones. And Katherine. Dear Katherine was polishing her screen with a duster. This would devastate them. In the meantime she had to do something about this scoop she was sitting on. She strode over to her desk, logged into her system and quickly typed out an email from her Hotmail account. Then she attached the written story, removing her byline and replacing it with ‘Sam Martin’, and all the images. Then she pressed send.

‘Everything okay?’ said Katherine.

Megan watched her as she turned and clocked the head of Human Resources walking into the office with Richard.

‘A minute, please,’ said Megan shakily.

‘Thirty seconds,’ said Richard.

Megan glared at him. ‘Sorry, guys, but they’re shutting us down.’

‘What?’ shrieked Ronnie. ‘They can’t do that.’

‘I’m afraid they can. They can do what they like.’

‘After everything that I’ve put myself through for this place?’ Ronnie’s face had turned puce. ‘I could have ended up on the bloody sex register thanks to this job.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Megan. ‘Katherine, Sunita, I’m sorry. But there’s nothing else we can do about it. Come on. Gather your stuff together and let’s hold our heads high.’

Megan and her team quickly emptied what little belongings they had in their desks: tissues, cereal bars, pens and pads. Megan decided she would leave copies of the implicating photographs behind in her desk. It would be a nugget of news for whoever came in next. They walked out of their office while Richard, the woman from HR and security staff watched. The lift pinged open and a few of the marketing team tottered out. One held up her phone, filming their departure, while both of the security men, who sat at the front desk and had greeted her every morning for the past couple of months, started to clap slowly. Megan smiled at them. 'Thank you,' she said and then led the team down the steps to the pavement. 'Let's keep walking,' said Megan. 'Be proud.' She led the team up the street and around the corner to Ashton Lane. She led them into a bar and straight to a corner booth. The smell of yeast and fried food from the night before lingered in the air.

'I'm shocked. I just can't believe it,' said Ronnie for the umpteenth time. 'I mean, last week my life was nearly ruined. I want to have kids one day, you know, and there I was practically being accused of being a kiddy-fiddler. Now I'm jobless and no doubt soon to be homeless.'

Megan signalled to the barman, and he hurried over to take their order.

'Well,' said Katherine briskly, 'they always say there's a silver lining to every cloud.'

'Pish,' said Ronnie.

'No point in crying over spilt milk. Up 'em and at 'em,' said Sunita flatly.

'Did you all swallow a bloody book of cliches on your way here?' Ronnie's voice was bitter.

Sunita jutted out her bottom lip. It reminded Megan of Matthew when he was about to have a meltdown. She began to laugh while Katherine, Sunita and Ronnie looked on aghast.

Ronnie touched Megan's hand. 'Are you okay, boss?'

'It'll be the shock,' said Katherine. 'She needs a drink. Look, just in time.' The barman unloaded a tray of glasses onto their table. 'Same again, please. Just whenever you're ready.'

'Thanks,' said Megan, still giggling. It was either that or start bawling. Her mobile began to buzz in her hand. She quickly took a large gulp of her gin and tonic before answering.

'I've got some news,' said Harry, 'about Trudy.'

'Oh,' said Megan glancing over at her now former colleagues. She was going to miss them.

'The cops have just received an email from Natasha Campbell. She's put everything up on a website detailing how her husband was the main player in the trafficking ring. Signed herself off as Trudy.'

'What?' Megan gripped onto the table to steady herself. This couldn't be happening.

'Are you there?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'You okay?'

'Yes. But 'I'll call you back.' Megan slipped her phone in her pocket and took a few deep breaths. She felt as though someone had winded her. Natasha? Natasha was Trudy? How could she not have known?

Chapter 39

The Herald, April 30, 2016

Business Digest

Media organisation, the Gibson Group, has announced that *Enquiry* magazine is to shut with immediate effect. It was launched just three months ago. In a statement the group said the venture had not proved to be commercially viable in the 'current economic climate'. The editor and her team of three have been made redundant with immediate effect. The news comes just days after Paul Rayon, editor of the group's newspaper, the *Daily News*, resigned. Board chairman Lord Bilston has stepped down citing health reasons and editorial director Richard Shaw has also announced he will retire with immediate effect.

Press Association

Breaking News: Labour MSP Thomas David has announced he is to quit Holyrood. The Glasgow MSP said he will stand down with immediate effect. He said he wishes to spend more time with his family.

Daily Post, 2 May, 2016

Arrest at Brothel in Police Anti-Trafficking Crackdown

A 38-year-old man has been arrested in connection with brothel keeping following police raids in Glasgow. It comes as part of a wider investigation into human trafficking and serious and organised crime.

The raid targeted an address in Partick in Glasgow, and also involved Europol officers. Police Scotland confirmed one man was arrested in connection with brothel-keeping and serious and organised crime. He is expected to appear in court tomorrow.

The Scottish Sun, 5 May, 2016

Assets Seized in Lap-Dancing Club Raid

One of Scotland's top lap-dancing clubs was raided yesterday in a major proceeds-of-crime probe. Police swooped on the Tinkle Club in Glasgow city centre where they seized £20,000 in cash. They later raided owner Warren McGregor's home in the Bearsden suburb of the city, where they seized a further £10,000 in cash along with jewellery.

McGregor spent most of the day being quizzed by cops but was later released. A report will now be submitted to the Procurator Fiscal. The club has been closed since the raid. It is a popular venue which has previously been visited by a number of high-profile celebrities and businessmen. For legal reasons we are not able to identify patrons of the club.

Twitter

@nosyparker who are the celebrities who've been going for a tinkle at the club?
#gaggingorder

@tellingthetruth read all about it here! household names! politicians! media luvvies!
coming soon! #gaggingorder

@jammydonut why the news blackout? #gaggingorder

@tellingthetruth cos they're not just tinkling at the club. more and worse to come
#gaggingorder #truthwill bedevilled

Daily Record, 5 May, 2016

Woman Arrested in Anti-Trafficking Operation

A woman suspected of being the ringleader in a sex-trafficking gang has been arrested in Nigeria. The woman, who cannot be named for legal reasons, has been held on suspicion of money-laundering offences, in an operation co-ordinated by the National Crime Agency. The woman is accused of accompanying around 15 victims on separate flights to the UK between 2012 and 2016. The victims were promised education or jobs in London and then forced into prostitution. Several of the victims are alleged to have been supplied to a Glasgow brothel.

Chapter 40

There was a knock at the door but Megan didn't answer it straight away. She knew who it would be and she couldn't face seeing him. When the person knocked again and coughed, she opened the door, holding it slightly ajar. It was Harry. She didn't invite him in.

'Megan, please. Let me come in. I've got something to tell you.'

'There's no point, Harry. I'm leaving.'

He pushed the door open with his foot and edged his way into the hallway, which was stacked with packing-boxes. 'What do you mean?'

'I'm leaving. I'm going back to London.'

'But why? What about the job? What about . . .'

She shook her head and looked at the ground. 'I've had enough. There is no job, Harry. It's over. Anyway, it's not worth it anymore.'

'But, Megan.' His voice was ragged and he tried to pull her towards him. She remained rooted to the spot. 'Come on. Look at what you've managed to do,' he said.

Megan just stood there, her shoulders slumped, her eyes fixed on the clean magnolia walls which she wished were smeared with Matthew's grubby handprints. 'What I've managed to do. Are you having a laugh?'

'We've had McGregor in for questioning. That wee shite Rod, Natasha's brother, has been charged. And there's more to come . . .'

'That's great.' Her voice was flat. 'But they're not the main players, are they, Harry? They're just the pawns.'

'But it all helps. These are all steps to landing the big ones. And look at the girls who have been freed. Thanks to you we were able to raid the brothel and get them out.'

'It doesn't help the dead girls, though, does it? It won't bring them back. Will anyone ever get charged with their murders? Or Sam's?' Megan leaned against the wall, flicking her eyes over Harry. She was tempted to allow herself to crumple into his arms but she knew it would be pointless. 'And what about Bilston? He just walks away because of who he is.'

Harry frowned. 'Look, just because his sister is the chief it doesn't mean he will get away with anything. But at the moment, without witnesses, then there's not a lot we can do. We *will* get him though.'

'How? From where I'm standing it appears he can get away with what he wants.'

'We've got forensic accountants examining his business interests. Seems he has links which tie him to the company which owned the flat where it was all happening. It's just a case of joining up the dots. I'm confident he'll get what's coming to him regardless of his links to the chief.'

'And what about the boss? Gibson?'

Harry cocked his head to the side. 'I was wondering when you would work out he was involved.'

'One of my colleagues managed to work out who he was from the pictures. Took him a while, but he remembered who he was. He's always been quite an elusive chief executive.'

'Think he'll continue to be so. It would appear he's left the country and returned to the US to lay low for a while.' Harry shrugged. 'But let's focus on the good things to come from this. We're looking at charging Campbell. That has got to be a start.'

'Oh.' She couldn't peel her eyes from Harry and almost stepped towards him. 'And what about Natasha?'

He shook his head. 'Nothing. And her brother says he doesn't know where she is. Says he hasn't seen her for years.'

'Just a coincidence, then, that he managed to get himself into cahoots with Natasha's husband?'

'Well, he's not the brightest.'

'What about Natasha's husband?'

'Dead.'

'What?' said Megan, her eyes widening in disbelief.

'Aye. Fell from the seventh floor of a hotel in London.'

'When?'

'Last night.'

'Did you get a chance to question him?'

'The Met had tried to pull him in. But he was trying to claim diplomatic immunity.'

‘On what grounds?’ Megan was incredulous.

‘Because of his political connections.’ He held up his hands. ‘I know, I know. It’s unbelievable. But it’s more common than you would think. Anyway, he’s dead. There’s nothing we can do about him.’ He looked over her shoulder and Megan realised he had spotted the boxes.

Megan knew he was about to say something so she quickly changed the subject. ‘Look, thanks for coming to tell me, but I’m kind of busy . . . I should get on.’

‘Megan, please don’t shut me out. What about you? What about you and me?’

She closed her eyes tightly for a moment. ‘I’m sorry, Harry.’

‘Megan, please.’ He stepped towards her and held out his arms. She paused for a minute and hugged him to her. They stood together, Megan’s head pressed into his chest, inhaling that scent once more. Despite the flicker of attraction she felt being near him, she had to let go. How she wished she could turn the clock back. If only things had been different for them both. Gritting her teeth together, she tensed her body and eased herself from his grip.

‘Please, Harry, I think it’s best if you just go,’ she said resignedly.

‘But, Megan, come on. Surely we can work something out.’

She wouldn’t allow her gaze to linger on the confusion she could see in his eyes.

‘I know you want to be with me.’ He walked towards her but she skirted round him and opened the door.

‘I think you’d better go, Harry.’ Her voice was shaking. She knew that if he didn’t go soon, she would break down and change her mind. She had to stay focused and get her priorities in order now. This was about doing what was best for Matthew. Yet somehow everything about it felt wrong. The wind blew in the gentle mist of rain from outside.

‘Megan, I’m here for you. Let’s not rush. Let’s talk.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered. ‘I can’t do this. I need to be with my son.’ Reaching up, she kissed him on the cheek, pausing for a moment to rub her cheek against his stubble. Biting back the tears, she clutched him for an extra second. Then she stood back. ‘Goodbye, Harry.’

He kissed her gently on the forehead, then stood back. 'Okay, Megan, if this is what you want.' His voice was tighter now, distant. 'Goodbye.' Then he turned and walked away.

Megan stood for a moment in the doorway watching him. Harry didn't look back. Fighting back the tears, she took a deep breath and closed the door. She knew she had to keep busy and get on with things. Focusing on something else would distract her from the overwhelming feelings of sadness which were threatening to engulf her. She walked into the bedroom and threw the rest of her clothes into a holdall.

'You're doing the right thing,' said Joanna, standing in the doorway.

Megan jumped. She'd forgotten Joanna was there.

'Though Megan . . . I didn't realise how close you two were.'

Megan brushed away a tear. 'I didn't think it would be this hard. I didn't think there was anything left here for me.' She glanced at her sister then shrugged. 'Sorry, I didn't mean it like that.'

'It's okay. I know you didn't. And I can come and visit.'

'I just wish things had been different.' She felt guilty that she had begun to question her sister's role in all of this mess.

'With him?' Joanna flicked her head towards the door.

Megan nodded and found herself gasping for breath, then a swirl of nausea rose from the pit of her stomach. She ran to the bathroom and sank to her knees, vomiting up white froth from her empty stomach.

'Are you okay?' Joanna stood watching from the door.

'Yes, I'll be fine. Just stressed with everything. I should probably make myself eat something.'

Joanna raised an eyebrow, but said nothing else for a minute. 'Do you love him?'

Megan choked back a sob. 'Yes, I probably do.'

Joanna sat with Megan on the bed, snaking her arm around her shoulders. 'Come on, Megan. It's all okay. You'll be fine.'

Megan allowed herself to cry for a moment, then pulled a tissue from her jeans pocket and noisily blew her nose. 'I'd better get on with this. It's not going to pack itself.' She stood up.

Joanna remained sitting. 'Your wee man needs you. Matthew needs you, Megan. You only get one chance.'

Megan closed her eyes. The thought of Matthew grounded her, gave her something to cling on to. She knew she had to go to him. He mattered the most. 'I know. You're right. I'm going to make a cuppa. Do you want one?' Walking into the kitchen, she turned on the radio before looking around for a mug. She'd already wrapped them all. Reaching into a box, she pulled one out and stopped for a moment to listen to the news.

'Police in Glasgow are appealing for help to identify the victim of a traffic accident. A young woman who was knocked down in a Glasgow street last month has died in hospital. The woman was spotted running towards cars in a distressed state on the 30th April in Dumbarton Road. She was thought to be aged 16 or 17, of Nigerian descent, and police have appealed to the public for more information to try to identify her. Police sources claim she could have been a victim of human trafficking. She had injuries consistent with prolonged sexual assault. A spokeswoman for Police Scotland appealed to the public for information. In other news, police have confirmed that they are treating the death of journalist Sam Martin as murder . . .'

Megan could hear the thud and squeal of brakes. She could see the girl's body somersaulting in the air. It all made sense now. She was there. She saw it happen. That's why Harry had come to see her. He wasn't there just to tell her about the arrests. He was there to tell her about the girl, and she hadn't let him. She dropped the mug and it crashed onto the floor. Joanna came running through, gasping when she saw the shards of ceramic scattered across the tiles.

'What's the matter?' She bent down to pick up a piece.

'It's Sam.'

Joanna listened for a moment. 'It was murder then. You were right.'

Megan shook her head. 'Yes, but it's not just that, Joanna. I know who she is. The girl. The girl on the news a minute ago. I saw her.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The one who was knocked down. She's dead.'

'Slow down, Megan. You're making no sense. What are you talking about?'

'The Nigerian girl who was knocked down. The one they thought was trying to escape. She's dead.'

'Oh.'

'I saw her. I saw her being knocked down that morning I was out running. It all makes sense now.'

'You're making no sense to me, Megan.'

'I know who she is. She had a name. Sam told me.'

Joanna looked confused. 'But Sam is dead.'

Megan ran through to her bedroom and reached for the bundle of pictures Sam had sent. She looked for the image of the girl. Megan knew it was the girl on the news. It had to be. She handed a picture to Joanna. 'She's called Mercy. Itohan in Nigeria.' Megan wiped away a tear. 'That girl is somebody's child.'

'And now she has a name. You can give her a name.'

Megan nodded. 'Yes,' she said softly. 'Itohan. Mercy. I'm glad we can give you a name. I'd better let the police know.' She shook her head. 'I'm just sorry we couldn't help her.'

'She's someone's child.' Joanna was staring at Megan.

'I know that,' she said brusquely. 'That's what I just said.'

'Megan. You need to stop all this now.' Joanna's hands were on her hips, her eyes narrowed.

'What are you talking about?' Megan suddenly began to feel uneasy. Why was Joanna staring at her like that?

Joanna threw her hands in the air. 'You have to stop, this, Megan. You have your own child.'

'I know that,' she snapped. 'Don't you think I know that?'

'Tell me, was it all worth it?'

'What do you mean?'

'The job? Was it worth risking the life of your son for?'

'Of course not. And you're making it more dramatic than it was.' Megan turned to fill the kettle, but she felt Joanna's eyes bore into her. Turning round, she could see tears sliding down her sister's cheeks. 'What's wrong, Joanna? What's going on?'

Joanna wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. 'I had to do something. I had to make you see sense. You've not changed. Even after all this you've not changed a bit.'

Megan clenched her jaw. 'Joanna, do you want to tell me what it is you're going on about? You're behaving very weirdly.'

Joanna perched on the edge of a stool at the breakfast bar. 'I didn't mean to scare you.'

'What do you mean?'

'I just thought it would make you see sense. Give you a fright.' Her voice was clipped.

'What do you mean?' Megan was now feeling queasy again. 'You're not making any sense.'

'I'm sorry, Megan, but it was the only way. I regretted it as soon as I'd done it,' she said, holding Megan's gaze. 'But it was too late. There was nothing I could do. I'd sent it.' She paused for a minute and gave a harsh chuckle. 'And anyway, it worked. I mean, at least you do still have a son.'

Megan was confused. 'What are you going on about? Regretted what?'

'At least you still have your son.'

'What the hell are you going on about? I *know* I have my son. What are you talking about?'

'The parcel you got with the blood,' whispered Joanna.

Megan's mouth fell open. 'The letter threatening Matthew?'

Joanna nodded.

'You?' whispered Megan. 'You sent that?'

Joanna nodded. 'I'm sorry.'

Megan didn't think there was anything particularly sorrowful about her tone. 'But, but why? Is this because I was too late to help George?'

Joanna stood up and started pointing at her. 'No. I told you already I don't blame you for that. I just wanted to make you see sense, Megan. You still have the chance to be with your son. You can still be a mum. You have a wee boy waiting for you.'

Megan looked at her sister's face, pale and strained. She thought about the past few weeks. The things she had told her sister and the lost relationship she thought

she had found. Now she felt exhausted and utterly betrayed by her own sister. She wanted to scream at her, to yell and shout. Yet her lips were clamped together as she watched Joanna standing there, her hands clasped, her face contrite. They stood there staring at each other, tense and waiting.

Joanna sobbed and made a sudden movement towards her. 'Say something, Megan. Please.'

Megan jolted back. 'Get out,' she said, her voice tight. 'Get out of my house. Now.' This time her voice was strong and loud. 'Get the fuck out of my house. Now.'

'I'm sorry.' Joanna lunged, grabbing at her sister's hand.

'Now,' screamed Megan, shaking her off. 'Get away from me. Get out.' She ran her hands through her hair, tugging at her scalp, feeling sharp needles of pain. She was caught between outrage and disbelief. Running through to the hallway, she grabbed Joanna, who was tugging on her coat.

'I trusted you,' she hissed, her eyes narrowed.

Joanna's cheeks flushed and she made a half-hearted attempt at spreading her hands out in a placatory gesture. 'I'm sorry. I just wanted to give you a fright. I wanted you to go home to your son.'

'Fuck you, Joanna. Get out.' She pushed her sister through the door, causing Joanna to fall against the wall outside, and slammed it shut. She slid over the chain. Then she stood there, too shocked to do anything else. Maybe in time she would be able to forgive Joanna and understand why she'd done it. But not now. At this moment in time she didn't want to be anywhere near her sister. Her future was now all about being with her son.

One Year Later

Megan glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. She had time to make a cup of tea and sit on the windowsill for a few minutes before collecting Matthew from nursery. It was her favourite spot in the flat. Wide enough to sit comfortably on, with cushions, it had a good view of the park across the road. Megan had spent most of the morning writing an article for a woman's magazine and was now looking forward to spending the afternoon with her son. Their new apartment was tiny, just big enough for the two of them, and Megan thought it was perfect. As she waited for the kettle to boil, she automatically reached for her phone to switch it off so she could enjoy her tea in peace. It beeped once: the Google news alert. Even though she had tried not to think about what had happened, she couldn't forget. She clicked on the links, one at a time.

BBC News

2 April, 2017

The Scottish Government today announced plans for legislation which will make the purchase of sex illegal.

Churches and women's groups have been pushing for the government to follow Nordic nations and introduce the legislation in a bid to reduce the demand which drives human trafficking.

Known as the 'Nordic Model', or Sex-Buyer Law, the legislation was first passed in 1999 in Sweden. It has also been adopted in Norway and Iceland and was voted for in Northern Ireland. It has been successful in reducing the levels of human trafficking and exploitation in prostitution. Today's announcement follows on from the successful introduction of anti-trafficking legislation in Scotland in 2015.

First Minister Rachel Thompson said, 'We are delighted to announce today that Scotland once again leads the way with its zero-tolerance approach to crimes against women. I am proud to be taking this further step in the Scottish Government's commitment to tackling the exploitation of women in Scotland.'

The move has been supported by Joanna Ross, co-ordinator of the Women's Refuge in Glasgow, which provides support to women on the streets of Glasgow. She said, 'I hope this new legislation is just one of many positive steps to offer hope to the victims of trafficking and prostitution.'

Daily Post, 6 April, 2017

River Body Find Confirmed as Missing Civil Servant

Police have confirmed that a body found in the River Clyde is that of missing civil servant, Natasha Campbell. The body was recovered by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service near Glasgow's Kingston Bridge on Saturday afternoon. The 52-year-old disappeared last year following the death of her husband. Police Scotland said her death is not being treated as suspicious.

