

# ROUTES OF REDEMPTION

by David Deighton

## Chapter One

It came to him suddenly, standing there alone among the gravestones, that he might well be dead himself before tomorrow night. The tiny seed of doubt planted two weeks ago when Roy had unexpectedly called him from prison and announced that - after more than twenty years - he was going to be freed early "for good behaviour" had finally germinated.

Moss toyed with the idea as he picked his way carefully between the headstones. The term amused part of him; presumably, it meant Roy hadn't killed or maimed anyone recently. *That must have been hard for him.* He looked left and right at the inscriptions. Some of them were centuries old, with the letters worn away and unreadable. Others bore familiar surnames, old names, some of which were undoubtedly his ancestors—the idea was oddly comforting. This place had been a burial ground for over a thousand years.

He was under no illusions; it was the same old Roy. Worse probably. They had slipped immediately into the old uneasy familiarity, as if continuing yesterday's conversation.

"It's me, laddie". Roy had announced in his flat, emotionless voice. "I'm out in about two weeks."

"Roy!" Moss couldn't believe it. "What...".

"That gives ya plenty of time to get organized," Roy interrupted him. The years had worn down the sharp edges of his Glaswegian accent and added a transatlantic patina. *What do you expect after twenty years in a yank prison?*

"No problem. I'll set up a party - welcome you back properly."

"Get the details to my brief," Roy meant his lawyer in Glasgow. "Make it somewhere in Scotland, near home. Don't want a party, have the books ready." That was it, no small talk, no reproaches. Just the unspoken assumption that he, Roy, was still the boss.

Moss had been disturbed that Roy had reached him so easily, after all those years of covering his tracks. The lawyer had been their only point of contact; Moss channeled funds through him for Roy's prison money, but had always been at pains to keep his exact whereabouts secret.

It would be fitting. A quiet funeral, a modest headstone in a corner of the churchyard. Maybe even inscribed with his real name, it wouldn't matter anymore; no one would remember - it had been too long. He came to his mother's grave and stopped before it, laying the flowers he had brought. There was no receptacle for them, so they just lay at the foot of the headstone - a sad little offering.

Her name was the last in a long list carved into a slab of dark brown granite. He'd had it added himself after returning as a young man to find that she had been buried in a family plot and that no one had bothered to have her name put on the stone. He closed his eyes and tried to picture her as he had last seen her over thirty years before, calling to him from the street, not half a mile from this very spot. He listened, almost hoping to hear her voice again, feeling the heat of the late afternoon sun and a low breeze on his sweating face. But the only sound was the muted roar of the river flowing under the bridge down beside the churchyard, hidden from view behind

a low wall of old stone.

He was a big man and muscular, six feet tall with a rugby player's physique. His features were bland and open, neither handsome nor ugly, his hair light brown and somewhat unkempt. Casually dressed in blue jeans and a plain white t-shirt, he habitually wore clothes that were slightly too big for him and had learned to move and hold himself in a self-effacing way, so that he often went unnoticed in public. He looked a little younger than his forty-three years. Only the eyes sometimes betrayed him; they could take on a hardness that reflected his principal quality and character flaw - a mule-like stubbornness - or 'quiet determination' as he liked to think of it.

He took in the picture-postcard little white church, the ancient graveyard, the trees, and the mountains behind and felt at peace. The die was cast now, and there could be no going back. He savoured the moment, knowing it would be all too short.

Glenorchy Kirk was set apart from the main part of the village, divided from it by the A85, the Oban to Tyndrum road. It stood alone, surrounded by fields and a stand of trees, accessible by a winding single-track road that crossed an ancient stone bridge spanning the River Orchy. The only other building nearby was the dilapidated manse, abandoned to nature since the last resident minister had moved away years before. A grubby painted sign indicated it was for sale. *What kind of person wants to live right on top of a graveyard?*

He knew it was going to be bad; Roy would take pleasure in hurting them, but he wasn't complaining. He'd had it good for more than twenty years, was modestly rich, and had even known a few moments of genuine contentment. But now Roy was free and would be coming for him, not just for his share of the money, but also for revenge. There would be no reasoning with him.