Police Renew Appeal for Unidentified Women

Police have renewed their appeal for information which can help them to identify two young women found dead in Glasgow last year. Both had been murdered. The first woman was discovered in the River Clyde last February. The second was discovered in the Botanic Gardens in the city's West End. Both were thought to have been aged between 15 and 21. They were both of African descent and thought to have been from Nigeria. A man has been charged in connection with their murders. A spokeswoman for Police Scotland said: 'These young women are somebody's daughters, sisters and friends. It is vital that we give them their identities back and return them to their families.'

Steam was rising from the kettle and Megan switched off her phone, placing it on the worktop. She dunked a teabag in her favourite mug and curled up in the window looking at the swirl of dark clouds above. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Megan swallowed back a few tears and looked across at the park. She wondered if a storm was coming.

The End

Critical Component

Introduction

I.i. Research statement

This project explores the representation and role of women in contemporary crime fiction; the role of women in contemporary Scottish society; the ways in which crime novels provide a socio-political and cultural context and the process of writing a novel, *The Invisible Chains*, which explores the role of women in a progressive, Post-Referendum Scotland. The research statement is interdisciplinary, contemporary and place-specific. It comprises an original piece of modern Scottish writing with a critical component investigating the role of female characters and writers in the Scottish and Nordic literary scene.

There are five main themes for examination in the critical chapters which follow: 'The Post-Referendum Context'; 'The Scottish-Nordic Pairing'; 'Gender Theories and Feminist Crime Fiction'; 'Human trafficking and domestic abuse in Scotland'; and 'The process of writing *The Invisible Chains*'.

The first seeks to identify and contextualise the changes in Scottish society in a Post-Referendum context, first and foremost in terms of gender but also beyond. The second initiates a discussion on the ways in which female writers and their protagonists have transformed contemporary Scottish and Nordic fiction over the past thirty years, and the ways in which this has influenced the main female character in my own narrative. The third clause focuses on gender theories and feminist crime fiction drawing on key feminist critics including Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam. The fourth section will discuss the social and cultural context of my creative genesis and the way in which my narrative plot and characters have been influenced by the issues of human trafficking and domestic abuse. The final chapter engages with the practice of creative writing in order to examine the narrative structures and techniques used with specific reference to the novel *The Invisible Chains*.

I.ii. Creative genesis

The Invisible Chains centres on a female journalist uncovering an international women-trafficking operation and is set in Glasgow, with a section in Stockholm, thus exploring the links between 'Tartan Noir' and 'Nordic Noir'. Central to this practice-led research is gender and the role of women in the texts analysed through characters such as Lindsay Gordon (Val McDermid), Paddy Meehan (Denise Mina) and Annika Bengtzon (Liza Marklund). In addition to the literary and political parallels explored, the specific focus on trafficking has contemporary resonance in Scotland given the debates about adopting the 'Nordic Model' for policing prostitution; and the new legislation, The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015,¹ which aims to combat trafficking and support victims. The focus on domestic abuse is also highly relevant because of the new bill, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill 2017, which will strengthen the laws against those who psychologically abuse their partners using coercive and controlling behaviour, published by the Scottish Parliament during the course of this research.²

The Invisible Chains follows the personal and professional life of Megan Ross and is a complex portrayal of female identity as she struggles to cope with her multiple roles as a journalist, mother, ex-partner, girlfriend, sister and colleague. By using the additional characters of The Girl, a victim of human trafficking, and Trudy, a woman experiencing domestic abuse, it creates a space for the voices of women who have been abused and marginalised. The narrative presents credible descriptions of the institutions which exist within contemporary Scottish life where women hold many senior and significant positions in public life. Yet, despite these gender equality advances, Megan continues to face challenges from the patriarchal organisation she works for and in her own personal life. Although she holds a senior editorial role, her power is clipped by her male colleagues, and she receives threats from an ex-partner trying to influence his power by challenging custody of her son.

The Invisible Chains draws on the theoretical strands of research as outlined in the critical genesis below; it tells the stories of victims of the significant crimes of human trafficking and domestic abuse; it is timely and relevant because it is set in

¹ Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2015/12/contents>, (accessed September 21, 2017)

² Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, March 20, 2017, <https://beta.gov.scot/news/new-powers-to-tackle-domestic-abuse-2017-03-20/> (accessed September 21, 2017)

contemporary society where new legislation has been introduced to combat these crimes. Thus *The Invisible Chains* is an original, creative work which has been developed to ensure that it reflects contemporary Scottish society through the lens of a female protagonist.

I.iii. Critical genesis

This critical work will maintain a focus on the role and representation of women in crime fiction as outlined in the research statement above. While there is a long tradition of scholarship on women in crime fiction the cross-cultural comparison is highly innovative and the Scottish writers, in particular, have not been widely researched in academia.

The thesis will also argue that, as a creative writing doctorate, the work will reimagine gender roles in contemporary Scottish society. To do this it is necessary to examine and evaluate the current body of literature that addresses the clauses identified in the research statement. This will provide a critical context for the creative text, *The Invisible Chains*.

By investigating the five clauses, this critical genesis will examine an original line of enquiry by providing a cohesive over-view of the role of women in contemporary Scottish and Nordic crime fiction. It will examine an original line of enquiry by investigating this specific trend, of the rise in women crime writers, that has emerged, how it can be categorised and considered; yet also retaining a focus on the creative narrative at the centre of the doctoral project.

The research statement maintains a focus on the role of and representation of women in crime fiction. However, the thesis will go further, arguing that as a Creative Writing doctorate the work attempts a re-examination of perceived gender roles in contemporary Scottish society while also drawing on relevant Swedish legislation.

There is an agency to the project therefore in that it is not only involved in exploring these issues but also reimagining the context and developing particular characters through which our understanding of representations of women in Scotland, and beyond, is advanced.

I.iv. The Post-Referendum Context

This chapter seeks to identify the changes in Scottish society in a Post- Referendum context. It will examine the impact of the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum,

focusing mainly on gender, and the role of women in society, but also beyond. It will also focus on the discussions and debates which have continued since 2014; the political links between Scotland and the Nordic countries and the effect of a strong female representation in Scottish politics and the way in which women became engaged with politics during the campaign.

There will also be an analysis of the political context and background to the creative genesis and why the Post-Referendum context is relevant to the role and development of the female characters in particular.

I.v. The Scottish-Nordic Pairing

This chapter will identify and define the ways in which female writers have transformed contemporary crime fiction by discussing the literature which has been produced over the last thirty years, (since 1987) with a particular focus on women protagonists. It begins with an overview of the wave of contemporary crime fiction writers in the 1990s.

The exploration of this will include an analysis of the characters of key Scottish female writers including Val McDermid, Denise Mina, Anna Smith and Lin Anderson. The study will then move on to investigate Nordic female authors including Liza Marklund, Anne Holt and Kati Hiekkapelto. The novel, *The Invisible Chains*, will then be considered in this chapter in relation to the literary influences of the above mentioned writers and the development of the character of Megan Ross. The chapter will then conclude with observations about the crime fiction genre, in relation to the role of women, and what the future holds.

I.vi. Gender Theories and Feminist Crime Fiction

Feminist thinking will be the focus of this chapter which investigates the key protagonists including Lindsay Gordon (Val McDermid), Annika Bengtson (Liza Marklund) and Rosie (Anna Smith). By analysing these characters and drawing in feminist thinkers Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam, I will explore the way in which the crime fiction genre interrogates the cultural constructions of gender and consider the range and significance of contemporary challenges from within the genre. In this chapter I will also explore the role of women in contemporary society and the ways in which gender inequalities persist. I will explore the ways in which I used this research to inform my development of the character of Megan Ross for *The Invisible*

Chains and the conflict she feels between gender expectations as a mother and her own personal ambitions in a professional capacity.

I.vii Human trafficking and domestic abuse in Scotland

In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which the two issues of human trafficking and domestic abuse have influenced the plot and development of two of the characters in *The Invisible Chains*. Val McDermid has frequently spoken of the ways in which the modern crime novel can be used to reflect society's changing attitudes and values. She has described the modern crime novel as 'the novel of social history'³ and said she believes that in future people will use the crime novel as a historic tool to offer insight into life at a specific time. It is this social and cultural context which I wanted to explore in *The Invisible Chains*, by reflecting and including the current Scottish situation in relation to the developing legislation around the crimes of domestic abuse and human trafficking.

I.viii The process of writing the novel: narrative structure and techniques

An analysis of the choice of narrative structures and techniques used for *The Invisible Chains* will be the focus of this chapter. By identifying key elements in the literature researched, I examine the narrative techniques I have chosen to use: third-person, first-person and blog entries, which focuses the readers' attention on the characters of Megan, The Girl and Trudy. The intention here is to reflect and embed the themes and aims as defined in the research statement as noted above. This study will then move on to investigate the different narrative techniques used in crime fiction and the impact that different voices can have on the reader. Each of the characters, whether viewed as protagonists or victims, experience the crimes explored in the creative; we are given Megan's perspective on both domestic abuse and human trafficking, then human trafficking through the eyes of The Girl and domestic abuse through the voice of Trudy.

I.ix Conclusion

We return to the doctoral project as a whole and examine both critical and creative geneses. The research statement is interdisciplinary, contemporary and place

³ Val McDermid, Edinburgh International Book Festival, August 2015

specific. It comprises an original piece of modern Scottish writing with a critical component investigating the role of female characters and writers in the Scottish and Nordic literary scene. What has been outlined allows for the development of an original piece of creative work, weaving in the theoretical component of the research, with a female protagonist challenging gender roles and expectations while reflecting social beliefs. This allows for a critical commentary that is theoretically informed, by feminist theory, but which maintains a practice-driven approach.

The Invisible Chains is set in Scotland in 2016, so post the Independence Referendum and prior to the European Referendum, and the development and progression of female identity must also be studied against the political backdrop of devolution which has had an impact on Scottish literature and identity.

The chapters which follow will focus on the creative work which is the focus of the project and its relation to the identified creative texts, rather than trying to derive a universal statement on the writing process or the role of women. By presenting the process and context of writing, through the critical project and creative work, this Creative Writing project presents a cohesive practice-based doctorate focusing on women in a Post-Referendum Scotland.

1. The Post-Referendum Context

1.1 Introduction

The setting for *The Invisible Chains* is in Scotland in 2016, post the Independence Referendum and prior to the European Referendum. The development and progression of female identity must also be studied against the political backdrop of devolution. This has undoubtedly had an impact on Scottish literature and identity, as seen through the lens of female protagonists, which will be examined in the next Chapter.

This chapter seeks to identify the changes in Scottish society by examining the impact of the 2014 Referendum, focusing mainly on gender and the role of women in society. The development and progression of the female identity, throughout contemporary crime novels, must also be studied against the political backdrop of devolution which has had a significant impact on Scottish literature and identity. The parameters of this have shifted during the political transformations of the past nineteen years with the establishment of a Scottish Parliament, in 1999, a vote on Scottish independence, in 2014, and now Scotland's first female First Minister, as well as female leaders of opposition parties in the Scottish Parliament.

1.2 Politics, Society and Gender

There has undoubtedly been progression for women in Scottish politics over the past decade. However, what was most notable in the lead up to the 2014 Referendum was the advancement of female politicians in the electorate and particularly at Holyrood. Nicola Sturgeon became the country's first ever female First Minister in November 2013. In her first speech to the Scottish Parliament, she made a pledge towards gender equality. Shortly after she appointed the first gender neutral cabinet in Scotland. This move to redress the balance of power at the heart of Scottish politics had positive repercussions on engaging women in politics. In the weeks after the referendum, Women for Independence saw a surge in membership from around 40 local groups to 60. This democratic wave was likened, by Women for Independence's Kathleen Caskie, 'to the political metaphor of destabilising

Westminster's power'.⁴ This empowerment of women and engaging them in the democratic process showed that women were reclaiming their voice and recognising the need for change. Scotland is not alone in trying to tackle structural inequality, particularly with Nicola Sturgeon's inaugural comments which focused on gender equality. Her comments were also forward-looking about the change that still needs to come. In the run up to the vote, and in the months after, there was a sense that a radical constitutional change could achieve a fairer society and a more equal society.

Yet despite this progression in recent years, women continue to face patriarchal sexism. At the Edinburgh International Book Festival 2017, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon summed this up when she said, 'I still think for all the progress we've made for equal rights for women, we've still got such a long way to go.' She went on to add, 'We now have a situation where, in theory, women in this country can do pretty much anything, but in practice that's still not the case, because we've got ingrained attitudes and systemic institutional barriers to women achieving all the same things, and the same dreams, as men.'⁵ Engender is a feminist organisation that has been working in Scotland for twenty years to advance equality between women and men. It asserts that women live with gender inequality daily, in ways that range from explicit discrimination and breaches of our human rights, to the relentless undermining portrayals of women in the media and public domain. Social expectations and assumptions rooted in historical gender relations influence all walks of life, for women and for men, and compromise the equality that has been achieved on paper. On its website, the organisation argues that this 'legacy of women's second-class citizenship has not been overcome and continues to define women's life chances in the 21st century'.⁶ A study carried out for the TUC by The Work Foundation showed that women in the UK are increasingly condemned to low-

⁴ Katie Gallogly-Swan, *Empowering Women*, Common Space, March 6, 2015 <https://www.commonspace.scot/articles/615/empowering-women-how-the-independence-referendum-catapulted-women-to-the-forefront-of-scottish-politics> (accessed November 21, 2017)

⁵ Nicola Sturgeon, *Life Under Public Scrutiny*, Edinburgh International Book Festival, August 18, 2017, <https://www.edbookfest.co.uk/news/scotland-s-first-minister-admits-nationalism-a-difficult-word-at-book-festival> (accessed September 24, 2017)

⁶ Engender, Scotland's feminist organisation, www.gender.org.uk (Accessed November 30, 2016)

paid, low-skill jobs with just one in 100 young women working in skilled trades in 2011, compared to one in five young men. The report – *The Gender Jobs Split* – revealed how their sex still plays a huge part in determining young people’s careers.⁷ Yet encouragingly in Scotland in 2017, Scottish Government official figures show the gender pay gap was 6.6%, an increase of 0.3 percentage points on the previous year.⁸

It is not only politics where there has been progress for women. In the male dominated world of football, there has also been change. Two of the country’s largest football clubs, Heart of Midlothian and Hibernian, are run by women. Businesswoman Ann Budge took ownership of Hearts Football Club in 2013 and Leann Dempster joined the board of Hibernian Football Club as Chief Executive in 2014 following six years as Chief Executive at Motherwell Football Club. It is important to recognise that many football clubs now have women on their boards. Val McDermid, who uses her novels to reflect society’s changing attitudes and values, says this is significant as ‘they are not the male enclaves they used to be. These clubs are becoming less masculine in their ethos.’⁹ She also believes there is a sense of public life in Scotland. In an interview, she said that ‘it is not acceptable to be openly misogynistic in Scotland. That is quite significantly different from elsewhere. I think there is a commitment at the highest level to address problems.’¹⁰ However I would seek to challenge this view by arguing that although there may be a commitment to address problems at the highest level, eradicating misogyny is a challenge. It may be unacceptable to be openly misogynistic in certain environments and spaces in Scotland, however there are plenty of communities and spaces across the country where it is still a live and current problem. McDermid also believes things are improving and changing in terms of equality in Scottish public life, citing the example of the three female leaders of the main Scottish political parties. First

⁷ The Work Foundation, *The Gender Jobs Split*, November 1, 2013 https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/The_Gender_Jobs_Split_Touchstone_Extra_2013_FINAL.PDF (accessed October 3, 2017)

⁸ Scottish Government, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, November 8, 2017 <http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms/indicator/paygap> (accessed November 21, 2017)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Val McDermid, interview with Lorna Hill, November 18, 2016, Appendix 3

Minister Nicola Sturgeon became leader of the Scottish National Party in 2014; Keiza Dugdale was the leader of the Scottish Labour Party between 2015 and 2017 and Ruth Davidson became the leader of the Scottish Conservative Party in 2011.

At the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2015, she described the modern crime novel as ‘the novel of social history’¹¹ and said she believes that in future people will use the crime novel as a historic tool to offer insight into life at a specific time. By its very nature, she said, the crime novel can be used to ‘span the whole of society going as wide or as narrow as you want’. It is this social and cultural context, as outlined in this chapter, which I wanted to explore in *The Invisible Chains*, by investigating the way in which today’s crime novels can tackle issues which reflect society’s changing attitudes and values.

1.3 Post-Referendum Context and the Nordic Countries

An analysis of Nordic crime literature as part of this project was necessary because of the parallels between Nordic Noir and Scottish crime fiction which will be examined in the next chapter in further detail. In addition to geographical proximity, there are of course obvious similarities between the countries including the climate, dark nights, small populations, religious traditions – the Scottish Presbyterian attitude is similar to the Nordic Lutheran outlook – which are all evident and reflected in the fiction examined.

However what is of specific relevance in this chapter are the political similarities between the countries. During the campaign for an independent Scotland, those in favour of independence urged that Scotland could adopt similar social and policies to those in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Norway’s oil fund was of particular interest to campaigners keen that Scotland should emulate its oil fund model. There were also suggestions that an independent Scotland would mean closer co-operation with Sweden, Denmark and Norway on trade, energy grids and oil and gas exploration.

During the course of this doctoral research, the debate has been ongoing and evolving, with comparisons being drawn with Scotland and the Nordic countries with reference to the vote on the European Union Referendum. There were suggestions that an independent Scotland could make its own separate negotiations to remain in the EU. Or follow the examples of Iceland and Norway, which made the decision not

¹¹ Val McDermid, *Edinburgh International Book Festival*, August 2015

to join the EU, but concluded specific agreements with the Union. Constitutional expert Katrin Oddsdóttir, who was elected to draft a new Icelandic social contract after the financial collapse, said Scotland should ally with Nordic countries and could succeed as an independent country outside of the UK and the EU. Oddsdóttir said that if there was a referendum to join the EU in Iceland, she would vote no – describing the union as a “gang” and a “bullying association”. On an independent Scotland, she said: “Scotland could be very progressive and say we will follow the path of Iceland and Norway, which are countries that trade with the EU but are not part of the Brussels camp.” She added that “an independent Scotland should look further north towards Reykjavik and Oslo rather than Brussels.”¹²

1.4 Conclusion

During the course of this research, the debates and discussions around both the Scottish Independence Referendum and the Brexit vote have continued. Both are complex issues and the tensions between these powerful narratives are significant as they give this creative project agency. The following chapter will go on to examine and unpick the Scottish-Nordic pairing and analyse the way in which contemporary crime books have evolved to reflect politics and society in fiction.

¹² Henry McDonald, *Scotland Should Look to Ally with Nordic Nations*, *The Guardian*, July 18, 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/18/scotland-ally-nordic-nations-not-eu-iceland-legal-expert> (accessed July 20, 2017)

2. The Scottish-Nordic Pairing

2.1 Introduction

The rise of the female protagonist in Scottish and Nordic crime fiction, in recent years, has dismantled what has historically been a male-dominated genre. Until the mid to late 1990s, crime fiction was significantly influenced by men 'writing about largely male police collectives'.¹³ A report in *The New York Times*, in 2010, into the rise in popularity of Scandinavian fiction in the US, observes that, 'If there is a formula to the genre, it often includes a cold, stark setting and a grizzled detective figure who consumes too much coffee and junk food'.¹⁴ Since then the surge in female writers has overhauled the genre, bringing a fresh perspective to the crime fiction market.

Female crime writers have created memorable female protagonists in traditionally masculine roles. This in turn has transformed the way in which readers view the role of women in crime fiction. In what has now become a distinct, popular and best-selling genre these characters have challenged the familiar realism of the traditionally hostile worlds of journalism, the law and the police, where bullying and misogyny once was the norm. With this background of realism, the plots explore the world of crime whilst also exposing cracks in the fabric of society. All the protagonists carry their own pasts with them, and have their own flaws, of guilt, failure and grief.

This chapter will provide: an introductory overview of women and crime writing; an analysis of the role of key Scottish and Nordic female authors and their characters; an explanation of these writers' influence on my own practice-based approach to the protagonist in my creative genesis; and concluding remarks on the future of female crime writing.

¹³ John Henri-Holmberg, *A Darker Shade: 17 Swedish Stories of Murder, Mystery and Suspense* (Head of Zeus, 2013) p.17

¹⁴ Julie Bosman, *The New York Times*, June 15, 2010
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/16/books/16noir> (accessed September 13, 2012)

2.2 A background to the role of women in crime fiction

Female crime writers are not a recent phenomenon. English writer Dorothy L. Sayers is best known for her mysteries, a series of novels and short stories set between the First and Second World Wars; and Margery Allingham was known for her 'golden age' stories set between the two wars. However, these writers, although successful in their field at the time, focused on male sleuths. Yet prior to this, there is evidence that female protagonists were popular. In *Murder by the Book: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, Sally Munt argues that

Since the inception of the genre female protagonists have been usurping male heroes, and as a liberal strategy of equality the instigation of female heroes persists in being popular¹⁵

Before interrogating this statement, I wish to briefly examine crime fiction as a genre in historic terms in relation to women. The genre arose out of the popular Victorian genre of sensation fiction, drawing on elements from gothic fiction like murder but placing it in a domestic setting. The theme, largely, was the way in which men threatened the female realm of domestic life. The significance of Wilkie Collins' novel *The Woman in White* (1859), in terms of gender and genre, was that it had both a male and female protagonist working together to solve a crime.