Moss wouldn't stand a chance by himself, but he wasn't going

to be by himself, was he? He'd made sure the syndicate knew. They would send someone to get their money back with interest. It could be Livio. Now that would be a grudge match, the Glaswegian bulldog against the Italian-American pit-bull.

Cat, too, she would be there, with her latest toy boy, no doubt. She'd have to be there to protect her interests and make sure that certain information didn't get out. If her current companion were anything like the last two, he would be a trained bodyguard, probably a killer. Moss had often wondered where she recruited them from, amusing himself by imagining they all came from the same place - a private assassins' school in the Swiss Alps, perhaps. In his mind, they were interchangeable. He decided to ask her when the next opportunity arose. They were on quite friendly terms these days; she had forgiven him years ago.

Moss reviewed the situation in his mind again. He was reasonably satisfied; he'd made all the arrangements he could think of, and Emile would be there to tie up any loose ends if he didn't make it.

Emile was his business partner and frontman in Brussels. Moss had given him a share in each of his businesses: the nightclub, the garage, and the real estate portfolio. An ex-mercenary, Moss had initially hired him as an enforcer. Still, he soon proved his worth, becoming Moss's right-hand man and accomplice in many of his less conventional enterprises. Over the years, Émile had become his closest and most trusted friend, but even he knew only part of the story. Moss followed a strict need-to-know policy, and his criteria were very exacting. His life and liberty depended on it.

Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was nearly five o'clock. Time to go. He wanted to be there when Cat arrived at the hotel. They had to get their story straight before Roy got here.

He eased behind the wheel of the white Mercedes and started

the engine. He often drove a white Mercedes - it was a kind of trademark, a little gesture of defiance against the clandestine life he felt obliged to lead. This one was a new E320 with less than a hundred miles on the clock when he'd rented it at Heathrow. He had preferred the long drive north through England, then the borders, into Scotland, Glasgow, and finally the Highlands. It had given him time to think, to make plans while basking in the nostalgia of many similar journeys.

He'd done the seven hundred and more miles in one go, stopping for naps when he began to tire, buying sandwiches at service stations, fumbling his way toward a resolution, or at least a conclusion. By the time he arrived in Oban and checked into the Caledonian Hotel, a plan had been clear in his mind.

He pulled out of the churchyard and then turned right onto the A85 heading west. He squinted into the afternoon sun and put on his sunglasses against the glare. It was the end of May and already very hot. The hotel manager had told him an unusually fierce summer was in prospect this year.

"Global warming, ye ken," the man had said, tapping the side of his nose.

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Arriving in Oban, he found a parking space in the street and walked into the hotel reception.

Cat was already there, checking in. At forty-two, she was almost the same age as Moss but looked much younger. Her long, dark hair combed straight down from a central parting framed her high cheekbones and long nose. A strong face, beautiful but not quite pretty. Her five feet eight inches were adorned by a scarlet salopette over a tight bodice, accentuating the hourglass figure. She spotted him immediately; her peripheral vision was excellent.

"Well, I hope you've a good reason for dragging me all this way," she said without preamble.

"Hi, babe, nice to see you again. How are you?" It was then

he noticed the hard-faced young man at her elbow. He had a compact physique and moved with tight but fluid gestures. His blond hair was cropped short, and he wore a dark blue silk shirt and black leather trousers.

She laughed at him and turned back to the receptionist to finish checking in while he browsed idly through the postcards on a display stand nearby.

"It's Roy, isn't it? Is that why we're here?" She joined him two minutes later.

"Yes," replied Moss. "He'll be here tomorrow."

She paused for a moment, examining him as if searching for a sign that it was another of his bad jokes, then relaxed in acceptance of the inevitable.

"Let's have dinner in the hotel. We can talk then." She turned away and made for the broad staircase, followed by leather trousers and a hotel porter carrying their luggage.

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The dinner went well, he and Cat slipped back into their customary easy familiarity. She had changed into a light blue dress that revealed just enough cleavage to distract him from the main business of the evening. For a while they made small talk, enjoying the simple pleasure of each other's company. She had given Anton, her chauffeur/bodyguard, the night off. He had gone to Glasgow and was to be back by noon the following day.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Moss. "What if Roy arrives early?"