In her chapter on women detectives in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Maureen T. Reddy writes that it was not until the late 1980s that women's role in the history of crime fiction was revised when critics discovered lost female writers including Seeley Register and Anna Katherine Green. She refers to Ann Radcliffe's gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) as examples where women, while not driving the plot as the main protagonist, still exhibit detective traits and therefore make a significant contribution. Reddy writes that

It is now widely acknowledged that the woman writer and the woman detective have as long a history in crime fiction as do their male counterparts.¹⁶

¹⁵ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, (Routledge: 1994) p.30

¹⁶ Maureen T. Reddy, *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge University Press: 2003) p.192

Catherine Louisa Pirkis's character of Loveday Brooke, *Lady Detective*, 1893 - 4, remains largely unknown. However, Reddy maintains her character was a significant development in the genre and should be viewed as a 'precursor of the boom in feminist detective fiction'¹⁷ which happened more than 100 years later. Interestingly, when a woman's career at that time normally ended with marriage, Loveday was focused solely on her career rather than romance.

The contribution of best-selling English crime writer Agatha Christie must of course be acknowledged as her work was so significant to the development of the contemporary genre. Scottish writer Val McDermid said that Christie's Miss Marple series had a huge influence on her: 'It was *The Murder at the Vicarage* that made me a crime writer,'¹⁸ she said in an article in *The Irish Times* (September 16, 2015). She adds

I fell in love with the complicated intersecting narratives, the recognisable claustrophobia of village life – even in a Scottish mining village, there were parallels – and the cleverness of Jane Marple herself¹⁹

Scottish writer Josephine Tey's role is also relevant here as her work bridged the gap between the classic detective stories, like Christie's, and contemporary crime fiction as we know it today. Tey, a pseudonym used by Elizabeth MacKintosh, wrote detective stories in the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s. In the book *Josephine Tey: A Life*, Jennifer Morag Henderson describes her as providing 'an entirely new way of looking at the Scottish Literary Renaissance - and at Scotland itself'.²⁰ Henderson argues that her writing engaged directly with the rise in Scottish Nationalism that came out of Inverness, where the writer was based, in the 1930s. She suggests that

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Martin Doyle, *Agatha Christie: genius or hack? Crime writers pass judgment and pick favourites*, *Irish Times*, September 16, 2015
<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/agatha-christie-genius-or-hack-crime-writers-pass-judgment-and-pick-favourites-1.2351699> (accessed September 11, 2017)

¹¹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jennifer Morag Henderson, *Josephine Tey: A Life* (Sandstone Press, 2016) p.8

her writing can 'provide a new understanding of the situation in Scotland - and Britain - today'.²¹

Furthermore McDermid says that Tey began writing at a time 'when the genre appeared only to have space for the most conventional of connections between men and women'.²² She goes on to suggest that Tey explored the possibility of 'unconventional secrets' which allowed other writers to explore the darker side of humanity. She writes

Tey was never vulgar nor titillating; she left space for the reader to forge their own understanding of what was underpinning her characters' behaviour. Nevertheless, her world revealed a different set of psychological motivations.²³

It was Tey's work that allowed McDermid to understand that she could write books dealing with 'serious aspects of human behaviour within the confines of genre fiction'.²⁴ It is this exploration, of pushing the boundaries of genre fiction, that I will now go on to examine, and the ways in which McDermid and her contemporaries have successfully achieved this.

2.3 Scottish writers

Until the late 1990s, crime fiction, in Scotland, was largely dominated by male writers including William McIlvanney and Ian Rankin, and in crime fiction as a genre, male characters were often portrayed as the experts and female characters as victims. Crime writing in Scotland was conforming to the broad stereotypes which were discussed in the previous section.

However, since then writers including Val McDermid, Lin Anderson, Denise Mina, Louise Welsh, Karen Campbell, Gillian Galbraith, Alex Gray, Aline Templeton, Alanna Knight and Anna Smith have brought a fresh perspective to the genre. In

²¹ Ibid.

²² Val McDermid, *The brilliant unconventional crime novels of Josephine Tey*, *The Telegraph* (November 15, 2014) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/val-mcdermid-the-brilliant-unconventional-crime-novels-of-josephine-tey/>, (accessed September 11, 2017)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

addition, many of these writers have gone beyond writing traditional police procedurals, with female detectives as their key protagonists. It was the specific formula of the 'grizzled detective figure', referred to at the beginning of this chapter, that I wanted to move away from, with my own research and writing project. With this in mind I deliberately focused on female writers using female protagonists in a range of professions. There is a strong connection between many of the novels I have analysed which feature female characters with an increasing diversification in terms of their professional roles. Author Lin Anderson writes about a female forensic scientist in her Rhona MacLeod series; Denise Mina has written separate series about a journalist, Paddy Meehan; a former psychiatric patient, Maureen O'Donnell; and a police detective, Alex Morrow. Val McDermid's main protagonists include Lindsay Gordon, a journalist, Kate Brannigan, a private investigator, and police detective Carol Jordan.

In a bid to narrow my focus again for this study, I chose to concentrate on female writers using female journalists as their central character. One of the most influential writers in the time-frame of my research is award-winning author McDermid, whose first book, *Report for Murder*, was published in 1987. In it, she introduced the character of Lindsay Gordon, who is working in the male-dominated world of journalism where sexism was rife in the 1980s. There are six books in the Gordon series; the final one, *Hostage to Murder*, was published in 2003.

Denise Mina, whose work also contributes significantly to this research project, has spoken of the inspiration and influence she drew from US writer Sara Paretsky's novels, which can be seen in her recurrent theme of strong female protagonists including rookie reporter Paddy Meehan, DI Alex Morrow and social worker Maureen O'Donnell. 'For me, it's about untold stories, especially women's stories,'²⁵ says Mina.

I will use the next chapter to expand significantly on the contribution of the Scottish writers to the crime fiction genre by with an in-depth analysis of their work focusing on the role of Mina's Paddy Meehan as she begins her career working in a heavily masculine environment and the outcomes of Mina's subversion of the genre.

²⁵ *The Herald, Where Stories Begin*, July 14, 2013
http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/13113715.Where_stories_begin/ (accessed September 13, 2017)

I will also analyse the role of Lindsay Gordon in detail as well as Anna Smith's reporter protagonist, Rosie Gilmour.

2.4 Nordic writers

The Scottish position was mirrored in the Scandinavian and Nordic countries where, until the mid to late 1990s, the genre was dominated by men. Swedish husband and wife team Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö pioneered modern Scandinavian crime fiction with their Martin Beck series in the 1960s and 1970s. Established male writers have also written from a female perspective with Henning Mankell's female judge in *The Man from Beijing* (2008) and Hakan Nesser's female serial killer in *Woman with Birthmark* (1996). However, Swedish writer Helen Tursten, author of the best-selling Irene Huss series, says that although she respects Mankell as an excellent writer, she argues that 'it might be said that he perceives our society from a male point of view'.²⁶ She goes on to add

In the past, we didn't have any women writers redress the balance, except Maj Sjöwall, who, of course wrote in tandem. So I decided to write the kind of books that I wanted to read myself – books that reflected different viewpoints.²⁷

In *Swedish Crime Fiction: The Making of Nordic Noir*, Dr Kerstin Bergman acknowledges that there was an under-representation of female writers in the Swedish crime genre until relatively recently. She observes that 'with a few notable exceptions' such as Maria Lang (pen name for Dagmar Lange, 1914-91), Kerstin Ekman (b. 1933), Ulla Trenter (b. 1936) and Maj Sjöwall (b. 1935) - the genre was for a very long time male-dominated'.²⁸ The contribution from female Swedish crime writers was so small that a crime fiction competition, the Poloni Prize, was established to be given to a promising crime writer. It was named after the late Swedish crime writer Helena Poloni and its first recipient was the journalist Liza

²⁶ Barry Forshaw, *Death in a Cold Climate: A Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) p.62

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kerstin Bergman, *Swedish Crime Fiction: The Making of Nordic Noir* (Mimesis International, 2014) location 309

Marklund for her debut novel *The Bomber*.

The turning point for female writers came when Inger Frimansson, Marklund, Helene Tursten, and Aino Trosell all published their first novels in 1997 and 1998. They brought a much needed renewal to the forms of Swedish crime writing. Now it would appear that the most significant trend in Swedish crime fiction is the surge of female crime writers. This huge shift means that many interesting female writers have emerged not just from Sweden and Scandinavia but also from the wider Nordic countries including Iceland and Finland. As in Scotland, the writers have diversified with their protagonists' professions: Marklund's books feature journalist Annika Bengtson; Camilla Läckberg's main female character, in her Erica Falck series, is a writer, and Asa Larsson's protagonist is a lawyer.

It is necessary to acknowledge that there are, of course, variations between the Nordic writers. Yet for international sales and marketing purposes their work is often grouped inclusively. Bergman argues that the national crime fiction traditions 'display their own specificities and preferences'²⁹ which can be linked to historical backgrounds rather than just mainstream literary history. She says these differences can often be overlooked when it comes to the international marketing and reader reaction to these novels. Norwegian author Anne Holt argues that the whole idea of Nordic noir is 'marketing, hyping' . . . 'pure luck.'³⁰ Yet the common thread linking all of these writers is their focus on the personal lives of their protagonists, so that the crime element of the book, although remaining significant to the narrative, is not always the main focus.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, June 12, 2005, Liza Marklund said she wanted her character, Annika, to be 'vulnerable, to cry easily, to love her children'.³¹ She also wanted her to be 'ambitious, clumsy, aggressive, make mistakes and get away

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Laura Boast, *Why Anne Holt says Stieg Larsson's writing is more American than Scandinavian*, *Toronto Metro*, June 30, 2016
<http://www.metronews.ca/entertainment/books/2016/06/29/anne-holt-says-stieg-larsson-writing-american.html> (accessed September 13, 2017)

³¹ Louise France, *Murder, they wrote*, *The Guardian*, June 12, 2005
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/12/crimebooks.features>, (accessed September 12, 2017)

with them'.³² Marklund added

Male characters can be unattractive, and we love them for that. I don't want that reaction with Annika. In fact, although she is the main reason for the success of the books, I don't want readers to be charmed by her.³³

These character traits have also been emulated by Finnish writer Kati Hiekkapelto, whose books feature criminal investigator Anna Fekete, who fled Yugoslavia as a child and grew up in Finland. Hiekkapelto describes her as 'a trouble minded woman, a loner, who is held together by her work. Work is everything to her'.³⁴ She adds, 'I think her relationships with men are important to describe because they reveal something about her inner self; how confused and almost blind she is about herself and what she wants.'³⁵

The Icelandic writer, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir, whose series of crime novels centre around lawyer and single mother of two, Thora Gudmundsdottir, adds, 'Women don't try to write cool characters, more often than not imperfect characters are what appeal.'³⁶

There is, of course, perhaps now a stronger connection between these aforementioned writers and their novels because of translations. At the *Edinburgh International Book Festival* in 2006, Val McDermid said

In social and historical terms, we're far closer to Germany or Scandinavia or France, than we are to the American model and being able to read European writers in translation has made us realise that.³⁷

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kati Hiekkapelto, interview with Lorna Hill, September 12, 2015, Appendix 2

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Sarah Hughes, *After Agatha Christie . . . female crime writers delve deep into women's worst fears*, *The Guardian*, July 3, 2016
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/03/women-writers-crime-novels> (accessed September 11, 2017)

³⁷ Veronique Desnain, *Contemporary British Women Crime Writers: Breaking the Mould?*, August 2006 http://www.europolar.eu/europolarv1/7_tribune_desnain_angl.pdf (accessed October 20, 2016)

The appetite for translated Nordic crime fiction became most significant with Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy of crime books (2005, 2006 and 2007) featuring protagonist Lisbeth Salander. Yet despite the demand for works in translation that this triggered, there were suggestions that the rise of Nordic crime fiction is stalling and publishers may be looking elsewhere for translated works. In an article in *The Independent*, July 2013, Christopher MacLehose, founder of MacLehose Press, which brought Larsson to English-speaking readers, explains, 'Scandinavian crime became a commodity and far too many publishers put out too many books of less than superb quality.'³⁸ In the same article H  l  ne Fiamma, head of the book department at the French Institute, says, 'The whole Scandinavian wave is waning and this could well be filled by the amazing French writers out there.'³⁹

As this genre continues to develop these trends, and others, are likely to emerge and evolve.

2.5 Creative genesis

This section will explore the influence that the aforementioned writers have had on my own creative writing project, *The Invisible Chains*, a novel which centres on a Scottish journalist whose investigations into a murder lead her to uncover an international human trafficking ring. After the body of a young woman is pulled from the River Clyde, police struggle to identify her. Then journalist Megan Ross receives an anonymous tip-off about another girl's body and realises that the two murders are linked. The chapters of the book, told from Megan's point of view, are interspersed with italicized sections which tell the story of a young trafficked victim, known as The Girl, from Nigeria. The third strand of the story, which feeds into the structure and plot of the novel, are blog entries from Trudy, a victim of domestic abuse.

However, before investigating the effect of these female writers on this creative narrative, I must acknowledge the major influence of Stieg Larsson's trilogy, the first of the series was *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005). As Barry Forshaw

³⁸ Nick Clark, *Well it is called noir . . . How French crime writers killed the competition.*

The Independent, 17 July, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/well-it-is-called-noir-how-french-crime-writers-killed-the-competition-8714642.html> (accessed September 12, 2017)

³⁹ *Ibid.*

writes, 'Larsson managed to achieve what 'most crime writers would give their eye teeth for: fashion an entirely original kind of protagonist for the crime novel'.⁴⁰ He did this with the Lisbeth Salander, whose character is a contrast to the detectives who have been so prevalent in other crime books. Although Salander's life could also be described as dysfunctional, along with the male detectives featured in the more traditional crime novels, she is female and a skilled computer hacker. Larsson was succeeded in creating an original protagonist for the crime fiction genre. By aligning her with the journalist, Mikael Blomkvist, he creates two striking protagonists which he sustains throughout the rest of his trilogy.

Salander's character has clearly been aligned with those of female action heroes. She is physically strong and intelligent yet also vulnerable and flawed. I found Lisbeth's character original and refreshing and wondered if I could subtly emulate some of her qualities in the main character of my own creative narrative, Megan Ross. Lisbeth lives outside the rules of society and breaks the law to get the answers to problems by using illegal means such as hacking into computers and breaking into homes. Salander has had an abusive upbringing, and as the books unfold it becomes clear that the driving force behind many of her actions is her desire to get revenge on men who abuse women.

Although I did not want to completely recreate Salander's character in my own female protagonist, I decided that Megan could emulate some of her traits. I also wanted Megan to reflect Mikael Blomkvist's strong passion for truth and fairness and to be someone who was a tenacious journalist with a sense of social justice.

As I read on through the rest of the trilogy, *The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, I was impressed by the way in which Larsson developed Lisbeth's attitude to sex. She is apparently sexually liberated, yet as the trilogy unfolds it becomes apparent that her sexual make-up is linked to childhood guilt and fear. I wanted to instill this approach, to an extent, in Megan's character so that she has a liberated attitude to sex. As my own narrative unfolds it is suggested that Megan had a complex relationship with her late father, who was a serial adulterer, and this has had a repercussive effect on her own personal life. Megan has a young son, but is no longer with his father, and she is reluctant to tell

⁴⁰Ibid., p.64

Harry, her former lover, that she is now a mother. Megan is forced to admit to him that she has a child when he spots a screensaver on her phone.

Megan brushed the hair from her forehead. 'It's not what you're thinking Harry. If that is what you're thinking.'
'When did you have the baby?' he asked again.
Almost two years ago. And it's not yours.'⁴¹

During the process of developing Megan's character, I was also inspired by Marklund's books. Her novels centre on journalist Annika Bengtzon, and the series follows Bengtzon's struggles in her private life - as a dedicated journalist, wife and mother - as well as her professional transformation in the newsroom. As earlier mentioned, when she developed the character, Marklund says she wanted her to have a variety of characteristics complete with flaws. She does this in *The Bomber* (1998) by letting us see that Annika is happier in the workplace than she is at home where she 'never felt sufficiently happy, horny, calm, effective, authoritative or relaxed'.⁴² As a journalist she is used to instant results, feeling more appreciated than she is at home and is 'in charge of her own domain . . . and could push her own demands of the world around her'.⁴³ So Bengtzon constantly feels in conflict with what she should be doing with her children at home and what she could be doing if she was in the workplace.

In my own narrative Megan is balancing part-time motherhood with a full-time career. Sebastian, the father of her child, is also the boy's main carer. He is prepared to move from London to Glasgow with their son in order to provide him with stability. However, Megan feels threatened by this, though she will never explicitly admit it, as she thinks she should be able to manage her career with the needs of her son. Sebastian says

I'm talking about my son. Our son. I just don't think I can hand him over to you and make do with weekend visits. Especially if you're going to be working as much as you are.'⁴⁴

⁴¹ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.23

⁴² Liza Marklund, *The Bomber* (Corgi, 2011) Kindle edition location 1404

⁴³ Ibid., location 1404

⁴⁴ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.51

Megan insists she is working so intensely because her son is not currently with her full-time and her attitude will change when he is in Glasgow. Sebastian believes she is devoted to her career and can foresee the personal frustrations she will feel if that is compromised. She then agrees that having Sebastian there to co-parent their son is something she cannot afford to turn down.

Bergman observes that many authors of her generation have emulated Marklund's protagonist by 'depicting their women police officers as married with children, struggling to balance work pressures with family life'.⁴⁵ Bergman goes on to write about the recent trend by writers expressing a feminist awareness in their novels and creating more original women heroes in fiction. In her later novels, Marklund has allowed her protagonist to become more and more lonely and eccentric, negotiating her way through a divorce and moving the focus away from her relationship with her children which was central in previous novels. This shift shows the way in which her own life has subtly changed and developed.

My own novel is set in 2016 and I was mindful that, although women have made progress in the society and the workplace, inequalities still remain as has been discussed in the context of Post-Referendum Scotland in the previous chapter. Although Megan, as a magazine editor, holds a senior role in the workplace, it was important to reflect that gender inequalities persist in society as a whole. It was vital for Megan to portray the types of challenges faced by women, as outlined above, as well as the personal battle she faces between the demands of work and motherhood.

Even though Marklund's novels are set more recently than the series by McDermid and Mina, I have drawn similar comparisons between them. The image of being a woman in novels, in these different time frames, can still be quite depressing because of the patriarchal sexism their protagonists continue to face. Therefore it was important to consider this with the development of Megan's character. As the plot of the novel develops, Megan is repeatedly thwarted in her attempts to uncover the truth about a trafficking ring and those involved. Towards the end of the novel, she is warned to leave the story alone by Richard, the company's editor-in-chief, who says,

⁴⁵ Kerstin Bergman, *Swedish Crime Fiction: The Making of Nordic Noir* (Mimesis International, 2014) location 1698

‘And they want to cover their sordid tracks? God it’s like the Westminster old boys’ network.’ Megan eyed him up and down. ‘Nothing ever changes, does it?’⁴⁶

Here, the intention was to infer that the position in Scottish society had not progressed as much as Megan had assumed. However it was important to place a twist on this and so Megan is left reeling when Richard goes on to say, ‘It’s not the old boys’ network, Megan. I think you’ll find there is a very powerful woman at the head of it.’⁴⁷

With reference to Liza Marklund’s novels, it is important to acknowledge, at this point, Sweden’s image for its progressive politics. In 2013 it was ranked number four in the Global Gender Gap Index⁴⁸ which would indicate a country at the forefront of gender equality. However, concerns that progress had stalled pushed a party called *Feminist Initiative* to the forefront of Swedish politics with its aim of putting gender issues at the top of the political agenda. In May 2014, the party won a seat at the European Parliament. Then, in September of the same year, they came very close to winning a seat in the Swedish general election when they gained 3.1% of the vote. However, they required to gain a threshold of 4% to secure a seat.⁴⁹

It appears that feminism remains topical to women living and working within Sweden. Bergman argues that Swedish women remain vulnerable today and are ‘abused within the patriarchal structures of society’.⁵⁰ She goes on to add

Whether the Swedish women crime writers are intentionally addressing feminist issues or not, the image of being a woman in Sweden, as seen through these crime novels of both these generations of writers, is often still quite depressing.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.246

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Viola Gad, *Time*, September 12, 2013 time.com/3319652/feminism-comes-to-the-forefront-of-swedish-politics (Accessed January 16, 2015)

⁴⁹ Emma Lundin, *Feminist Initiative’s strong showing in the Swedish elections puts pressure on mainstream parties*, *The Guardian*, September 15, 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2014/sep/15/feminist-initiative-swedish-elections-gender-equality> (accessed October 3, 2017)

⁵⁰ Kerstin Bergman, *Swedish Crime Fiction* (Mesemis, 2014) location 1698

⁵¹ Ibid.

These problems and themes apparent in Swedish crime fiction are similar to those, as will be discussed later, in novels by Scottish female crime writers.

In Marklund's concluding book in the Annika Bengtzon series, *The Final Word* (2016), Marklund finishes the circular narrative of the story arc which began with *The Bomber* in 1998. Although her books did not follow the chronological order of the events depicted in Bengtzon's life, the underlying theme is the abuse of women by men. Bengtzon killed her abusive boyfriend in self-defence and this is an issue which plagues her throughout the books. In a review, Sweden's *Expressen* describes Annika as 'tormented, struggling and tough all the way to the end'.⁵² These are traits, I would argue, that all of the female protagonists examined display. These characters are used to illustrate the sense of shifting identity for women in modern society and the challenges they continue to face. By the end of *The Invisible Chains*, Megan is left to consider her role in society, both as a redundant journalist and as a mother who has chosen to focus on her career. The challenges that Megan faces will be examined in detail in the following chapters.

2.6 Conclusion

As explored in this chapter, there is undoubtedly a significant trend in the number of female crime writers both in Scotland and the Nordic countries as analysed.

Throughout the research process I have drawn several conclusions on what makes these books so appealing. I would argue that the common thread and adjective appearing in the debates around these novels is the word 'grim'. These writers are not afraid to have their female protagonists tackle gritty, dark and uncomfortable issues. Setting and place are key, along with the characters, the style and the rhythm of the prose. Lin Anderson says, 'Really, the writing couldn't have come from anywhere else. It's the style and the rhythm that tell it like it is.'⁵³ I would argue that such female protagonists have invigorated the crime fiction genre for they give the reader the unexpected and therefore bring another dimension to crime writing.

⁵² Unauthored, Review, *Expressen*, 2015, <http://www.salomonssonagency.se/books/jarnblod> (accessed September 2017)

⁵³ Lin Anderson, interview with Lorna Hill, September 11, 2016, Appendix 1

The crime fiction genre is continuing to thrive, with a recent survey suggesting that crime is the favourite form of fiction for the majority of Scottish book readers. The Ipsos mori poll of 1,000 adults found 'one in four readers preferred crime fiction'.⁵⁴ Figures from the latest *Bloody Scotland Crime Festival* show that 2017 was the best year yet with ticket sales up 30% on 2016.⁵⁵

Sam Eades, senior commissioning editor at Orion crime imprint Trapeze, says that readers of crime fiction are statistically more likely to be female. 'So it's no surprise that publishers invest heavily in female writers – who is better placed to explore the darkest fears of the female reader?'⁵⁶

Women write about crime fiction because, says Anderson, 'they like to see justice done. They like to try and understand why things happen. They like the thrills and the puzzle.'⁵⁷ She adds that female readers, 'like good characters who they can follow in a series. The characters are the most important reason to read a crime series.'⁵⁸

McDermid says she wrote her first serial killer novel, *The Mermaids Singing* (1995), partly as a reaction 'against a slew of novels coming out of the US in which hideous violence was meted out to female victims whose only role in the books was to be raped, mutilated, dismembered and strewn across the landscape'.⁵⁹ Those books she referred to were all written by male authors and she says

Nobody was asking them at literary festivals or in interviews, 'How does it feel, as a man, to be writing such extreme violence against women?' But as soon as women – who, after all, are overwhelmingly the victims of sexually motivated brutality and homicide – decide they want to explore the same territory, gender becomes an issue.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ BBC News, *Crime fiction is favourite genre for Scottish book readers*, November 21, 2016 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-38045342> (accessed September 11, 2017)

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Sarah Hughes, *After Agatha Christie . . . female crime writers delve deep into women's worst fears*, July 3, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/03/women-writers-crime-novels> (accessed September 11, 2017)

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Val McDermid, *Complaints about women writing misogynist crime fiction are a red herring*, *The Guardian*, October 29, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/oct/29/misogynist-crime-fiction-val-mcdermid> (accessed September 13, 2017)

⁶⁰ Ibid.

McDermid adds that this was not just an issue, but 'a stick to beat all of us women who dare to want to examine a society that has produced so many people who are interested in reading such fictions'.⁶¹

Norwegian writer Karin Fossum says she is more interested in the crime than the criminal. 'If I have a mission, it is to show the perpetrators as human beings. To show that they didn't want the crime to happen either, that it wasn't something they dreamed about.'⁶²

Marklund, a former journalist, has always had an interest in writing about the abuse of women by men. This is a theme that is consistent throughout her books. She explains

We don't have a long tradition of protecting women in this country. What happens at home is your own business in Sweden. Yet every 10 days a woman is beaten to death by her partner. It's a subject that I was angry about when I was a journalist - and I'm still angry.⁶³

For Finnish writer Kati Hiekkapelto, the decision to write crime came from her desire to write about immigration. 'I wanted to write crime fiction that handles social issues but the most important thing to me was to tell a good story.'⁶⁴ Hiekkapelto goes on to say that the 'best art work shows something about the surrounding world and often it is something people want to close their eyes about'.⁶⁵ She adds that, in her books, her aim is to open this 'institutionalised oppression' and that 'if a single reader begins to look at our society and its mechanisms from a different perspective than earlier, my 'duty as an artist' has succeeded'.⁶⁶ For Hiekkapelto, art should be about creating a space for voices to be heard. She says

The thing is about whose voice we listen to, whose voice gets volume and space. I cannot give a voice to, let's say for example an illegal

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Louise France, *Murder they wrote*, *The Guardian*, June 12, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/12/crimebooks.features>) (accessed September 12, 2017)

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Kati Hiekkapelto, interview with Lorna Hill, September 12, 2017, Appendix 2

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

immigrant - what do I know about his life after all - but I can try to create a space where his voice could be heard.⁶⁷

Despite the overwhelming evidence that women have overhauled the crime fiction genre, there is conflict over whether women are sufficiently recognised for their contributions. Anderson says that, despite the way in which the genre has evolved in the last twenty years, 'there is not enough recognition for female authors and characters'.⁶⁸ She argues that, although there are some 'huge female players in the genre, men still dominate as in all literary forms'.⁶⁹

However, McDermid takes a different view to Anderson's and says she believes there is recognition for women writers and characters in the genre. 'I think we do well. Women are really prominent in the critical sphere. I think women's voices are not silenced in Scotland and there are great young writers coming through like Kerry Hudson and Kirsty Logan.'⁷⁰

A press release from the recent Bloody Scotland Crime Fiction Festival, *Women Dominate Bloody Scotland International Crime Festival*,⁷¹ is perhaps a further sign of progress. At the festival Mina became the first woman to win The McIlvanney Prize for Scottish Crime Book of the Year, and the winner of the inaugural Virago/The Pool New Crime Writer Award, set up for women, was announced.

Kerstin Bergman says that the success of the 'second generation'⁷² of female crime writers, such as Katarina Wennstam and Åsa Träff, who have followed on from Marklund, are a positive sign for the future of Swedish crime fiction. These writers, she says, have developed the genre in 'fresh directions' and made 'feminism a more prominent feature of the genre'.⁷³

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Lin Anderson, Interview with Lorna Hill, September 11, 2016, Appendix 1

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Val McDermid, Interview with Lorna Hill, November 18, 2016, Appendix 3

⁷¹ Bloody Scotland/Virago Press Release, *Women Dominate Bloody Scotland International Crime Festival*, September 9, 2017 <https://www.bloodyscotland.com/the-mcilvanney-prize/> (accessed September 11, 2017)

⁷² Kerstin Bergman, *Swedish Crime Fiction: The Making of Nordic Noir* (Mesemis, 2014) location 1676

⁷³ Ibid.

This idea of shifting identity and contradictions for women in contemporary society, and Post-Referendum Scotland, where progress is made then challenges are faced, perhaps most accurately illustrates the current position as contextualized in Chapter 1. These themes of feminine identity, coupled with social and political beliefs and the abuse of power, will be explored in the following chapters.

3. Gender Theories and Feminist Crime Fiction

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will examine gender in crime fiction, drawing on key feminist critics Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam whose work is particularly relevant to this project. I will explore the way in which the crime fiction genre interrogates the cultural constructions of gender and consider the range and significance of contemporary challenges from within the genre. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, authors including Val McDermid, Denise Mina, Anna Smith, Liza Marklund and Lin Anderson are just a few of the women who have challenged the expectation of gender and genre and patriarchal order to create memorable female protagonists in traditionally masculine roles. This in turn has transformed the way in which readers view the role of women in crime fiction. In this study I will focus, particularly, on McDermid's character of Lindsay Gordon, Mina's character of Paddy Meehan, and Smith's Rosie Gilmour. I will also expand on the role of Anderson's character, Rhona McLeod, and Marklund's protagonist, Annika Bengtson, and the influence of these writers on my own creative genesis.

3.2 Val McDermid and Lindsay Gordon

The starting point in terms of influential Scottish female crime authors would be with Val McDermid, who was one of the first writers to challenge the male-dominated genre with her first book *Report for Murder* (1987), a feminist mystery novel featuring lesbian journalist turned detective Lindsay Gordon. She has acknowledged her timing with the book was significant as the first wave of American women's crime fiction - authors including Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton and Marcia Muller - had just arrived in the UK. McDermid's book was published by independent publisher Women's Press and, McDermid stated in an article with *The Independent* newspaper, 11 September, 2010, that she was in 'the right place at the right time with the right book'.⁷⁴ In the same report she described how the book went largely

⁷⁴ Val McDermid, *The Independent*, September 11, 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/niche-off-the-leash-val-mcdermid-on-progress-in-lesbian-fiction-2073909.html>, (accessed January 16, 2017)

'unreviewed by the mainstream press and was ignored by chain booksellers'.⁷⁵

McDermid was challenging the traditional boundaries of UK crime fiction, traditionally strictly heterosexual, by introducing the first openly lesbian female detective.

McDermid cleverly uses Gordon to challenge the perception that investigating and reporting on crimes can only be done properly by a man. In *Report for Murder*, Gordon is criticised for acting coldly when reporting on a killing that has taken place. She says, 'I'm going to get well pissed in my local. Put all this out of my mind.'⁷⁶

However, when challenged on her attitude she says, 'It's the job I do. I've been trained to forget my feelings and do the business. And I do it very well.'⁷⁷ McDermid has also spoken of the influence novelist Sara Paretsky had on her writing process, particularly Paretsky's *Indemnity Only* (1982) which features a female private eye. Speaking at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2016, she said the book struck a chord with her because of its urban setting. Crimes happened in the novel because of the environment and its social structures. What was most refreshing, she added, was the fact that there was a female protagonist 'with a brain who didn't need to call the guys in every time something difficult happened'.⁷⁸ Having closely read the Lindsay Gordon series, I reflected on whether Gordon had to adopt a male attitude to do her job effectively, given the masculine working environment she operated in. In *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2001), Gill Plain argues that regardless of a detective's gender or sexuality, they will always exist 'in negotiation with a series of long-established masculine codes'.⁷⁹ She goes on to write that the extent to which a detective will conform or challenge such codes is pivotal to an 'understanding of crime fiction and the changing role of the investigator within the genre'.⁸⁰ These genre conventions have an impact on the way in which writers develop their female protagonists and led McDermid to create a confident female character who would not hesitate to speak her mind. In *Report for*

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Val McDermid, *Report for Murder* (Harper Collins, 2004) p.77

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Val McDermid, *Edinburgh International Book Festival*, August 25, 2016

⁷⁹ Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (University of Edinburgh Press, 2001) p.11

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Murder the news editor of the *Clarion* newspaper throws a memo at her and tells her that the story, about a woman who has had thirteen miscarriages, requires a woman's touch. Gordon replies that she's not there to do 'this sort of crappy feature'.⁸¹ She goes on to add that what the story requires is a 'dollop of heavy-handed sentimentality and you bloody well know that's not my line'.⁸² Gordon refers to the feature as 'sexist garbage'⁸³ then tells him to assign it to a male reporter. Such assertiveness and outspokenness could be associated with masculine behaviour and have traditionally been the qualities of male protagonists in the hard-boiled tradition of writers such as Raymond Chandler and Robert B. Parker. By projecting this persona of someone who is emotionally detached from the issue, it could be argued that Lindsay is behaving like a man, and actually appears to be a replica of the male predecessors in the genre, rather than a revisionary character. McDermid was shrewd and, I would argue, bold with her development of the character of Lindsay. She is not at all self-conscious in her role as a journalist, in what was a male-dominated profession in the 1980s, and McDermid succeeds in establishing her as a strong, plausible character. In an interview with Danuta Kean, in the *Daily Mail* (July 19, 2012), McDermid spoke of the social expectations of women and of the crime fiction genre, which means 'anybody who writes a categorically female protagonist is by definition transgressive'.⁸⁴ By writing about strong women who drive the plot and solve the crime, these female authors are challenging the patriarchal order and traditional expectations that crimes are solved by men. In addition, the female characters are becoming the subjects of the novel rather than the objects - as victims of crimes.

At this stage, it is worth considering Judith Butler's ideas about the cultural constructedness of gender as well as its 'performativity'. She defined gender as a series of practices, expectations and behaviours performed by individuals which is then in turn accepted and therefore validated by society. In *Gender Trouble* (2007),

⁸¹ Val McDermid, *Report for Murder* (Harper Collins, 2004) p.96

⁸² Val McDermid, *Report for Murder* (Harper Collins, 2004) p.96

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Danuta Kean, *Bloody guts and girly gore: Why do female authors write nastier and more violent crime than men do?* *The Daily Mail*, July 19, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2175785/Danuta-Kean-investigates-female-crime-writers-produce-violent-novels-men.html> (accessed January 16, 2017)

third-wave feminist critic Butler argues that feminism has made a mistake by trying to assert that 'women' were a group with common characteristics and interests. She observes that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'.⁸⁵ Butler argues that the sex of individuals is also a socially constructed category which stems out of social and cultural practices. I would advocate that in contemporary crime fiction, gender is not an innate quality linked to biological sex, although women are often objectified for sexual gratification and victims in crimes of a sexual nature, but rather a series of 'fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means'.⁸⁶ By this I mean the way in which the female protagonists, who are driving the plot to solve the crime, behave and act through their use of words and gestures. Are they acting in a certain way and performing certain roles which they think they should as expected by society? Are they behaving in a certain way in order to gain validation from society? This is particularly relevant to this study because of the focus on texts featuring women working in a traditionally male-dominant work environment. Therefore this assertive behaviour from a woman, which would possibly be acceptable from a man, is seen as being 'pushy' or 'bossy' behaviour. So these gender constructions dictate what is considered appropriate behaviour from a woman. By applying the performative theories of Butler to several characters, as mentioned, in the crime fiction genre I have been able to examine whether the hegemonic norms can be tested. The questions around the masculinity and femininity of characters such as Lindsay Gordon will in turn initiate a discussion on the influence on my own writing and development of Megan Ross's character.

3.3 Denise Mina and Paddy Meehan

McDermid's characterisation of Gordon led me to further explore the role of other female protagonists in the newsroom environment. Denise Mina's series about a young reporter, Paddy Meehan, who also works in a Glasgow newspaper in the 1980s, is a useful example of how women crime writers have utilised female characters in a Scottish setting. In *The Field of Blood* (2005), Mina introduces

⁸⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 2007) p.25

⁸⁶ Ibid.

eighteen-year-old Meehan who has just started her career in journalism. Paddy is quite unremarkable in some ways, as a protagonist, in that she is self-conscious, lacking confidence and critical of herself yet despite this she is ambitious to do well at work. In his book, *Tartan Noir* (2014), Len Wanner describes her as 'self-conscious in her girlishness, self-satisfied in her feminism'.⁸⁷ He describes these as 'typical traits of adolescence'⁸⁸ in the young woman who has only just begin her career in journalism. However, I would challenge these observations. Meehan may have been 'self-conscious in her girlishness'; yet her anxiety and self-consciousness would have been heightened while working in such a male-dominated and sexist workplace. Bearing in mind that this was during the 1980s, before equality legislation was taken seriously in a newspaper environment, it is remarkable that Meehan had the inner confidence and strength to throw herself into such a hostile environment. So in doing this Mina has created a significant role model in Meehan. She uses her to show that even a seemingly ordinary character, with insecurities and worries, can find inner strength and resolve to channel ambition and drive herself forward. The notion of a female protagonist working in a male dominated profession assumes certain gender behavioural expectations, that women are there to serve the men and not hold senior roles. This is the issue for Meehan in *The Field of Blood* (2006) when she is sent to the bar to get a drink for a male colleague. Although she does not like her male colleagues or even want to be in their company, she knows she has to show willing if she is to earn a promotion. She says she would have felt like an 'interloper at the bar' if she 'hadn't been on news business, here to get the picture editor's tankard filled'.⁸⁹

However, the distinction apparent between both characters is that Gordon is assertive, professional and self-assured. She does not appear to assume any behavioural expectations tied to her gender. It may be relevant to note that Lindsay is a lesbian, confident with her own sexuality, and not afraid of establishing herself in a man's world, again pushing the boundaries of what until then had been a strictly heterosexual genre. Yet her homosexuality should not necessarily equate with these masculine traits. Lindsay is older, more experienced and self-assured than Mina's

⁸⁷ Len Wanner, *Tartan Noir* (Freight, 2015) p.45

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Denise Mina, *The Field of Blood* (Orion, 2006) p.7

Meehan who is lacking in emotional maturity and has a constant conflict with conformity throughout the book. She has been brought up in a strict Catholic family which has meant there are certain expectations of what she will do with her life. Towards the end of *The Field of Blood*, the reader realises the personal development which Meehan has undergone when she breaks off her engagement with her boyfriend. This is a bold move on her part as she still lives at home with her staunchly Catholic family who have strong beliefs in the way she should lead her life. 'I want a career and I don't think I can get married and have one, so I'm choosing the career.'⁹⁰ This is met with outrage by her boyfriend who accuses her of turning into a lesbian. He says, 'Why do you need to try and be a man? What's wrong with just being a woman?' This is significant as it implies that Paddy should be meeting his expectations, and indeed societal and familial expectations of how a woman should behave. The constructions of gender become relevant here as behaviour which would be deemed acceptable from a man is viewed as being inappropriate from a woman. Paddy is being punished because she is deviating from old gender norms and traditional concepts of what it means to be a woman, as explored in Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998). This theme is one I will explore later in this chapter when I focus on its relevance to my own narrative. This conflict between professionalism and expectations regarding gender behaviour is a common theme throughout the narrative for both Paddy Meehan and Lindsay Gordon.

3.4 Anna Smith and Rosie Gilmour

Another example of gender behaviour, and how a character can challenge expectations, can be seen in Anna Smith's debut, *The Dead Won't Sleep* (2011), in which we are introduced to the character of Rosie Gilmour. She is working in journalism in a Glasgow newspaper and Smith manages to emulate some of the qualities of McDermid's Lindsay Gordon in this character by using sharp humour and wittiness to deflect sexist comments. During a night out with work colleagues a male colleague boasts about his sexual prowess thanks to some tablets he has been given by a friend. He describes his performance as 'unbelievable' and claims he is having sex several times a day. Gilmour goes on to interject, 'Just think how

⁹⁰ Denise Mina, *The Field of Blood* (Orion, 2006) p.335

knackered you'd be if there was somebody with you.'⁹¹ Although *The Dead Won't Sleep* is set in 1997, ten years after McDermid's *Report for Murder* and Mina's *The Field of Blood*, Gilmour faces similar challenges in the newsroom from male colleagues. Gilmour, like Gordon, does not trust her news editor and so purposely withholds information from him. In his first week in his new job, he sends Rosie to follow a trivial story that she feels a junior reporter could easily have covered. She follows instructions but when she returns to the office she takes the news editor aside and 'told him in no uncertain terms never to pull a stunt like that again'.⁹² Rosie is adamant that she will not be pushed around by a male colleague. However, in an email interview, September 18, 2015, Smith said gender wasn't an issue for her when she was creating the character of Rosie who is 'just a woman and a journalist'.⁹³ She said that that if a story is good enough then it 'shouldn't matter whether the main protagonist is a woman'.⁹⁴ The characterisation of the protagonist should engage with readers, and a good character is a good character regardless of gender. She added that 'I would never want to see women characters being recognised just because they are women'.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, the huge shift in the crime fiction genre in recent years means that this is unavoidable. Smith may not consciously have been keen to contribute to the debate surrounding female protagonists. However, by writing a successful series featuring a strong woman character comparisons and distinctions are certain to be made.