"He won't, he wants us to be waiting for him, worrying about it."

"We can't be sure of that. He's back in Glasgow today. They deported him back to the UK immediately, drove him straight to La Guardia and put him on a plane to Heathrow. Livio should be here soon too." Moss had made sure Livio would be told.

"Livio? I haven't seen him for years. What's he been up to?"

"He's a big wheel now, runs a casino. Something like that."

She examined him across the table.

"You haven't changed much, same old Moss. Still not married?"

"No, just that one time. It was enough for me." He was surprised she had mentioned it. They had been married for a couple of years, just after the job. He had taken care of her, nursed her back to health. He had often thought that she accepted his proposal as a reward, to thank him. It had been wonderful for a time. The sheer optimism of it, when they could still pretend it might be possible to lead normal lives.

But he'd always known, deep down, that it wouldn't last. There was Roy's prior claim, she had always been his girlfriend first. Then there was Cat herself - she had granted him a few months of her time but she would never have consented to a permanent relationship. No man would ever own her; it had been that way since childhood.

"What are we going to tell him, about the money?" She meant Roy.

"I'll make him an offer," he replied. "You'll have to contribute too."

"How much?"

"A million, maybe more."

They ate in silence for a while as she thought about this.

"It's more than I thought," she said. "His share was three hundred and fifty thousand."

"That was twenty years ago. It was supposed to have been invested, he'll be expecting a lot more than that."

"Okay, I should be able to live with that." She smiled her crooked little smile. Moss didn't believe a word.

"So sell some real estate, or borrow against it. You should be able to come through."

"I'm not that rich, things haven't gone quite as well as I'd hoped. And I have a lot of expenses."

"Is that what you're going to tell Roy?".

She didn't answer, and the conversation moved on. By common consent, they never asked each other personal questions. The information would be volunteered at the right time or not at all. Moss liked it that way; it removed the need to lie.

"Why here?" she asked.

"Well, it's home ground, a little out of the way but accessible nonetheless, not too many people." He didn't mention the other reasons, like the nearness of old friends who could be called upon if things turned nasty.

"Oh dear," she stifled a yawn, "I think I should get some sleep now. A girl has to think of her beauty. Thanks for the dinner."

"Pleasure." He signaled to the waiter and signed the bill while she fiddled with her handbag.

They rose from the table and mounted the winding staircase together. Nothing more was said but she didn't seem at all surprised when he followed her into her room and began unbuttoning her dress even as the door was still closing behind them.

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He'd always liked her body immensely - the long legs, the narrow waist, the small, firm breasts. It hadn't changed much with the years, though it was perhaps a little firmer here, more muscular there. She'd been working out. Cat wasn't the woman to deprive herself of the benefits of cosmetic surgery and other 'benefits of civilization' as she called them. At least she had been discreet; there were no signs that Moss could see. No detectable scars, all he noticed in the course of his very detailed examination were the old ones - the bullet wound under her right arm and the fine line around the base of her neck.

Their lovemaking was accomplished from long practice, yet adventurous too. He always tried to come up with something to

surprise or amuse her. This time, it was the tension generated by Roy's imminent return that fueled their passion. A hit of that most potent aphrodisiac of all - the nearness of danger.

"Oh Cat," he breathed into her ear as they approached climax again. This was always the moment he was liable to let his guard slip.

"I know, I know." She did too. It was her way of acknowledging his pain, the loss of the life they might have shared if things had been different.

They sat on the edge of the bed, she on his lap, facing him, in control, rocking back and forth with him inside her. He busied himself with her shoulders, neck, and breasts, pausing to kiss her deeply from time to time. His right hand was on her hip, helping her movements, while his left ran lightly over her skin. After a time, sensing that she was ready, he pivoted to his left and deposited her gently onto her back. Then he moved above her, entwined his fingers in the hair at the back of her head, and with regular, powerful strokes delivered them both to a shuddering conclusion that left them like shipwrecked mariners washed up on the shore after a storm.