3.5 Additional key influencers

Although McDermid, Mina and Smith all feature female journalists as their protagonists in these novels, I must also acknowledge the significant influence of Lin Anderson's books. Her first book, *Driftnet* (2003), introduced forensic scientist Dr Rhona MacLeod who is now the established character of her series. The personality traits evident in Rhona are similar to those exhibited by the female protagonists I have examined. Explaining her choice of profession for the character of Rhona, in an

⁹¹ Anna Smith, *The Dead Won't Sleep* (Quercus, 2011) p.239

⁹² Ibid. p.75

⁹³ Anna Smith, interview with Lorna Hill, September 18, 2015, Appendix 4

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

interview on September 11, 2016, Anderson said there are more male criminals than female and more male police officers than female.⁹⁶ She further acknowledged that the area of forensic science is now a popular career for women, so there is no shortage of female experts in the forefront of all branches of forensics. Anderson described Rhona as 'self-sufficient, good at her job and expects to be treated as an equal'.⁹⁷ She further argued that having a strong female lead character does not mean her femininity is compromised. 'It's really interesting when you talk to people in this field and realise that when they are examining the victim of a crime they may write up their notes in the tent with the body.'⁹⁸ Therefore the protagonist is acknowledging that this is 'not just a body but a human being'.⁹⁹ For example, in her novel *The Reborn* (2010), the seventh in the series, Rhona is called to the scene of the violent death of a pregnant woman whose foetus has been crudely delivered and stolen. After Rhona completes her examination of the victim, she sits beside her to write up her notes. 'She had sat with the body when she had finished her forensic examination, recording everything she had found.'¹⁰⁰ Although her colleagues chide her for this habit, it was something MacLeod always did. 'Sitting with the dead. Rhona thought it was the least she could do.'¹⁰¹ By doing this Anderson acknowledges that the female protagonist brings additional strengths and values to the crime scene. This fresh perspective allows the reader to engage, on a human level, with the protagonist who is seeing the person who has died as a human being, an individual rather than just a dead body. A particularly strong and recent visual example of this was shown in the second series of Australian TV drama, *Top of the Lake, China Girl* (2017) when Detective Robin Griffin is called to Bondi Beach. A suitcase, suspected of containing a body, has been found there and in the scene Griffin kneels down and gently opens the case to discover the body of a young Thai woman. She speaks directly to the corpse and says, very gently, 'Hello, darling. Do

⁹⁶ Lin Anderson, interview with Lorna Hill, September 11, 2016, Appendix 1

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Lin Anderson, *The Reborn* (Hodder, 2010) p.4

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

you want to tell me what you saw?’¹⁰² The effect of this is to immediately humanise the victim and evoke compassion and sympathy, in the viewers, rather than revolt at the grisly discovery.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, December 8, 2010, Anne Holt said that female detectives are ‘alienated by entrenched male hierarchies at work’ and the ‘Janus-like disjunction between their formidable professional personas and their vulnerable private lives’.¹⁰³ She goes on to add that female detectives are particularly sensitive towards the victims of crime and writes,

The dramatic potential is heightened because female detectives, without the physical strength of their male counterparts, have to be more resourceful, intelligent and tactical to solve the case.¹⁰⁴

In *Dissection of Patricia Cornwell’s Feminist Woman Detective* (2012), Carme Farré Vidal examines the role of female forensic pathologist, Kay Scarpetta. He remarks that this empathy, another traditionally regarded female trait, is incorporated into her identity as a woman hero. ‘Not only is she very careful with the bodies of those who have been killed but she also cares for those who they leave behind.’¹⁰⁵ He suggests she functions in this manner ‘as a feminist woman investigator who involves herself and rejects the traditional male detective’s emotional detachment’,¹⁰⁶ adding that her job involves the ‘use of her intellectual abilities together with her deepest feelings towards others’.¹⁰⁷ Yet I would argue that this empathy is not a characteristic trait in all of the female characters in the texts analysed as demonstrated, for example, by McDermid’s character of Lindsay Gordon as discussed earlier in this chapter. Therefore, empathy is not necessarily prevalent or

¹⁰² *Top of the Lake, China Girl*, dir. Jane Campion (See-Saw Films, 2017)

¹⁰³ Anne Holt, *Anne Holt’s Top 10 Female Detectives*, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/dec/08/anne-holt-top-10-female-detectives> (accessed October 3, 2017)

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Carme Farré Vidal, *Dissection of Patricia Cornwell’s Feminist Woman Detective Kay Scarpetta*, *Journal of English Studies*, Volume 10 (2012) p.55
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/298153217_Dissection_of_Patricia_Cornwell%27s_feminist_woman_detective_Kay_Scarpetta (accessed August 30, 2017)

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

an obvious quality in all the characters created by the female writers studied. The protagonists are integrated in society, and each has her own story. None of them are particularly extraordinary, which perhaps makes them resonate with readers, yet they all possess an inner determination and strength.

3.6 Creative genesis

The Invisible Chains, the practice-based component of my own research, is set in 2016 and focuses on a female protagonist who is editing a current affairs magazine. Her character was developed around the central theme of women working in a more progressive society post Independence referendum, where more women hold senior positions. When I developed the character of Megan, I wanted her to challenge the hegemonic norm which she still faces in her roles in the workplace and as a mother. I wanted the character to emulate some of the characteristics of the protagonists created by McDermid, Mina, Smith and Anderson. Megan is ambitious, intelligent and has a successful career which she has combined with motherhood, although she does not believe she copes with both roles. She keeps her work and personal lives separate and adopts a 'masculine' persona while in a work environment. Despite advances in the workplace and the role of women in Scottish society, she still faces the challenges of living in a patriarchal society.

To contextualise this, it was important to consider the time-frame of *The Invisible Chains*, which is set in 2016 - almost thirty years after the first Lindsay Gordon book. Although Megan, as magazine editor, holds a senior role in the workplace, I was mindful that as the creative genesis developed it would be important to reflect that gender inequalities persist in society as a whole. This is an area which required further investigation in order to develop Megan's character. Thus, it was important to consider whether women, in crime fiction, consistently have a vulnerability about them because of their gender. Nicci Gerrard commented in *The Observer* (October 25, 2014) that gender changes the meaning of the protagonist's behaviour and for a woman to behave like a man can set up a conflict in the viewer. 'Women's behaviour, by contrast, is judged against the norm of their male colleagues: it can

never be invisible, never taken for granted.¹⁰⁸ These comments echo Judith Butler's theory about gender being like an improvised performance. So, to say that gender is performative is to argue that gender is 'real only to the extent that it is performed'.¹⁰⁹

The contemporary crime fiction which is being examined in this study has evolved and reflected the changes in society. As the role of women has changed and expanded alongside shifting cultural norms, so too have their roles and jobs in society. In an interview with Alex Henry, in *Dundee University Review of the Arts* (October 25, 2013), Denise Mina spoke of the observations she made of people's reactions to her novels when she began writing and using lead female protagonists and the differences in law which have affected women's rights. 'When I was a girl in the 80s, your husband could legally rape you and you had no recourse to law: he could legally beat you.'¹¹⁰ She goes on to add that it was quite routine for people to ask young girls if they wanted to get married: 'We've come such a long way and people forget that.'¹¹¹ These comments are significant because they imply that gender equality has been achieved in contemporary fiction and, by extension, to some extent in modern society.

However, although there has been progress, it is vital to acknowledge that women still face complexities and gender inequalities in the workplace today as Megan's experiences show. I was mindful that, although women had made progress in journalism since then, inequalities still remain. These were demonstrated by Jane Martinson in her article in *The Guardian* (March 13, 2016) which noted that in the British Press Awards, in 2016, just 20 women were shortlisted along with 94 men.¹¹² This was the 'lowest percentage in six years'.¹¹³ Although my character, as a magazine editor, holds a senior role in the workplace, it is important to reflect that

¹⁰⁸ Nicci Gerrard, *Move over, Morse: female TV detectives are on the case now*, *The Observer*, October 25, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/oct/05/female-tv-detectives-move-over-morse> (accessed October 25, 2014)

¹⁰⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 2007) p.185

¹¹⁰ Alex Henry, *Denise Mina in Conversation with Alex Henry*, *Dundee University Review of the Arts*, October 25, 2013, www.dura-dundee.org.uk (accessed January 16, 2017)

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Jane Martinson, *Can tackling awards inequality help close journalism's gender gap?* *The Guardian*, March 13, 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/mar/13/inquality-press-awards-gender-divide> (accessed October 3, 2017)

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

gender inequalities persist in society as a whole. Megan, a working unmarried mother, rebels against the conformities and expectations of the Scottish society she has been raised in. The most significant action she takes to express this rebellion is by leaving her young son in London with his father while she pursues her career, as revealed in Chapter 3 of the novel.

It was important that Megan's character had similar characteristics to McDermid's Lindsay Gordon, though I was aware of the differences given that my creative piece is set thirty years after the Gordon series. At times Lindsay Gordon's brash and sometimes prickly behaviour seemed to be because she existed in a largely male environment. Megan does, at times, adopt a masculine role when expressing herself in the workplace. For example, in one scene in Chapter 5, she discovers a body in the river and is clearly in shock. Harry, her police friend, tries to take a sensitive approach and suggests she should go back to her hotel to gather her thoughts. However, Megan takes umbrage at this as she is focused on getting back to work at the office. She bluntly says, "And do what, Harry? Mope about feeling sorry for myself? Go and soak in a hot bath?"¹¹⁴ She ignores Harry's advice and goes back to the office, picking up coffees to take back to her team, because she feels she has a duty to get on with things and meet editorial deadlines. She is therefore adjusting her behaviour and language to suit her environment at that particular moment. However, later in the novel, in private, she does allow herself to cry, thereby acknowledging grief for the victim.

Megan also briefly shows a different side to her personality when she is with Harry out of the workplace. When he picks her up from the airport, in Chapter 16, after she has been to London to visit her son, he takes her to a restaurant and asks how he is. She begins to cry and promptly excuses herself from the table. When she returns to her seat she deflects Harry's attempts to probe further. Having her show some emotion, albeit very briefly, about her son was a decision to show that she was able to dispense with the masculine traits adopted for her professional role. This brief moment of emotion is significant as it marks the start of the blurring of the boundaries of their relationship.

This conflict, between gender expectations as a mother and her own personal

¹¹⁴ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.41

professionalism at work, is a theme that features heavily in *The Invisible Chains*. In a scene with Sebastian, the father of her child, she is frustrated at being unable to seamlessly juggle her job with motherhood. When she is called by police to go to the local station and give a statement, she has to hand her son back to Sebastian, even though she is supposed to be spending the day with him. 'At least let me go and get him organised. I'll bring him down and meet you in the lobby in ten minutes.'¹¹⁵ Megan experiences a range of emotions around the challenges she faces as a mother and as a woman in the workplace. The question of motherhood and how a woman 'should' behave in the role was a significant consideration when developing Megan's characteristics. Her focus was to be solely on her son when she was with him rather than feel frustrated that her needs were balanced against those of his. Yet there were of course certain discourses surrounding her gender role. Megan is still trying to come to terms with her own feelings about motherhood. She feels guilty about leaving her son in London so she can pursue her career. Yet even when she is at work she is constantly aware of her powerful emotional ties to her son and the way in which her former partner still manipulates her.

In order to explore this further, I considered *The Last Breath* (2007), the third book in the Paddy Meehan series. Paddy has become a mother, which has certain implications on the decisions she makes and the way she behaves. She now has her son to consider. In an interview with Peter Guttridge in *The Guardian* (July 29, 2007) Mina described crime as a 'very hard genre to feminise'.¹¹⁶ She also referred to female protagonists who are responsible for looking after their mothers when they get older; 'She is going to be worried about her brother and sister; she will be making a living while bringing up kids.'¹¹⁷ However, this view was one I wanted to challenge with my own creative project. Although Megan does exist in a masculine environment, she strives to resist these gender expectations as described above. Throughout the narrative her focus is on making a success of her new job so she can build a new life for herself and her son in Glasgow. In order to do this though,

¹¹⁵ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.52

¹¹⁶ Peter Guttridge, *Murder She Wrote and Plenty of It: Denise Mina on her Career*, *The Guardian*, July 29, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jul/29/crimebooks.features> (accessed August 30, 2017)

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

she has to rely on her ex-partner to look after their son in London until she has settled into her new job and found a new home. This made me consider the patriarchal systems which are still very much entrenched in society. When Megan's former partner Sebastian makes a pass at her and she refuses his advances, he then decides to flex his position of power and demand full-time custody of their child. It was also important to investigate the themes of obedience which emerge in the creative project. In Chapter 11, Trudy writes in her blog, 'And so I obey', with reference to her abusive husband. In *The Girl's* entries there are numerous references to the fact that she must not 'disobey'. Then there is the oppression experienced by Megan as she, in her professional role, begins to threaten the patriarchal power surrounding her. In *The Invisible Chains*, Megan has been investigating the deaths of two women in Glasgow. One has been pulled from the River Clyde and another has been dumped in the Botanic Gardens. As her enquiries progress she begins to suspect they are part of a human trafficking ring. Both are Nigerian and cannot be identified. Both bodies have markings which suggest they have been put through a traditional ritual known as juju. However, Megan begins to feel pressure from her employers and the male-dominated editorial board to 'back off' the story and, when she is in Sweden for conference, in Chapter 23, she wakes alone and drowsy in her hotel room, believing she has been the victim of sexual assault. She is confused, guilty, ashamed and destabilised by what has happened to her. Yet it is only much later in the narrative that the reader learns that it was in fact a woman who drugged her and made her believe she had been attacked. This narrative technique is designed to surprise the reader, who has been led to believe Megan has been attacked by a man with whom she had a drink with at the bar. However, it transpires that the female perpetrator acted in this way because of the influence and coercive control of a man who is ultimately threatened by Megan's position of power and increasing knowledge. This takes us back to the theme of 'punishment' as outlined earlier in this chapter in relation to Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998). Megan is being punished because of her role, which is a significant focal point in the narrative because it underpins Halberstam's beliefs that women who deviate from the gender norm are punished. She argues that tomboyism is tolerated in a girl's childhood yet is punished when it 'appears to be the sign of

extreme male identification'¹¹⁸ and when it 'threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence'.¹¹⁹ This is significant here to Megan and also to the characters created by McDermid, Mina, Smith and Anderson because they exist in patriarchal societies where they are rebelling against these 'compliant forms of femininity'.¹²⁰ Ultimately it is this patriarchal hierarchy and the theme of 'punishment' which removes Megan from her job. It is also notable that it threatens her role as a mother when she receives a letter covered in blood, in the post, threatening the life of her son unless she backs off her investigations. She immediately calls Sebastian and tells him to cancel plans for bringing Matthew to see her at the weekend. She claims she is working too hard and that she can't be a good mother to him. She says, 'I think you're right. I'm working so much right now. I don't have the time or energy to devote to him. I can't give him what he needs.'¹²¹

As demonstrated through this close analysis of the narrative, Megan faces an overlap between her professional and private lives. She reaches out to Harry for help, which allows the reader to observe Megan's actions as conflicting with her usual trait of fierce independence. It was important to reflect on whether the characterisation of Megan was dependent on genre convention and whether this restricted the outcome of the conclusion of the narrative. Significantly, I explored whether Megan was pursuing a fulfilling career at the sacrifice of any elements of her personal life. Initially the narrative was to conclude with Megan quitting her job and returning to London to be with her son. However, this seemed to be an expectation of her defined gender role as a mother. Would the reader view Megan differently if she chose an alternative route to the expected one?

3.7 Conclusion

My project illustrates the sense of shifting identity for a female protagonist in contemporary Scottish society in the crime fiction genre. By exploring the subversion of identity and gender expectations, I have created a definitive character in Megan, who is still bound by a patriarchal system despite advances in equality.

¹¹⁸ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Duke University Press, 1998) p.6

¹¹⁹ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Duke University Press, 1998) p.6

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.220

In the next chapter I will explore the idea of 'invisible victims' of crime, focusing on the specific crimes of human trafficking and domestic abuse. Both are complex issues which can be difficult to detect because their victims are kept hidden from view.

4. Human Trafficking and Domestic Abuse in Scotland

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which the two issues of human trafficking and domestic abuse have influenced the plot and development of two of the characters in *The Invisible Chains*. Val McDermid has frequently spoken of the ways in which the modern crime novel can be used to reflect society's changing attitudes and values. She has described the modern crime novel as 'the novel of social history'¹²² and said she believes that in future people will use the crime novel as a historic tool to offer insight into life at a specific time. It is this social and cultural context which I wanted to also explore with *The Invisible Chains*.

For my creative narrative, I have explored the idea of women who are 'invisible victims' of crime focusing specifically on the crimes of human trafficking and domestic abuse. Both are complex issues which can be difficult to detect because their victims are kept hidden from view, behind closed doors. The chapters of the book, told from journalist Megan's point of view, are interspersed with italicised entries which tell the story of a young trafficked victim, known as The Girl, from Nigeria. The third strand of the story, which feeds into the structure and plot of the novel, are blog entries from Trudy, a victim of domestic abuse. The purpose of this is to give a social commentary on Scottish contemporary culture and two of the challenges women continue to face today. Although the two characters are completely different in terms of their nationalities, upbringing and experiences, they are both victims of coercive abuse through physical, sexual and psychological abuse. It is important to give these women a voice, to ensure authenticity through meticulous research, so that they become visible and real.

¹²² Val McDermid, *Edinburgh International Book Festival*, August 2015, https://www.google.co.uk/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=val+mcdermid+edinburgh+book+festival+with+nicola+sturgeon+2015&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&gfe_rd=cr&dcr=0&ei=AX7kWbPRBaPc8AetrKTwCA (accessed October 16, 2017)

4.2 Human trafficking

Firstly, I will focus on human trafficking which is the world's fastest growing global crime¹²³ and 'one of the largest sources of income for organised crime'.¹²⁴ The 2016 figures from the National Crime Agency's UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC) reports that 3,309 people, including 732 children, were potential victims of trafficking for exploitation in 2014, an increase of 21 per cent on 2013.¹²⁵

As I developed *The Invisible Chains*, the intention was to offer an insight into Scotland's own legal and social outlook on trafficking, which has been constantly evolving throughout my period of research. In 2011, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission published its findings from an inquiry into the nature and extent of human trafficking in Scotland. It made ten recommendations aimed at tackling and preventing trafficking. One was that Scotland should 'pioneer a strategic, victim-centred approach to trafficking, focusing on human rights and crime prevention.'¹²⁶ There is evidence that significant steps have been made to implement these recommendations. On April 1, 2013, the National Human Trafficking Unit was established within Police Scotland to address the issues and target those who are benefiting from the vulnerabilities of others. The Scottish Parliament introduced legislation, ahead of the rest of the UK and Europe, to support victims of human trafficking in Scotland. The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act came into effect on 31 May 2017 which established human trafficking as a specific offence. It also increased the punishment for offenders to a maximum life sentence and ensures support for victims. Then, in June 2017 new powers to tackle human trafficking and exploitation came into effect. The trafficking and exploitation risk orders (TEPOs) allow courts to impose special prevention orders on people convicted of trafficking and exploitation offences. These orders can impose a range

¹²³ Stop the Traffik <https://www.stophetraffik.org/the-scale-of-human-traffiking> (accessed December 21, 2015)

¹²⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/index.html?ref=menuaside> (accessed December 21, 2015)

¹²⁵ National Crime Agency, December 16, 2015 <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/779-nca-human-trafficking-report-reveals-21-rise-in-potential-victims> (accessed July 10, 2017)

¹²⁶ Equality Human Rights <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work-scotland/human-rights-scotland/inquiry-human-trafficking-scotland> (accessed October 16, 2017)

of restrictions such as preventing offenders from employing staff, working with children or travelling to certain countries. Breaching this would be a criminal offence. Support for victims of human trafficking was also doubled to at least 90 days, which is three times longer than the Council of Europe minimum period and twice as long as the rest of the UK. Scottish Justice Secretary Michael Matheson said: 'We are working hard to make Scotland an increasingly hostile place for those who traffic other human beings, while also improving the support we provide to victims.'¹²⁷

In *The Invisible Chains*, The Girl is a young victim who has been trafficked from Nigeria. I specifically chose not to name her at the start of the novel because I wanted to convey the idea that she is a commodity, an invisible person who is viewed as not being someone who has a stake in society. I chose Nigeria as her country of origin after reading Richard Hoskins' book, *The Boy in the River*¹²⁸, which documents the story of a young boy's torso found in the River Thames in London in 2001. The investigation into the boy's death uncovered a trafficking ring that smuggles African children into the UK for ritualistic abuses. Bronagh Andrew, co-ordinator at Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance (TARA), which helps victims who have been trafficked to and within Scotland, confirmed that Nigerian women have consistently been the largest nationality group for TARA over the years. As I continued with my research I learned about the spiritual belief system of juju which, for centuries, have led Nigerians to juju priests who will perform rituals to bring them luck, protection and prosperity. Many of them hope it will help them to escape the vast poverty trap in Nigeria. However, human traffickers are using juju to bind their victims to them by forcing them to take oaths of loyalty and secrecy. A recent report on ITV reported this was done by

using blood and clothing to cement this oath, the ritual psychologically chains the victim to their abuser - leaving them trapped in the perpetual fear that if they betray their trafficker, the repercussions will be severe.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Michael Matheson, Justice Committee, Scottish Parliament, 30 May, 2017 <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10986&i=100418&c=2005793> (accessed October 16, 2017)

¹²⁸ Richard Hoskins, *The Boy in the River* (Macmillan, 2012)

¹²⁹ Julie Etchingham, ITV News, *Revealed: Family betrayals and Juju rituals behind Nigeria's murky human trafficking trade*, 16 October, 2015 (<http://www.itv.com/news/2015-10-16/revealed-family-betrayals-and-juju-rituals-behind-nigerias-murky-human-trafficking-trade/>)

This leaves many victims of trafficking terrified to speak out, particularly when they are in countries with different cultural beliefs, because they are frightened of what will happen to them or their family if they do. In my own narrative I felt it was essential to immediately convey the significance that ritual oaths play in the story of many young women who are trafficked from Nigeria. Drawing on all my research, I wanted to ensure the scene with the village priest was graphic and shocking to illustrate what the girl went through before leaving her village. He performs a ceremony for her in which he slaughters a chicken and forces her to eat its heart.