They met and made love, perhaps once or twice a year. Just enough to assuage their need and maintain the bond forged in the emotional catastrophe of their youth. It was as if their passion burned away the everyday carapace until, at last, they could say, 'Look, this is me as I am now.' Then, without waiting for approval or reproach, reversion - actors resuming their roles in the long-running soap opera of their everyday lives.

Moss found her intensely stimulating. It wasn't just her physical beauty and her sharp mind, though that was a killer combination as far as he was concerned. It was the shared secrets, the familiarity tinged with strangeness, and, yes, the danger. She was dangerous. The deep confidence they shared

in no way implied trust in everyday matters such as money, business, or sexual fidelity. He knew that she would do anything he wanted in bed, but almost nothing outside it.

She had been eleven years old the first time he had met her. It was his first day at the orphanage. A group of older kids had been giving him a hard time, poking fun at his sing-song highland accent, kicking him when the adults weren't looking. He was still in a daze, unable to accept the death of his mother or the changes in his life, and easy prey for bullies. Two of the older boys had cornered him in the back yard, out of sight from the main house, and relieved him of the pocket money the lawyer had given him the day before. He was picking himself up and trying to choke back the tears when he spotted a scrawny, dark-haired girl looking down at him from the branches of a nearby horse chestnut tree.

"What are you looking at?" he blurted out, the shame rising to his cheeks in a crimson tide.

"You've got to face them down," she said. "Don't let them see you're hurting." She jumped down from the tree and stuck out her right hand. "My name's Catriona," she said, helping him to his feet.

She was right. She had learned the hard way, before her friend had taken her into his protection. A hard boy Moss's age with a shock of bright ginger hair. 'Red' they called him, 'Red Roy'. It wasn't long before Roy and Cat accepted Moss into their little band, and the three of them became inseparable, a kind of family.

He was immediately taken with her eyes; they were hazel with flecks of green and seemed too big for her face, giving her a doll-like appearance. Her voice, too, had a lilting quality that he never tired of listening to. Later, he would learn that it came from her mother, a farm girl from Mooncoin near Waterford in Ireland.

When the time came, Cat duly initiated Moss into the

mysteries of sex just as she had done for Roy a few weeks before. It happened naturally, a gift of friendship. It changed nothing between them, and they never questioned it, not until much later.

Roy was the undisputed leader of their little band right from the start. His parents, a merchant seaman and his alcoholic wife, had given him up for adoption at the age of five, unable to cope with yet another turbulent child. Roy was possessed by an implacable hatred for his parents that became his principal motivation, powering him to extremes of daring and violence that earned him both admiration and fear from the other children.

Moss took to him immediately, fascinated by the streak of wildness that threatened to transform any situation. He quickly learned how to handle Roy. You had to stand up to him and be ready to challenge him at any moment. Roy despised cowards and would pounce on any hint of weakness. The worst crime was to embarrass him in public, meaning in front of anyone else except Cat - but that changed as they got older.

So they grew up together, foiling all attempts to break-up the band for adoption or fostering. When Moss began to do well at school, Roy was proud of him and began calling him 'professor'. As Moss grew bigger and stronger he began to play rugby at a local club. Roy, a fanatical Glasgow Celtic supporter who had never shown the slightest interest in any other sport, suddenly became his biggest fan - often dragging Cat along to watch him play on cold, wet Sunday afternoons.

Cat had grown smoothly and gracefully into the role of sister and substitute mother. Though she never spoke of it directly, Moss gradually learned that she had been sexually abused from a young age by her father with the tacit complicity of her mother. She had been placed in the orphanage for her own protection, only to suffer more abuse from older boys. Until Roy took her under his wing, beating one of her

tormentors so severely that he had permanently lost the sight of one eye.

They slipped slowly but surely into a life of petty crime. Roy would organize shoplifting expeditions where two of them would create a diversion while the other took items of clothing, electrical goods, and sometimes even jewelry and cash. Then, in their mid-teens, things became more serious, and they graduated to burglary and joined Glasgow's burgeoning criminal subculture.

They started with modest urban houses, learning as they went and honing their technique before moving on to the more lucrative targets in the leafy suburbs. Small businesses, too. Moss became quite good at disabling alarms and breaking in quietly and discreetly - skills that would serve him well in later life.

It was during one of these raids that Roy had killed for the first time. A night watchman caught them inside a warehouse full of ghetto blasters and video recorders. He surprised them as they were loading boxes into the back of Roy's old Volkswagen Combi van. Cat spotted him lurking in the shadows, and he lunged at her, grabbing her around the neck. He was trying to drag her backward into his little cubicle of an office when Roy launched himself at him.

It was over in seconds and then the portly, grey-haired figure lay in a widening pool of his own blood, the hilt of Roy's knife protruding from the side of his neck. He was on his back gasping like a beached fish; his eyes searched out Cat and followed her around the room for a while in silent pleading before finally glazing over.

In panic, they cleaned-up as best they could and left quickly without the goods. Moss moved in a daze, running on automatic pilot, while Cat appeared deeply shocked - they'd had to take her by the arms and frog march her out. Roy was different though, he seemed elated, as if energized by the

experience. During the weeks that followed, they hunkered down and went through the motions. Moss ruthlessly suppressed his conscience and concentrated on trying to save the only family he knew. The affair was in the newspapers for a few days but they were never bothered by the police.

But Roy had changed. His violent nature was always closer to the surface after that, quick to emerge at the slightest provocation. At the same time, he was more serene, as if he had finally and irrevocably chosen his path, deciding finally that the normal rules of civilized society did not apply to him. And they never could persuade him to get rid of that knife. He hoarded it like a trophy and still carried it when he was finally arrested more than five years later.

"He's afraid of you," said Cat suddenly, breaking into his reverie. "You do know that, don't you?" They were lying entwined on the bed, her head on his shoulder. The bedclothes were pushed back almost to the foot of the bed so that their naked bodies were exposed.

"It's not quite that simple," he replied, reluctant to think about it.

"Isn't it?"

"No, it isn't. There are things you don't understand."

"Oh pardon me," she mocked, "it's a man thing, is it?" He didn't reply. "Believe me, he's scared of you. It was obvious, right from the start. He always believed you could have beaten him if you had wanted to."

"At what?"

"Everything that he considered important." Silence reigned while they both thought about this.

"But I'm not at all like him," protested Moss finally. "Am I?" This was his own private nightmare.

"If you say so."

"I'll bet he's pissed off about us anyway," said Moss finally. He disentangled himself, got to his feet, and made

for the bathroom.

"That too," she murmured.

"What?" At the bathroom door, he stopped and turned.

"Shower?" The mischief was back in his eye. She looked at him in surprise, then dropped her gaze to his returning tumescence. She laughed, got out of bed, and sidled over.

"You on Viagra, or what?" Without waiting for a reply, she linked her arm through his and pulled him inside.

## Chapter Two

Oxford, November 1985.

He'd always known it wouldn't be easy to break away, and the figure sitting on the other end of the narrow bed was the living confirmation of it. It was late November 1985, near the end of Michaelmas Term, his first, at Keble College, Oxford. Against all expectations, he had won a scholarship to study Applied Mathematics. It had been a dream come true but now reality had come calling.

Roy was dressed in his habitual jeans and grubby white t-shirt; his unwashed red hair hung over his ears, lending him something of the air of an overweight spaniel.

"Look, Red," said Moss, using Roy's childhood nickname. Sometimes, it mellowed him just enough. "I can't leave just before the end of term, just like that."

It had been barely five months since the killing in the dusty warehouse, and Moss couldn't rid himself of the image of the dying night-watchman. *Why did you do it? You stupid, fucking mindless bastard.*

"Too good for us now, are we?"

"Yes."

"That's not nice," Roy said softly, his face starting to redden. Moss suddenly saw how badly Roy needed him to accept.

"How's Cat?" Moss changed tack. She had been the most affected - subdued and withdrawn since that night in the warehouse. She had barely acknowledged him when he announced that he was coming here.

"Not good. She needs your support, laddie."

They were in Moss's tiny study-bedroom in Liddon Hall on the opposite side to the main quad. It was classified as 'non-standard' accommodation, meaning cheap, and he shared a communal bathroom with four others. There was just enough space for a single bed, a small closet with a desk and chair at the end of the bed next to the door. Moss was able to stand fully upright only in the middle of the room where the ceiling was highest. If you lifted the little window in the roof and stuck out your head, you could get an attenuated view of the smaller Newman Quad. It was a bright November day, and sunlight streamed through the window, warming the small room uncomfortably despite the cold outside. This was the last Sunday in November and Moss had been here just eight weeks.