*Forcing the gristly tissue into her mouth, she tried to chew. It felt fatty and oily in her mouth. He handed her a glass of liquid which she sloshed into her mouth, not caring that it had a foul taste. She just wanted her mouth to be empty and clean of the rubbery flesh.*¹³⁰

After the ritual, the priest warns her that she must do as she is told when she goes overseas because, ‘the gods will know if you disobey’.¹³¹

The girl’s nationality is important to the narrative, as not only does it accurately reflect the current situation in Scotland, but the ceremony has a profound effect on how she reacts and responds to her ordeal. One report in the *Daily Record* described the torment of an African woman who was terrified by a witchcraft oath she had taken. She was convinced she would be seen by the evil spirit. This is ‘typical of the enduring psychological power traffickers hold over their victims, even after they are freed.’¹³² This is a theme that I have tried to ensure is ever present in the Girl’s diary entries with reminders that she must not disobey: ‘The girl couldn’t allow herself to have any bad thoughts. The gods wouldn’t like it’.¹³³

In order to ensure authenticity, it was important in this research to have the insight of a trafficking survivor. Mary, a Nigerian teenager, explained in an interview with the Thomson Reuters Foundation, how she was trafficked from her home and forced to work as a prostitute in Italy for three years. A woman approached her family claiming

¹³⁰ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.20

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Annie Brown, *Daily Record*, March 30, 2015 <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/real-life/misery-scotlands-sex-slaves-vulnerable-5426691> (accessed December 21, 2015)

¹³³ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.47

she could take the girl abroad to work. ‘Eventually I agreed to go, but I had no idea what I was in for,’ she said.¹³⁴ She had to endure a juju ritual and then was subjected to beatings and threats. Mary was eventually arrested and repatriated to Nigeria along with more than one hundred other girls like her. ‘I returned to Nigeria with nothing. My parents didn’t know what I had been doing until I came back and told them.’ She continued: ‘They were disappointed as their expectations had been cut short. I tried hard not to hate them. I already hated myself.’ Mary was introduced to the *Girls Power Initiative* in Benin and offered counselling. Without this, she says she would have been re-trafficked. She now works to help other victims of trafficking and uses her own story to dissuade others. However, she says the difference is that many girls now know what they are set to face if they agree to go to Italy. ‘They say: “Is it not prostitution? No problem - I will go.” But they do not understand the trauma they will face.’¹³⁵

In a bid to continue to develop the character of The Girl authentically, I conducted extensive research on trafficking, watching documentaries and films including *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*,¹³⁶ *The Whistleblower*¹³⁷ and *Lilya 4-ever*,¹³⁸ as well as accessing the websites of a variety of anti-trafficking organisations including *Anti-Trafficking Consultants*¹³⁹ and *Africans Unite Against Child Abuse*.¹⁴⁰ A bibliography of Research-Based Literature on Human Trafficking: 2008 - 2014, compiled by academics at Georgetown University,¹⁴¹ adds further depth to an understanding of

¹³⁴ VOA News, *Nigerian Sex Trafficking Victim Recalls Traumatic Past* <https://www.voanews.com/a/nigerian-sex-trafficking-victim-girls-do-not-understand-to-trauma-they-will-face/3355184.html> (accessed September 16, 2011)

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls* dir. by Benjamin Nolot, Matthew Dickey (2011; Exodus Cry)

¹³⁷ *The Whistleblower* dir. by Larysa Kondracki (2010; Samuel Goldwyn Films)

¹³⁸ *Lilya 4-ever* dir. by Lukas Moodysson (2002; Memphis Film)

¹³⁹ Anti-Trafficking Consultants <http://www.antitraffickingconsultants.co.uk/anns-story/> (accessed December 20, 2015)

¹⁴⁰ Africans Unite Against Child Abuse <http://www.afruca.org> (accessed December 20, 2015)

¹⁴¹ Elżbieta M. Goździak, with Sarah Graveline, Whitney Skippings and Minna Song, *Bibliography of Research-Based Literature on Human Trafficking 2008-2014* (Georgetown University: February 2015) <https://isim.georgetown.edu/sites/isim/files/files/upload/2.23.2015%20Trafficking%20Bibliography.pdf> (accessed October 9, 2017)

just how widespread the problem of human trafficking is and its global reach. In *Sex Trafficking and Women - The Nigerian Experience (Journal of Politics and Law)*, Ine Nnadi writes that in Nigeria 'the economic situation is a direct cause of sex trafficking'.¹⁴² Trafficking provides financial incentives to those who are vulnerable and desperate to escape poverty. This allows the traffickers to lure them with promises of a better life elsewhere and the chance to earn money. In many situations women and girls have little chance of upward mobility and are therefore more susceptible and vulnerable to being trafficked. Trafficking is becoming 'pandemic' although it is difficult to know exactly how many are affected due to inefficient data collecting and under-reporting. Nnadi states that women and children are particularly vulnerable because they are 'rooted in systematic gender discrimination especially devaluation of women and children's human rights'.¹⁴³

Victims of trafficking, regardless of nationality, are treated as commodities. They are bought and sold in response to a demand for depravity from sex buyers across Scotland.

In an investigation into human trafficking, the *Daily Record* newspaper reported that one brothel in Glasgow 'boasted of having prostituted women of 35 different

¹⁴⁰ Nnadi, Ine, *Sex Trafficking and Women - The Nigerian Experience* (Journal of Politics and Law, Vol 6., No 3) August 30, 2013 Nnadi, Ine, *Sex Trafficking and Women - The Nigerian Experience* (Journal of Politics and Law, Vol 6., No 3) August 30, 2013

(<http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/jpl/article/viewFile/29987/17769> (accessed July 10, 2017))

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

nationalities'¹⁴⁴ and that 'another woman was forced to have sex with up to 40 men in 24 hours after she told her traffickers she was pregnant'.¹⁴⁵

Again, in my own narrative I wanted to ensure the Girl's diary entries were visceral and shocking because the reality of life for victims of human trafficking, as depicted above, is truly visceral and shocking.

*Some days the girl was raped by eight or nine men. Sometimes more. One after the other. There was a knock at the door and a youngish, overweight man skulked in. He had a paunch, a hairy chest and larger breasts than the girl. Then came the man with the pale, sweaty face covered in eruptions of pus-filled acne. The third man blew ragged, rancid breaths in her face. He had long hair, lips twisted into a sneer and a scarlet face.*¹⁴⁶

Although the main focus of this chapter has been about victims of human trafficking, it should be noted that it is important to acknowledge the role of women as the perpetrators of crimes. *Trafficked: The Diary of a Sex Slave* is a novella about a young woman, Elena, who is trafficked from Moldova. Although this is a fictionalised account, rather than an academic or journalistic account of trafficking, I felt it important to acknowledge this work, as the author, Sibel Hodge, donates a percentage of the royalties from it to two UK-based anti-trafficking charities: *The Poppy Project* and *Unseen UK*. In the book, Hodge examines the role of women in the crime of trafficking. Elena describes her shock when she realises one of her captors is a woman.

It is unbelievable to think that a woman could be involved in something like this. Women are mothers and nurturers. How can she do this to another woman, knowing what will happen to us? Somehow that makes her worse than the men. Does living in poverty and the sudden prospect of money make people evil, or are they evil to begin with?¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Annie Brown, *Daily Record, Misery of Scotland's Sex Slaves*, March 30, 2015 <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/real-life/misery-scotlands-sex-slaves-vulnerable-5426691> (accessed December 21, 2015)

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.134

¹⁴⁷ Sibel Hodge, *Trafficked: The Diary of a Sex Slave*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform: 2011) p.5.

This is an important theme in my own narrative. I wanted to expose the role of the women who are complicit in the fate of trafficking victims. I wanted to highlight this uncomfortable fact in my own narrative by using the girl's aunt Angelika as an example of a woman who is not a nurturer but instead sells her own family for profit.

*One day when she returned from market, Auntie was at her house. The girl ran across and hugged her. She wore a beautiful red dress and smelled of sweet cherries. The girl's mother was slumped on a seat, her hands trembling. Auntie's eyes were shining. She said she had good news. She said a friend had a job for the girl in London: household duties and babysitting in return for a small allowance each week.*¹⁴⁸

The girl is from a poor village in Edo state, where poverty is endemic, and there are no prospects. So the girl is delighted that she is being offered a chance to make something of her life. The girl puts her faith and trust in her aunt, but when they arrive in the UK she is quickly handed over to a trafficker and abandoned by her aunt. She is then kept imprisoned by another woman and her trust in women is shattered. Throughout her diary entries, the girl tries to rationalise her aunt's behaviour and at times begins to wonder if her mother also played a part in what happened. 'The girl had always trusted other women. But now she knew that women could be worse than men.'¹⁴⁹ The role of Angelika as a madam and broker is crucial here because, unlike other crimes in which men are mostly the key offenders, women have a central role in sex trafficking. The importance of madams in trafficking networks has been highlighted by many academics. In *Not all madams have a central role: analysis of a Nigerian sex trafficking network*, Marina Mancuso explores the role of madams further. They are usually 'women formerly enslaved in prostitution'.¹⁵⁰ Thus it could be argued that, although they are perpetrating crimes, they themselves are victims or have been coerced. Later in this chapter, when I focus on domestic abuse, I will explore the role of women who are complicit in

¹⁴⁸ Hill, Lorna, *The Invisible Chains*, p.14

¹⁴⁹ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.71

¹⁵⁰ Mancuso, Marina, *Not all madams have a central role: analysis of a Nigerian sex trafficking network*, May 31, 2013 (Springer Science & Business Media: New York) <https://www.mensenhandelweb.nl/system/files/documents/03%20feb%202014/not%20all%20madams%20have%20a%20central%20role-%20analysis%20of%20a%20nigerian%20sex%20trafficking%20network.pdf> (accessed October 25, 2017)

committing crimes. It is also important to acknowledge that human trafficking can happen to all nationalities; and recent figures from the *National Crime Agency (NCA)*, show the UK remained the 'third most prevalent country of origin for potential victims with 300 cases, a 55% rise on the previous year'.¹⁵¹ This was confirmed in June 2017 when the NCA published its fourth annual public analysis of the nature and scale of serious and organised crime affecting the UK. It observed that 'the scale of modern slavery and human trafficking is increasing steadily and the threat is growing'.¹⁵² Another book which has been helpful, and which gives a first-person account of this activity, is *Trafficked*. Author Sophie Hayes, from England, was trafficked overseas by her boyfriend. In it she writes that it is easy to dismiss girls who work on the streets as 'deadbeats or drug addicts'¹⁵³ without considering why they may be working as prostitutes. 'The truth is many of them have been trafficked and they work long, exhausting, miserable, soul-destroying hours for men who are cruel and violent.'¹⁵⁴ Like the aforementioned Nigerian women they are afraid of what will happen to them and their family if they do not comply. This is of particular relevance to my own writing as it articulates what I am also trying to do in my own narrative through the character of The Girl and also through another character, Trudy, who I will go on to discuss in the next section. Although the two characters are completely different in terms of their nationalities, upbringing and experiences they are both victims of abuse.

4.3 Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is a threat to all women in Scotland regardless of their race, class or wealth. The levels of domestic abuse reported in Scotland have increased by 2.5% during 2014 to 2015 according to official Scottish Government figures. They show

¹⁵¹ National Crime Agency, Human Trafficking Report, December 16, 2015 <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/779-nca-human-trafficking-report-reveals-21-rise-in-potential-victims> (accessed October 25, 2017)

¹⁵² National Crime Agency, June 2017, *National Crime Agency publishes 2017 analysis of serious and organised crime threats* <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/1128-national-crime-agency-publishes-2017-analysis-of-serious-and-organised-crime-threats> (accessed October 25, 2017)

¹⁵³ Sophie Hayes, *Trafficked: The Terrifying True Story of a British Girl Forced into the Sex Trade* (Harper Collins, 2012) p.284

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

that between 2013 and 2014 there were 58,439 incidents of domestic abuse compared to 59,882 between 2014 and 2015.¹⁵⁵ Victims are given legal protection with the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2011. Figures from Scottish Women's Aid's annual Census Day survey, in December 2016, reveal that Women's Aid groups in Scotland were dealing with around '17,000 new cases of women, children and young people needing support with domestic abuse a year'.¹⁵⁶ These statistics, along with government figures, will of course relate only to reported cases of abuse. There are of course unreported cases which are not accounted for. Researchers at Scottish Women's Aid warn that their figures are a 'conservative' estimate, and the true figure could be higher. It is another complex and often hidden crime which can only be detected when its victims are able to speak out.

I wanted to raise awareness of this in my own creative narrative through the character of Trudy. She is a white, professional, middle-class woman who has been seemingly happily married for years. I wanted to contrast her with the trafficking victim, The Girl, to highlight that both women are invisible victims of hidden crimes regardless of their race or socio-economic status. As I developed Trudy's character, I realised the significance of the definition of 'domestic abuse' rather than 'domestic violence'. Police Scotland works to a nationally agreed definition of domestic abuse which has been adopted by the Crown Office Procurator Fiscal Service. This is

Any form of physical, sexual or mental and emotional abuse which might amount to criminal conduct and which takes place within the context of a relationship. The relationship will be between partners (married, co-habiting, civil partnership or otherwise) or ex-partners. The abuse can be committed in the home or elsewhere.¹⁵⁷

In researching domestic abuse, I realised there is a common conception that domestic abuse is physical abuse alone. The term 'domestic abuse' is key in Scotland, as it emphasises that abuse can come in many forms: sexual, emotional and mental. The term 'coercive control' has been significant to the way in which I developed the character in my own narrative, as this highlights the fact that domestic

¹⁵⁵ *Domestic Abuse Recorded by the Police in Scotland, 2013-14 & 2014-15*, The Scottish Government, October 27, 2015

¹⁵⁶ Scottish Women's Aid, *Census Day 2016*, December 12, 2016

¹⁵⁷ Police Scotland, <http://www.scotland.police.uk/keep-safe/advice-for-victims-of-crime/domestic-abuse/what-is-domestic-abuse/> (accessed October 25, 2017)

abuse is more than violence. The idea of coercive control was discussed by Evan Stark in his book *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*.¹⁵⁸ In it, Stark describes a pattern of behaviour which seeks to strip the victim of their liberty and sense of self. Coercive control, he argues, is not primarily a crime of violence; it is first and foremost a liberty crime and its most significant aspect is control. Stark writes that tactics are used to 'isolate victims, monitor their behaviour or break their will'.¹⁵⁹ Victims' experiences have been likened to the degradation suffered by POWs, hostages, prisoners and kidnap victims. He goes on to add these rituals include

humiliating sexual examinations, unannounced room searches, bathroom inspections, interrogations, forced confessions, lockdowns (where a victim is not permitted to leave her room or the house or use the phone for a period of time), periods of forced silence and being denied access to rites of personal hygiene, eating, sleeping and toileting.¹⁶⁰

Stark's research underpinned the development of the character of Trudy. She is unaware she is a victim of coercive control as the abusive behaviour has been long-term, at times subtle, and repeated over the lengthy duration of her marriage. In one blog entry, she writes

He said he'd ring me on the landline. It's because he cares. He doesn't always have time to hang around especially if he's in the middle of a meeting or a client dinner. He always likes me to pick up after three rings. I have to. Otherwise he'll be worried. I've been sitting waiting for the phone to ring.¹⁶¹

I hope the above extract will offer an understanding and appreciation of the impact of domestic abuse on those who experience it and how it affects their behaviour and choices. In a bid to ensure my creative work accurately reflected the current position in Scotland, I have undertaken training with Scottish Women's Aid, *Understanding the Dynamics of Domestic Abuse* (November, 2015). This has given me an

¹⁵⁸ Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*, p.205

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*, p.205

¹⁶¹ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.137

understanding into how coercive and controlling conduct produces compliance in the victimised partner through fear and the creation of a sense of entrapment. As I continued with this research I wanted to ensure that Trudy's voice captured the feeling of being completely trapped in her relationship. Her husband controls every aspect of her life, including the financial side, and she writes

He keeps a close eye on the bank accounts. Knows what comes in and goes out. There's no way I can start squirrelling money away.¹⁶²

One recent report which informed my reading, was a two-year study carried out by the Women's Health Improvement Research Project which showed that women were being let down by the system and being 'forced to choose between homelessness and abuse'.¹⁶³ This helped me develop Trudy's character because I was able to convey how she felt she had little or no control in what happened to her if she did leave her husband. She felt worried about becoming homeless. She writes

I have this house, this lovely kitchen. This computer to write on. If I left I would lose it all. I would lose everything. Would I cope on my own? Where would I go? A refuge? I don't think so. I'd be too embarrassed. What would people think?¹⁶⁴

Trudy's self-image and character is crucial to the narrative as it reflects the current situation in Scotland; that domestic abuse can affect all women of all ages. It was important to contrast her character with the trafficked girl to convey the sense that violence against women was not just confined to traffickers making money. It also happens in domestic settings to a wide range of women and children. In order to substantiate this, it was important to read some fiction titles where domestic abuse is a key element to the plot. In Sibel Hodge's *Look Behind You*, the main character Chloe has been undermined by her partner, Liam, for years. His abuse is subtle and is often in the form of comments designed to undermine Chloe

¹⁶² Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.195

¹⁶³ Women's Health Improvement Research Project, March 2016

¹⁶⁴ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.195

‘Why are you wearing those tatty old jeans, darling?’ I glance down at them. The denim is soft and has faded over time. I love them. ‘They’re comfortable.’ ‘They make you look fat. Put the other pair on. The black ones. You know how I like you in those.’¹⁶⁵

This has a profound effect on Chloe. The mental impact of coercive control takes its toll over the years and she loses all her confidence. Chloe also loses contact with her friends, because Liam has never liked them, and it is easier for her to do that than to stand her ground.

In *I Let You Go* by Clare Mackintosh, it is not immediately obvious that the main character, Jenna, is a victim of years of domestic abuse. In this novel, sections are told from the perpetrator’s point of view, giving the reader an insight into the abuser’s frame of mind. In one scene, he is annoyed that Jenna has gone out for a night with her friend. By using the first-person narrative, we learn that

You had left nothing out to eat, so presumably you were eating with Sarah and hadn’t concerned yourself with what I might have . . . I hadn’t asked you to live with me in order to spend evenings on my own. I had been taken for a fool by one woman - I wasn’t about to let it happen again.¹⁶⁶

During this scene, the protagonist becomes increasingly irritated that Jenna’s kitten constantly cries. He ends up killing the cat but tells Jenna it must have eaten some of her toxic art material. Jenna is then consumed with guilt and the protagonist uses the situation to comfort her despite his role in the cat’s death. Later on in the book Jenna takes the blame for the cat’s death, even though the reader knows that her partner did it.

In Elizabeth Haynes’ *Into the Darkest Corner* the main character Catherine is abused by her partner. His erratic, controlling and frightening behaviour has a profound effect on Catherine and she loses contact with her friends who don’t believe her. Elizabeth Haynes explains

It can be all too easy to pass judgement on victims who stay in violent relationships but for a lot of victims of violence in the home, there is no easy escape from it. Aside from the emotion, there are so many practical

¹⁶⁵ Sibel Hodge, *Look Behind You*, (Create Space, 2014) location 1530

¹⁶⁶ Clare Mackintosh, *I Let You Go*, p.211 (Little, Brown, 2015)

factors that keep people together: having children, the perceived shame of a failed relationship, even something as basic as not being able to afford to move out of the house.¹⁶⁷

A common theme in Haynes' novel is that this difficult situation can become much worse, and the cycle of violence can escalate. By reading these novels in what is termed as the 'domestic noir' category¹⁶⁸, a subgenre of crime fiction about troubled home lives, my research has been strengthened, and these novels have also helped to set the tone and pace of Trudy's character development.

Documentaries such as *I Love You*¹⁶⁹ and *Scope of Practice*¹⁷⁰ have also helped my research. The latter was particularly helpful as it is about an abusive man who is well-regarded in the community. The film depicts the struggle the protagonist endures to expose the abuser for what he is. I was able to apply this to my own narrative: Trudy's situation is similar because she is convinced nobody will believe her if she tells the truth about her domestic situation. It was also important to ensure that the psychological impact of the continuing abuse was reflected in Trudy's actions. This is an important theme in my own narrative and I wanted to touch on the role of women who are complicit in crimes because they are coerced by partners. I wanted to develop this element and highlight it in my own narrative as Trudy is conditioned to follow her husband's orders. If she refuses, she knows he will expose her secrets and/or kill her. Trudy's true identity, Megan's friend Natasha, a civil servant, is revealed towards the end of the book. In one scene, she spikes Megan's drink and uses the opportunity to trick Megan into thinking she has been attacked. She does this in order to download data for her husband from Megan's mobile and laptop. In a later blog she admits

It was me, Megan. It was me who slipped it into your drink. I am sorry. I am sorry I let you think that the Clooney lookalike had attacked you. Do

¹⁶⁷ Elizabeth Haynes, <http://www.elizabeth-haynes.com> (accessed August 28, 2017)

¹⁶⁸ Julia Crouch, *Genre Bender*, August 25, 2013, <http://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender> (accessed October 25, 2017)

¹⁶⁹ *I Love You*, dir by Wright, Adam (*University of Sunderland: 2014*)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAp2vnVPERI> (accessed March 10, 2016)

¹⁷⁰ *Scope of Practice* dir. by Brandyn T. Williams (Bewildered Media Productions: 2015)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kv2ldkoJtYE&ebc=ANyPxKpUI9FKTz4eyobhthfGpRDdNTbxxYkREj-_Iz0zRC4kzhLYcDujj4-Y49wXF1jMQUB-Fx4STbC4iO6LE-GhBHisE8oRCA (accessed March 10, 2016)

you want to know what else happened that night, Megan? When I was in your room? After you were stripped and put in bed? I took out your laptop and your mobile and downloaded everything I could.¹⁷¹

Throughout the narrative Natasha has been portrayed as a confident businesswoman therefore this image, as demonstrated above, is at odds with what has really been happening to her behind closed doors. The issue of complicity is one which I wanted to investigate further so I consulted Kathleen Ferraro's book *Neither Angels Nor Demons: Women, Crime and Victimization* (2006). In it she focuses on women who commit crimes through their relationships with a violent partner. 'Fear, hopelessness and confusion are the feelings most commonly described'¹⁷² by those women who are charged with crimes committed by or under orders from their abusers. She goes on to add that 'their crimes are not committed with "malicious intent", but through their compliance with the demands of violent partners'.¹⁷³ Therefore Trudy/Natasha behaved in the way she did because of her oppressive domestic situation. In her household, her husband assumed the traditional male authority role and used this power to physically and physiologically manipulate her. The coercion that occurs in this relationship means that she is concerned about the immediate impact on her if she fails to obey and the long-term consequences and effects on her family. She is going against her own moral code to commit what Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton describe as 'crimes of obedience'¹⁷⁴ - an act performed in response to authority. This of course relates back to the discussion around themes of 'obedience' in Chapter 3. In this instance Trudy/Natasha's husband is the figure of authority.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the current situation in Scotland with regards to the issue of domestic abuse. The Scottish Government has recently introduced new legislation, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, which covers physical abuse and also psychological abuse and controlling behaviour. It draws a clear distinction: 'between, on the one hand, emotionally abusive, controlling and

¹⁷¹ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.240

¹⁷² Kathleen Ferraro, *Neither Angels Nor Demons: Women, Crime and Victimization* p.197

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ V. Lee Hamilton, Herbert Kelman, *Crimes of Obedience, Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (Yale University Press, 1990)

coercive behaviour which is often motivated by a desire to humiliate a person and undermine their autonomy, and, on the other hand, ordinary arguments and friction that can occur in almost any relationship and which should not be regarded as constituting a criminal offence, unless they involve threatening behaviour or violence'.¹⁷⁵

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has consistently spoken out against domestic abuse and stated that violence against women is causing gender inequality in the UK. Speaking last year, at London's *Women In The World* summit, she said

I believe passionately that domestic violence isn't just a result of gender inequality but a cause of gender inequality. We'll never have true gender equality until we eradicate violence against women.¹⁷⁶

In 2015 the Scottish Government announced £20 million worth of funding over the next three years to tackle domestic violence in Scotland.¹⁷⁷ The money will be used to speed up the court process, give more support to victims and expand schemes to help rehabilitate offenders. On the eve of International Women's Day, on March 8, 2016, Nicola Sturgeon announced that women who have suffered violence or abuse will benefit from an additional investment of £190,000 to help them back into work. The funding allows Scottish Women's Aid, in partnership with local domestic abuse services, to work directly with women to allow them the opportunity to get back into the job market and offer them vital support and guidance. Women who have been financially dependent on an abusive partner can struggle to rebuild their lives. Addressing this economic inequality is vital in order to make a difference. Nicola Sturgeon said

Women face a range of barriers that may prevent them moving into employment but none more so than if they are struggling to rebuild their lives after suffering abuse at their hands of their partner . . . We need to

¹⁷⁵ Scottish Government, *An Offence of Domestic Abuse*
<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/03/4845/4> (accessed October 25, 2017)

¹⁷⁶ Radhika Sanghani, *The Daily Telegraph*, October 9, 2015,
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/11922942/Nicola-Sturgeon-Domestic-violence-is-stopping-gender-equality.html> (accessed March 9, 2016)

¹⁷⁷ Scottish Government, *Support for Victims of Violence*, March 28, 2015
<https://news.gov.scot/news/support-for-victims-of-violence> (accessed July 10, 2017)

do more to help rebuild the lives of these survivors. This funding will ensure women who may previously have lost confidence or who have relied on their partner's income now have a chance to become more financially independent.¹⁷⁸

It has been important throughout this research to continue to reflect and embed the evolving political and legal situation through the experiences of the three female characters: Megan, Trudy and The Girl.

4.4 Conclusion

I hope that by the end of *The Invisible Chains* both the characters of The Girl and Trudy will be recognised as individuals and human beings rather than merely invisible victims of crime. Although the two characters are completely different in terms of their nationalities, upbringing and experiences, they are both victims of abuse through physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Another underlying theme I am keen to portray in *The Invisible Chains* is that women of all ages, classes and races can be victims of violence and abuse. It is important to give these women a voice so they become visible and real and acknowledged by society. Thus I hope that *The Invisible Chains* reflects and acknowledges the extent of human trafficking and domestic abuse in Scotland while reflecting contemporary attitudes and values, as portrayed through the characters and plot.

In the next chapter the focus will be on the narrative structure of the book and the decisions taken to present and utilise these women's different voices.

¹⁷⁸ Scottish Government, *Helping domestic abuse survivors into work*, March 8, 2016, <http://news.scotland.gov.uk/News/Helping-domestic-abuse-survivors-into-work-2374.aspx> (accessed March 9, 2016)

5. The Process of Writing the Novel: Narrative Structure and Techniques

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will analyse the choice of narrative structures and techniques used for the creative component, *The Invisible Chains*, of this doctoral research.

When considering this creative narrative, it was necessary to identify the key elements of the genre by examining contemporary authors including Val McDermid, Lin Anderson and Liza Marklund as well as widening the scope to include domestic noir - a term which is outlined in Chapter 3 - a subgenre of crime fiction. By examining the narrative techniques I have chosen to use, whereby the readers' attention is focused on Megan, The Girl and then Trudy, I shall reflect and embed the themes and aims as described in the research statement. This study will then move on to investigate the different narrative techniques used in crime fiction and the impact that alternative voices can have on the reader. Each of the characters, whether viewed as protagonists or victims, experience the crimes explored in the creative narrative. We are given Megan's perspective on both domestic abuse and human trafficking, followed by human trafficking as experienced by The Girl and then domestic abuse through the voice of Trudy.

Experimenting with voice, structure and setting was an important consideration at the outset of this research. I was confident that the novel could provide a way for me, and therefore the reader, to explore an extreme situation which would provoke questions about morality in society. I knew I wanted to examine and highlight the plight of women who were victims of domestic abuse and human trafficking. However, in order to do this successfully, it was vital to consider characters, voices and the structure this narrative would take. During this creative process, I was also aware of the need to engage with the social and political topic McDermid refers to and which are discussed in Chapter 2. Louise Welsh echoed this theme in her keynote speech at the Bloody Scotland Crime Festival in 2016 when she spoke of the 'circumstances where I face choices which aren't always comfortable. I want to write about loss, pain, guilt and excitement.'¹⁷⁹ These comments came at a pivotal

¹⁷⁹ Louise Welsh, *Bloody Scotland Crime Festival*, September 9, 2016

point during my creative process and resonated with my intentions for *The Invisible Chains*. Welsh also spoke about ethics and how far writers should go in their novels. She said, 'Each writer will be different. As a writer, I have to be able to say why I included it. Why I think it was important.'¹⁸⁰ This has been valuable advice during the writing and editing process as it helped me to focus on the type of book I wanted to produce and what was important.

5.2 Noir novels

My intention was to write a noir novel, and the crime writers whose work underpins this doctoral research, such as Val McDermid, Lin Anderson and Liza Marklund, have often been referred to as 'noir' writers. In order to explore what this means I considered Mary Evans' comments in her keynote speech, 'Dark Nights and Moral Diversity: Very Good and Very Bad in Nordic Noir' which she presented at the Noir in the North conference. Evans said that Nordic noir had 'spectacularly moved some of the goal posts of detective fiction'. She added that 'hiding, the hidden, what is not said, is a central theme in crime fiction'.¹⁸¹

This led me to explore the other definitions of what Noir fiction is and where it originated. I would argue that its historic origin lies in American noir, following on from 'hardboiled' crime fiction. In *The Noir Thriller*, Lee Horsley explains that it began developing as a form in the 1920s after the First World War. Horsley writes

In its most characteristic narratives, some traumatic event irretrievably alters the conditions of life and creates for its characters an absolute experiential divide between their dependance on stable, predictable patterns and the recognition that life is, in truth, morally chaotic, subject to randomness and total dislocation.¹⁸²

Key noir writers such as Cornell Woolrich, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James Cain were using a wider and more flexible type of approach which encompassed what Horsley refers to above. These books were grittily descriptive and reflected the economic and socio-political circumstances of the time. Noir has

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Mary Evans, *Noir in the North*, November 13, 2016, Reykjavik, Iceland

¹⁸² Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) p.16

since been routinely used as an umbrella term for different sub-genres including Nordic Noir and Tartan Noir on which I have concentrated for this thesis. However, perhaps one of the most widely recognised traits of noir is the focus on the central protagonist who has self-destructive qualities. He or she is usually tormented or damaged, and where the psychology of character is explored it is, writes Horsley, 'predominantly in terms of human shortcomings'.¹⁸³ This is the case in Val McDermid's Lindsay Gordon series, Liza Marklund's Annika Bengtzon's books, Lin Anderson's Rhona McLeod series, Denise Mina's Paddy Meehan books and in Anna Smith's novels about journalist Rosie Kane which I have studied in detail in Chapters 1 and 2. All the central characters are woman who are flawed, with emotional baggage, and who are working in jobs which take them to the darker corners of society. There are no easy answers for any of these characters, who have their own challenges and personal problems to deal with as they drive themselves to solve the crimes in the books. The third-person point of view is a common narrative technique in crime fiction and I go on to explore this further in the next section.

5.3 Narrative techniques and voice

Consideration of these writers' characterisation then informed my own creative process of devising my central protagonist, Megan Ross, who is fractured by her past. Megan is a single working mother, who has left her ex-partner holding the baby so that she can do her job. As a consequence, she is plagued by feelings of guilt related to abandoning her son. As the plot of the book developed, I realised that this sense of torment should be deepened in order for the reader to understand what drives her on her moral crusade to ensure justice for victims and, essentially, put the world to rights. Thus, it is gradually revealed throughout the novel that Megan has run away from her life in London to escape her ex-partner Sebastian. In *The Invisible Chains*, it is not until chapter 16 that the reader is given insight into why Megan and her partner have split up.

For a moment she stood there, secure and safe in his arms, and blinked through her stupid tears. If only things had been different, she thought sadly. She had tried to make it work for the sake of Matthew. But she just couldn't pretend to love him when she never had. He was too nice,

¹⁸³ Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p.17 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001)

too attentive, and it had suffocated her.¹⁸⁴

This passage is also a useful example of the power of what James Wood describes, in *How Fiction Works* as 'free, indirect style'.¹⁸⁵ The reader is able to see things through the 'character's eyes and language' in addition to the author's 'eyes and language too'. By describing Megan as blinking 'through her stupid tears' then the word 'stupid' can become a transferred epithet, so therefore synonymous with Megan. Thus the reader becomes further engaged with the character and the story. In this example it also allows Megan to be seen as a victim of sorts, which deepens her character and helps the reader to understand what drives her strong sense of morality.

Megan is the dominant narrative voice for the story. However, for this creative project I wanted to experiment with other voices which would contrast against Megan's. After considering the plot points of the novel, which had to be plausible and ensure that the trajectory of the narrative twisted in unexpected directions, I brought in additional narrative voices to allow insight into the victims' lives. According to Wood, 'In reality we are stuck with third and first-person narration'.¹⁸⁶ So while it may seem that we have lots of different options and choice, we are essentially left with only two. For the purposes of *The Invisible Chains*, I wanted to experiment with multiple voices using both the techniques that Wood refers to. Megan's voice, in third-person narration, is interspersed with sections which tell the story of The Girl, also in the third-person. However, by using Trudy's blog, written in the first-person, and switching between the narrators, the differing strands are therefore intensified and differentiated. This was a useful narrative technique for creating pace and engaging the reader in the plot of the book. It also allowed an insight into the lives of both the protagonist and victims, allowing the reader a sense of immediacy with the characters.

The notion of a first-person, present tense voice was one I wanted to consider when creating the characters and structure of *The Invisible Chains*. As already discussed, the first-person voice can create a sense of tension and immediacy. For

¹⁸⁴ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.99

¹⁸⁵ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (Vintage, 2009) p.11

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.104

the character of Trudy, it felt like the most natural voice because I wanted her to communicate directly with Megan. By making her a first-person narrator I also hoped she could convey her story as a victim while also potentially making her an unreliable narrator.

In *Narratology*, Mieke Bal writes that characters are individual because of defining characteristics and traits and 'each function in a different way with respect to the reader'.¹⁸⁷ By allowing the reader an insight into the lives and minds of the different characters then the reader is able to get to know them 'more or less than other characters, finds them more or less appealing, identifies more or less easily with them'.¹⁸⁸ This insight allows the reader, through their individual perspectives, to create their own views. It allows them to develop their own sense of the characters and their actions and build their own relationship with Megan, The Girl and Trudy as the narrative develops. By focusing on these different narrative perspectives, the aim is to engage with the reader in addition to alluding to the themes and content of the project as defined in the research statement.

In *The Invisible Chains* I wanted to emulate this style of narrative, the difference being that the narrative focused on two characters in simultaneous time frames and ultimately simultaneous locations. In Chapter 26 Megan tells Harry that she suspects she was raped while in Sweden and he suggests that she has been drugged.

I think, though, in your case your drink has been spiked Megan.' He paused. 'Rohypnol. Or ketamine.'
Megan's shoulders slumped and she began to sob quietly. Huge fat, salty tears spilled onto her clasped hands.¹⁸⁹

In The Girl's extract which follows on from this chapter, we learn in the first few gut-wrenching lines that the girl has also been raped and is in fear albeit in a contrasting situation to Megan.

The girl woke up drenched in sweat. She gagged and choked on the stale taste in her mouth. She tried to sit up but her arms were spread above her head. She couldn't feel her feet. It took a few moments to

¹⁸⁷ Mieke Bal, *Narratology*, (University of Toronto Press, 2009) p.106

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.156

*realise she was tied to a bed.*¹⁹⁰

Therefore this technique of flitting between Megan and The Girl allows the reader to be drawn into both character's worlds, giving them insight into their extreme predicaments.

To give an overview of the multiple voices in the narrative, which can build plot and develop suspense, it is necessary to mention several authors who do this in the contemporary genre of domestic noir genre which is discussed in the previous chapter. In her novel *Behind Closed Doors* (2016) Elizabeth Haynes writes about a fifteen-year-old girl, Scarlett, who went missing in Rhodes and is then discovered ten years later. We discover what happened to Scarlett in the past which contrasts with the voice of the protagonist Detective Louisa who is attempting to piece together what happened to Scarlett. Employing this technique allows the characters to develop and builds suspense as the story flits between what happened to the victim in the past and what is happening in the present. Haynes also uses this narrative style in her novel, *Into the Darkest Corner* (2011), which focuses on Catherine, a victim of domestic abuse. By presenting alternate chapters, splitting the narrative voice between Catherine's present and her past, the reader is given a real sense and understanding of what has happened to this woman.

5.4 The unreliable narrator

As mentioned earlier, I wanted to make Trudy a first-person narrator with the aim of conveying her story from a victim's point of view. However, I realised there was also potential to make her an unreliable narrator. The unreliable narrator has, according to Sarah Williams, not traditionally been a common technique used in crime fiction. In *How to Write Crime Fiction*, she suggests this is because of the 'critical importance of having a moral centre to the book'.¹⁹¹ The reader, she says, must be able to rely on 'a vision of good and evil'. I would argue however that the concept of the unreliable narrator has been used successfully in many books with historical significance. Two examples include Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) and

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p.157

¹⁹¹ Sarah Williams, *How to Write Crime Fiction* (Robinson, 2015) p.47

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). Denise Mina was perhaps one of the first Scottish crime writers to experiment with this in her Garnethill trilogy, in which the credibility of her main character, Maureen O'Donnell, a psychiatric patient with a history of abuse as well as a drink problem, is questioned. Of course, there has in recent years been a significant trend in crime fiction to use an unreliable narrator, most notably, in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012) and Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* (2015). In both these books the narrator's credibility is seriously compromised yet it is this unreliability that propels the plot of the novels forward. In an article on its website Pan Macmillan states that

The unreliable narrator is a crime fiction staple, creating plot twists and turns which are impossible to predict and leaving the reader with no-one to trust as events unravel.¹⁹²

I was keen to experiment with this technique, and it was one I wanted to introduce towards the end of the novel, with particular reference to Trudy's role. As has been discussed she has been contacting Megan directly with her blogs throughout the novel, yet Megan has no idea who she is and is unable to respond to her. Indeed she initially believes that Katherine is the mystery blogger. It is only in Chapter 38 that she learns that Trudy is in fact Natasha Campbell.

'Oh,' said Megan glancing over at her now former colleagues. She was going to miss them.
'The cops have just received an email from Natasha Campbell. She's put everything up on a website detailing how her husband was the main player in the trafficking ring. Signed herself off as Trudy.'¹⁹³

The aim of this passage was to introduce an element of surprise that Natasha was concealing such a secret while being able to function in such a high-profile role. As an unreliable narrator, in the voice of Trudy, she has therefore seriously compromised her credibility.

¹⁹² Pan MacMillan, March 19, 2015 <https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/crime-thriller/five-unreliable-narrators-in-crime-fiction-who-you> (accessed October 3, 2017)

¹⁹³ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.249

5.5 The use of flash fiction

The decision to use The Girl's extracts in the style of short flash fiction was underpinned by the need for these entries to be direct, graphic and shocking. Calum Kerr of Southampton University runs National Flash Fiction Day UK and describes flash fiction as a 'short, short story featuring one or more characters, some events and some sense of a journey being taken by the character'.¹⁹⁴ He adds that because of its concise length it often refers to 'a much larger story which occurs off the page'.¹⁹⁵

Therefore, by imposing a word count of around 500 words on each of The Girl's sections, the intention is to give a sense that the character is on a journey with the awful events happening to her while also hinting at the bigger story.

*She pulled off her T-shirt and let her trousers and wet pants slide to her ankles. His eyes flicked over her rigid body and he held out his hand to her. She stepped into the tepid water. Her mouth was dry and she gulped when he grabbed her. She tried to focus on the water sloshing up and down the sides of the bath.*¹⁹⁶

In this passage, The Girl is terrified at what is about to happen to her and highlights the extremity of her situation. By using this technique, I am seeking to follow writers including Kati Hiekkapelto, in *The Hummingbird* (2013), who uses flash fiction extracts in the first book of her series about criminal investigator Anna Fekete. While trying to solve the main murder case she becomes increasingly concerned about Bihar, a Kurdish refugee whom she believes is at risk from her family of becoming a victim of an honour killing. Bihar's voice is interspersed throughout the book as she tells her story in her own voice in what is developed as sub-plot. In this passage, after she is spotted with a boy she shouldn't be with, she says

Dad was furious. Still, he managed to behave with surprising calm - he didn't beat me or anything. That's when I knew they meant business. It felt as though they'd been planning this day for a long time. Perhaps they

¹⁹⁴ Calum Kerr, *The World in a Flash: How to Write Flash Fiction* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014) p.12

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.65

had.¹⁹⁷

This first-person account is effective in building suspense and adds an eerie element to the novel. Although Bihar's inserts are longer than those of *The Girl* extracts, both build a sub-plot and allow the reader to engage further with the book and create their own relationship with a victim of crime.

In Liza Marklund's *The Last Will*, Annika Bengtson's narrative is interspersed with short extracts woven through the chapters from the point of view of the killer, a deadly female assassin. In the opening chapter of the novel, Annika witnesses a member of the Nobel Prize committee being gunned down at an event in Stockholm. Marklund then switches the focus back and forth between Annika and the killer, Kitty, which is effective in building pace and suspense. In this passage Kitty is focusing on her targets.

The weapon was heavy and solid in her hand, and the concentration that finally filled her made every sound around her fade away. She was calm and clear. She raised the bag towards the dancing couple, aiming at the man's leg: the first shot.¹⁹⁸

Marklund has chosen to write both narratives in the third-person perspective. In the case of the killer, this is effective as it adds some distance between the character and the reader. If the story had been presented in the first-person it may have been too personal and immediate and not so effective as the plot progressed. Whereas McDermid's serial killer in *The Mermaids Singing* (1995) uses a first-person voice with the opening line of the novel, 'You always remember the first time,'¹⁹⁹ which directly addresses and engages the reader and propels them to read on. By the end of this section the reader is told that 'after that first time, part of me hoped I wouldn't be forced to do it again. But I knew if I had to, the next time would be better.'²⁰⁰ This narrative technique submerges the reader straight into the story, bringing them uncomfortably close to the crimes being committed.

¹⁹⁷ Kati Hiekkapelto, *The Hummingbird*, (Orenda, 2013) p.316

¹⁹⁸ Liza Marklund, *The Last Will*, (Corgi, 2012) p.2

¹⁹⁹ McDermid, Val, *The Mermaids Singing*, (HarperCollins, 2015) p.1

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5

5.6 The use of social media and other communication platforms in the novel

For the Trudy sections of the creative, it was important to consider what form of messages she would use to communicate with Megan effectively. In contemporary fiction many authors have used social media platforms including blogs, emails, text messages, Whatsapp and SnapChat, all of which reflect modern technology and society's evolving methods of communication. In *Forward Slash* (2013) by Louise Voss and Mark Edwards, a novel about a serial killer and internet dating, the authors use emails to tell the story of one of the characters. Ruth Ware uses emails in her novel *In a Dark, Dark Wood* (2015); *The Exit* (2015) by Helen FitzGerald uses Facebook snippets to illustrate conversations between two of the characters and in *The Missing* (2016) by C.L. Taylor, a book about a missing teenage boy, the chapters of the book are interspersed with Whatsapp messages with two usernames that leave the reader guessing their identities. This adds suspense to the psychological aspect of the story, as these snippets allow readers to form their own ideas as to the identity of those involved in the exchanges.

The use of a blog, specifically, as narrative technique is employed by Kristin Innes in her book *Fishnet* (2015), which tells the story of a woman who has discovered her missing sister was a sex worker. The blog posts are told from prostitute's point of view, and act as a contrast against the sister Fiona's voice. They offer an unsettling insight into the world which Fiona is exploring. Here is an example

Today, my camera and I are just in the mood for a very simple leg shot, in my favourite stockings. Sure, fishnets are a bit of a hooker cliché, but look at me. I'm making them work.

Tags: politics activism sexism **Comments (17)**²⁰¹

The language in the passage is bold and direct, and illustrates the way in which the blogger is directly addressing her audience and therefore the reader. I decided to employ the technique of a blog which Trudy could use to drip-feed information to Megan. This platform allows Trudy to write in a confessional diary style, where she shares her thoughts and feelings on her situation. To begin with, Megan is the only reader, as Trudy emails the blog links directly to her. However, as the arc of the

²⁰¹ Kristin Innes, *Fishnet* (Freight, 2015) Location 1305

narrative continues it is Trudy's intention to publish all the material at a time of her choice in a bid to expose those involved in the trafficking ring. In the following passage Trudy contacts Megan for the first time. The form is confrontational and engaging and directly addressing Megan.

'Don't expect your husband to be an angel. You would get very tired of him if he were.' When did it start? It's not something I ever talk about to anyone. Nobody knows. Well, apart from you. See, you need to keep reading now. I always have it there in my head, niggling away in a corner. I try and rationalise it and smooth it all out. Sometimes that works and I feel okay. Then the niggle comes back and I'm reminded that it's my fault.²⁰²

The impact on Megan is significant. Her interest is immediately piqued: who is Trudy and why she is contacting her? And there is nothing Megan can do but wait until Trudy contacts her. Thus, suspense is built in this subplot to the story. Innes's blog, as seen above, which includes the phrase 'look at me', is precise and challenging. It invites a 'second person' reading. Similarly, Trudy's blog entry, which opens with 'When did it start?' has an implied audience. The question speaks directly to Megan and then to the reader, drawing them in. The intention is also to allow the reader to understand, identify with and trust Trudy. It is this trust which is then shaken towards the end of the novel when Trudy reveals her true identity. These blog entries are carefully seeded throughout the novel in a bid to provide Megan information about the trafficking ring. As the blogs continue Megan becomes personally invested in Trudy's story. Although they are one-way communications, Trudy begins to personalise the blogs. The undercurrent of the content of the blogs, and indeed the intention behind her decision to send them, is that Trudy wants Megan to help her. This becomes evident in the following passage

I am the one lying on the floor bleeding and bruised. He is the one who will wake up with a sore head in the morning, a tender dick, and will jump in his Audi and go to work as normal. Nothing will change. It's too late for me. Any dreams I have are gone. But something needs to change, Megan. I need to do something to help those poor girls.²⁰³

²⁰² Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.94

²⁰³ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.149

In this extract Trudy addresses Megan directly by saying, ‘something needs to change, Megan’. This is intended to intensify the situation and now means that Megan is personally involved with Trudy and her story. The decision to name each blog was intentional. The quotes come from the *Don'ts for Wives* 1913 handbook, a compendium of advice given to married women. The idea was to contrast the gender expectations which Trudy felt she was obliged to fulfil with what happens towards the end of the novel when she rebels against them.

The decision, in Chapter 39, to use a series of news reports and Tweets as a technique to move the story on was building on the use of social media platforms, as previously discussed. I wanted to create a sense of immediacy and realism that would allow readers to draw their own conclusions as to how the narrative was unfolding. The intention was to emulate the technique used in many epistolary novels. For example, Stephen King's novel *Carrie* (1974) uses newspaper clippings, magazine article and book extracts; Wilkie Collins uses documents to construct the detective novels, *The Moonstone* (1868) and *The Woman in White* (1859) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) uses letters, diaries and newspaper accounts. The purpose of the different extracts from tabloid, broadsheet and business publications for my novel was to encourage the reader to draw their own inferences by joining the dots together with the information these reports provided. The online Tweets reflect the impact of social media in contemporary society and build in another layer of suspense and suspicion as to who is responsible. These reports separately state that *Enquiry* magazine has been shut, that an MSP has quit his role, that a nightclub owner has been arrested, and that a woman has been arrested as part of an anti-trafficking investigation. The Tweets then ask questions and raise suspicions about what exactly has happened at the nightclub and who is involved

@nosyparker who are the celebrities who've been going for a tinkle at the club? #gaggingorder

@tellingthetruth read all about it here! household names! politicians! media luvvies! coming soon! #gaggingorder

@jammydonut why the news blackout? #gaggingorder²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Lorna Hill, *The Invisible Chains*, p.251

By taking the reports together it is possible to piece together the wider story yet on their own the articles and tweets are just snippets of events. The purpose of this, and a technique which I employed at the start of the book and then in Chapter 13, was to consider the idea that very often one must read between the lines to try to deduce the bigger picture of a story presented through traditional media routes. According to a recent *Digital News Report*,²⁰⁵ 51% of people are now using social media, such as Facebook, to access their news online, Facebook and other social media outlets are where many consume their news. According to the survey, consumers are happy to have their news selected by algorithms 'with 36% saying they would like news chosen based on what they had read before and 22% happy for their news agenda to be based on what their friends had read'.²⁰⁶ However, 30% had concerns that these algorithms formed bubbles which presented news which would not challenge their views.

As demonstrated through selective exposure theory, where it is argued individuals tend to favour information which reinforces their pre-existing views rather than contradict it, there is then a suggestion of whether people would be inclined to piece the snippets of information together. In *Selective Exposure To Communication*, the authors argue that in contemporary society hand-held devices allow exposure to many events. Yet this access can 'easily be abandoned' in favour of exposure to other events. Television viewers, he writes, can 'effortlessly jump from exposure to a news item in China to a soccer match in Italy'.²⁰⁷ So whether individuals choose to expose themselves to newspapers, social media platforms or TV reports they can consume or abandon them at 'a moment's dissatisfaction'.²⁰⁸

It was in the consideration of the differing narrative techniques and voices that I realised that I wished to begin and end the novel with a piece of journalism. Having utilised social media platforms, extracts of flash fiction and traditional narrative prose,

²⁰⁵ The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Digital News Report 2017* <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org> (accessed Aug 18, 2017)

²⁰⁶ Jane Wakefield, *Social media outstrips TV as news source for young people*, June 15, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36528256>, (Accessed Aug 18, 2017)

²⁰⁷ Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, *Selective Exposure to Communication* (Routledge, 2011) p.4

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

it seemed apt that the beginning and ending should be written in a news report style in a tribute to Megan's profession, again allowing readers to draw their own conclusions as to what had happened. By placing the reports one year later, it also allowed me to move the narrative on in time and place. The first report announces that the Scottish Government will adopt the Nordic Model in Scotland, thereby criminalising the purchase of sex. The second report states that the body of a 52-year-old woman has been pulled from the Clyde and it is thought to be that of missing civil servant Natasha Campbell. Therefore, the book hopefully, does allow the reader to draw a positive conclusion overall, in that Natasha's death was not in vain. This new legislation was what Natasha Campbell had fought so hard for her during her time at Holyrood. So, despite the fight all the women in the book face, against a patriarchal society, there is a glimmer of hope and redemption.

5.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this chapter was to analyse the narrative structures and techniques used for *The Invisible Chains*. By studying the strengths of employing different narrative techniques in crime fiction, I hope to have illustrated the impact these can have on the reader without compromising the content of the novel. Although there has been much to admire in the works I have studied, I had to narrow my focus for the purpose of this creative project. Each of the characters, whether viewed as protagonists or victims, is aligned to the crimes explored in the creative; through Megan's perspective as the protagonist then human trafficking through the eyes of The Girl and finally, domestic abuse through the eyes of Trudy. It would perhaps have been interesting to experiment with other techniques that I discovered during the course of my research, including voice, tense, plot and structure. However, it would have been impossible to fit them all into this one project. This detailed research process has been significant, in terms of the process of writing the novel, and I would hope to put this knowledge into use with future projects at a later date. We now return to the doctoral project as a whole which comprises an original piece of modern Scottish writing with a critical component investigating the role of female characters and writers in the Scottish and Nordic literary scene. What has been outlined allows for the development of an original piece of creative work, weaving in the theoretical component of the research, with a female protagonist

challenging gender roles and expectations while reflecting social beliefs. This allows for a critical commentary that is theoretically informed, by feminist theory, but which maintains a practice-driven approach. Rather than try to derive a universal statement on the role of women or the writing process, the focus has been on the creative work which has been the main output of this research and its relation to identified creative texts. The aim in presenting the process and context of writing, through the critical project and creative work, is that this Creative Writing project presents a cohesive practice-based doctorate focusing on women in a Post-Referendum Scotland.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview with Lin Anderson, Stirling, September 11, 2016 and subsequent email follow up, October 13, 2016

LH: Can you talk about your decision to have a female protagonist, Dr Rhona McLeod, working as a forensic scientist; and the environment she works in?

LA: By using Rhona as my main character I am also writing about what it means to be a woman and a parent. There are always other themes in a crime book and it's important to address these too. A crime novel has a theme of justice as its backbone. The restoration of order is also a standard theme. But each individual story can have other themes, love, revenge, the psychological study of evil and retribution. How we treat groups in our society. There are more male criminals than female. There are more male police officers than female. However, the area of forensic science is now a popular career for women, so no shortage of female experts in the forefront of all branches of forensics.

LH: Why write about crime?

LA: I write about things that frighten me. We don't have a background of Agatha Christie, and 'posh' police procedurals. It's rare for a Scottish crime writer to write about money and the big house where the murder happened. It's much more in your face. It's scary and realistic. My books have a very strong thriller element. I have pace so that you want to know what happens next. They do say you should write the books you enjoy reading so I do that. The wonderful thing about writing crime is that you cross all segments of society. The main difference with the crime novel is that they can cross all classes and question the rich as hard as the poor.

The main backbone of a crime book is justice. It's not always perfect but a punishment is meted out, there's a sense of restoration of order. That is very important in the story. In real life people do awful things and get away with it. So the resolution in a crime book offers a sense of justice.

LH: Thoughts on Scottish crime novels?

LA: The genre is so diverse. You get people from outside knowing that it's a Scottish book through the place and setting and the characters. The island of Sanday in *None But the Dead* is a huge character. 'Tartan Noir' is known for its gallows humour, which could be said to distinguish it from Scandi Noir. Really, the writing couldn't have come from anywhere else. It's the style and the rhythm that tells it like it is.

In his book *Laidlaw*, William McIlvanney asked, 'who is the true monster among us?' How did that person end up doing these things? I think that is something crime writers explore.

Additional Questions (by email)

LH: Since you started writing books - what are the biggest changes you have noticed in the crime fiction genre?

LA: The variety and continued development in the genre. Also its popularity.

LH: Why do you think so many women read crime fiction?

LA: They like to see justice done. They like to try and understand why things happen. They like the thrills and the puzzle. They like good characters who they can follow in a series. The characters are the most important reason to read a crime series.

LH: Crime fiction has evolved greatly over the last 20 years and now it is quite normal for women characters to be the main protagonists. Do you think there is enough recognition for female authors and female characters?

LA: No. Although there are some huge female players in the genre, men still dominate as in all literary fiction.

LH: Would you describe Rhona as a feminist?

LA: She's self-sufficient, good at her job, and expects to be treated as an equal... so if that's how you define a feminist . . .

Appendix 2: Email Interview with Kati Hiekkapelto

September 12, 2017

LH: I was really interested in comments you have made about it being your duty as a writer to give a voice to those who don't have it yet in our society. Is this something you felt quite strongly about before you started writing your books?

KH: When I started to write my books I did not had very conscious idea about "giving a voice to those who yet don't have it in our society". I knew I wanted to write about immigration and all aspects of it and I knew I wanted to write crime fiction that handles social issues but the most important thing to me was to tell a good story and write it as well as I could. It has not changed. A writer is a story teller. For me social issues have always been important so they came to the text quite naturally, without much thinking or planning it. That is one of the fascinating things about writing. Your fingers seem to know more than your conscious mind. I remember when I was younger and painting a lot. Often after the picture was done I started to see deeper levels in it than just colours or composition. Like motives, symbols, meanings. I have had the same experience with writing. After a second book I realized that I am a political writer whether I mean to be or not. I think all the best art work shows something about the surrounding world and often it is something people want to close their eyes about. We treat immigrants and refugees as shit. We question, doubt, despise, fear, hate. We don't want to give them the same opportunities we have and then, when they fail and are packed in some cheap, ugly suburbs with high crime rates and without jobs we get our justification; SEE! I guess in my books I try to open this institutionalized oppression and if a one single reader begins to look at our society and its mechanisms from a different perspective than earlier, my "duty as an artist" has succeeded. I also want to point out that there are as many stories as there are people. Every refugee is an individual with unique life. But also, the main thing for me as writer is to write, I don't write for doing political pamphlets. I write because I want to write and tell stories. But I don't want to fill paper with meaningless words either, as I did not want to fill canvas with meaningless shapes. After all it is up to the reader what he/she wants to pick up from the text.

I want to say something about this giving a voice to someone issue. I think that I

can not give a voice to anyone because everyone has a voice already. The thing is about whose voice do we listen to, whose voice gets volume and space. And here art can do something, I hope. I cannot give a voice to, let's say for example an illegal immigrant. What do I know about his life after all, but I can try to create a space where his voice could be heard.

LH: I also wondered if you would be able to tell me a bit about your character of Anna. I think she is a really strong character. What influenced you when you were developing her character and what do you think is important when writing about women in crime fiction?

KH: Again I have to admit that I had no clear picture of her character in the beginning and to be honest I still don't have it. She is a mystery to me and this is at the same time very fascinating and annoying. Maybe this is one of the reasons she became such a strong and interesting character. Full of contradictions and hidden emotions. She is very interesting to me because she is a woman originally from the Balkans, which is very macho society. Although she grew up in Finland since she was nine years old, she carries her background in her. She is an independent woman, a feminist, and for that she is grateful to Finland. I think this is one of the main reasons she is not (at least not yet) going back to Serbia, even though her mother lives there and her brother moved there in *The Exiled*. There she probably could not be as free as she is in Finland. But, on the other hand, she has an affair with a married Serbian macho man who lives in the same town with her and she fell in love with a Hungarian man in her home village during her summer vacation. I don't fancy romantic stories and I don't want to write about man-woman relationships more than necessary, but in Anna's case I think her relationships with men are important to describe because they reveal something about her inner self; how confused and almost blind she is about herself and what she wants. She is a troubled minded woman, a loner, who is held together by her work. Work is everything to her.

Appendix 3: Interview with Val McDermid, Reykjavik, Iceland November 18, 2016

LH: Would you describe your characters as feminists? Was it a conscious decision to make them feminist?

VM: It never occurred to me that they wouldn't be feminists. That was always where I was coming from in terms of my beliefs. When you start to write you write what you know and so it was very much my background. Certainly with the Lindsay Gordon series I was looking at the life of a Scottish feminist. As an undergraduate I read Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and that really influenced me. It changed the way I read. So it never occurred to me that you couldn't or shouldn't have characters as feminists.

I was influenced hugely by Sara Paretsky and Barbara Wilson's books. They wrote about social politics not just from a feminist sense but from a personal and political perspective. The crimes happened because of the environment these books were set in rather than being novels with a crime bolted on. To me they felt quite organic.

Barbara Wilson wrote about a lesbian world which at the time I admired. As a writer you take risks and I realised I could do that too with my writing. However, in the final book of the trilogy her female protagonist is raped. This was an incredibly powerful thing to do within the confines of a crime novel and the notion that this violation that happens doesn't destroy the character. It doesn't destroy her or become a defining characteristic.

I remember Sara Paretsky said she wouldn't know how to write the character if this happened. I thought that was limiting the basis of reality. So this is something I thought about with my protagonists. Fay Weldon once said that rape isn't the worst thing that could happen to a woman and was lambasted for it. I thought she was right. In *The Torment of Others* Carol Jordan is dealing with the aftermath of rape and I decided that I didn't want this to define her. Somehow I wanted her to incorporate that into who she is.

LH: Do you think the crime genre is hard to feminise?

VM: I don't think you have to adopt a masculinisation of character to operate successfully. The world the characters operate in is very masculine but that doesn't need to define them. The new wave of private eye novels from the US - from the

feminist writers Sara Paretsky, Barbara Wilson and Marcia Muller - gave us these strong characters through the lens of feminism.

However, what I noticed was these characters were lone mavericks. They didn't typify the people I know. They didn't seem to have friends or any kind of meaningful relationships. I was determined my protagonists should have a proper network of friends and family, people they could call in times of particular need. So with Lindsay Gordon and Kate Brannigan that was key. That for me was really important to write about the way in which women connect, because it's different from the way in which guys operate.

LH: Has the role of motherhood affected your writing?

VM: It has made me more aware of how fragile we all are and conscious of the fragility of life. When my son was little I had to have an office I could work in outside my house otherwise he was too much of a distraction. *The Vanishing Point* wouldn't have happened if I wasn't a mother because the idea came from a situation I was in with my son at an airport.

LH: What are your thoughts on the current political landscape?

VM: Politically, things in Scotland are quite different. At the heart of that women are leading the three main parties. Within the chamber the public face of politics is much more civilised than at Westminster. There does seem to be the capacity to have areas where common ground is acknowledged. We have obviously got a long way to go and we are far from problem free. We still have disturbingly high levels of domestic abuse, there is still a pay gap. But we do have a sense in public life in Scotland it is not acceptable to be openly misogynistic. That is quite significantly different than from elsewhere. I do think there is a commitment at the highest level to address problems. That tone is set from above and that can only be positive.

In football two of the main clubs, Hearts and Hibs, are run by women and most clubs now have women in the boardroom. So they are not the male enclaves they used to be. That is another example of how things have changed. These clubs are becoming less masculine in their ethos.

I feel quite positive that there has been very little of the blowback in Scotland about Brexit than there has been elsewhere in terms of misogyny and racism.

LH: Is there enough recognition for women writers and characters in the genre?

VM: I think we do well. Women are really prominent in the critical sphere. I think women's voices are not silenced in Scotland and there are great young writers coming through like Kerry Hudson and Kirsty Logan.

Appendix 4: Email interview with Anna Smith, September 15, 2015

LH: Where did the inspiration for Rosie Gilmour come from?

AS: The inspiration for Rosie Gilmour really comes from most of my life as a frontline journalist. I was probably creating this character at the back of my mind - probably unwittingly - all the time I was working as a journalist, travelling and investigating. A lot of the stories I did used to remain with me on a daily basis, so that is where Rosie came from.

LH: Would you describe her as a feminist?

AS: I wouldn't describe her as a feminist, and the character that Rosie is wouldn't thank anyone who did. Sure, she's a woman at the top of her job in a profession where men tend to run the show. But she doesn't see herself as any kind of pioneering feminist. She's just a woman and a journalist.

LH: Did you base her character on women you worked with?

AS: I base a lot of her character on myself. There is a lot of me in Rosie, in that we share the same sense of compassion and the will to fight for the underdog. That underpinned a lot of my career as a journalist, and it does for Rosie. So she's a lot like me - but a bit more exciting and braver!

LH: Do you think women still face inequalities in the workplace today?

AS: I'm not so sure about that, as I think women have made great strides in the work place. No doubt though, there are still some inequalities, but women are more than able to fight their corner these days and have the law on their side.

LH: What do you think Rosie's biggest challenge is when she is doing her job?

AS: Rosie's biggest challenge when she's working is getting her story in the newspaper, while the dark powers try to prevent it. That's what makes the novels different from police procedurals where the object is to bring the villain to court. In a newspaper the burden of proof is different, so Rosie is focused on tying up all the ends so her story will pass the lawyers. But she's also always very aware of the effect her story will have on whoever is telling it to her - and often her editor describes her as a 'bleeding heart', which she is.

LH: Do you think women face particular challenges in journalism? Is it still male dominated? Sexist attitudes?

AS: I don't think sexism is an issue these days for women. If it is, then it's up to them to push their way through that. It was a huge issue when I was growing up in newspapers, so perhaps unconsciously I always felt I had to be better than the men and prove myself. Newspapers are still male dominated at top level, but I don't think the sexist attitude prevails, because society is very different now, and political correctness would not allow for that.

LH: Crime fiction has evolved greatly over the last 20 years and now it is quite normal for women characters to be the main protagonists. Do you think there is enough recognition for female authors and female characters?

AS: I think if a story is good enough, then it won't and shouldn't matter whether the main protagonist is a woman. For example, in *Prime Suspect*, Helen Mirren as the Detective Inspector was loved by men and women because the storylines were terrific and her character was someone everyone could identify with. If you create a good character, as I hope I have with Rosie Gilmour, who is tough and determined but also a bit flawed and vulnerable, then that is what draws in readers. I think there are plenty of good women characters in novels - from police detective characters to the kind of gangland female characters that Martina Cole and Mandasue Heller write about. A good character is a good character - regardless whether it's female or male, and I would never want to see women characters being recognised just because they are women. That kind of defeats the whole point for me.

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