"Why didn't she come with you?"

"I dinna tell her I was coming down," Roy looked at his hands. "In case it was no."

At first, it had been difficult; he'd felt like a visitor from another reality, mildly surprised that this place actually existed and that he, of all people, had been allowed to come here. It had taken a significant effort to fit in and make friends with the other students. They were mainly private school-educated, the sons and daughters of the English moneyed classes, with a sprinkling of international students and a few oddballs like himself. He'd been a curiosity at first - a poor Scot with rough manners - he had won them round with his easy-going manner and outstanding capacity for alcohol. He was just starting to enjoy himself - and now this.

They argued for a while longer, adjourning to Moss's favourite pub - the Eagle and Child in St. Giles - about five

minutes walk from the college. There, he allowed Roy to wear him down with emotional arguments and pints of ale. They sat in an alcove by the front door, speaking in hushed tones, their heads close together, as Roy told him about the job.

It was a shipment of bearer bonds, worth millions, from Zurich to the New York office of a Swiss bank with a stopover in Glasgow. Their share was to be twenty percent, half a million pounds each, in Roy's estimation.

"Security is poor," said Roy. "They're counting on secrecy, stupid fuckers." It slowly emerged that Roy had already committed them to his contacts in the Glasgow underworld. He couldn't go back and tell them one of his team had pulled out. "They're hard bastards. I had to give assurances."

Moss began to understand. It emerged that another team member would be a representative of the New York crime family sponsoring the project. Roy's Glasgow friends were just the middlemen.

By closing time, they were both utterly drunk, and Moss had allowed himself to be talked around. After all, Roy was the nearest thing he had to a brother—an elder brother, though Moss was actually a few months older. Arm-in-arm and giggling like schoolboys, they staggered back to Moss's tiny room, where they collapsed across the bed. They slept, fully clothed, until nearly nine the next morning after an uneasy night punctuated by visits to the communal bathroom down the hall.

Having queasily refused breakfast, by midday they were on their way back to Glasgow in Roy's rusty old Jaguar XJ6 – he'd dumped the Volkswagen right after that night in the warehouse. He'd left a message with the college porter mentioning a 'family emergency', though it was no secret that Moss had no family to speak of. It had been agreed that Moss would return to Oxford for the beginning of the new term, Hilary, after the Christmas vacation, but he already knew, without understanding

how, that it was not going to happen. The person he would have become afterwards wouldn't want to, he was sure. He felt like a child who had been given a marvellous new toy for Christmas, only to have it snatched away after a few minutes of play.

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His name was Livio Spinetti and he made it clear from the start that he expected to be the boss. Moss, Cat, and Roy were just the local soldiers hired to help him carry out the job. They were expendable, he made that clear too. A little shorter than Moss, he was lean and intense with feverish eyes. Impeccably turned out from his neatly coiffured blue-black hair to his expensive-looking brown suede boots, he wore a double-breasted light-blue suit over a plain white t-shirt. He was presenting yet another version of the plan, drawing on a whiteboard at the end of the room.

They were in an apartment provided by Roy's Glasgow contacts, located on the third floor of an anonymous block owned by Glasgow City Council. They worked for a certain Mr. Brown whom none of them had ever seen. There were rumours that he was a prominent businessman, maybe a city councillor. In any case, he ruled his criminal empire with an iron hand and was suspected of being behind several well-known gangland killings.

"This is where you kids come in," said Livio, pointing to his shakily drawn rendering of the cargo plane. "Here and here." He went through the entire procedure, annotating the diagram's lines with times.

"What if we're interrupted?" asked Moss.

"You should have a clear ten minutes, at least."

"But what if we don't?" joined in Roy.

"Then we'll have to improvise, won't we?" Livio didn't bother to hide his contempt. He expected them to obey orders and keep their opinions to themselves.

Moss was worried about the safe, which required a code to be typed into the external keypad. Livio was providing the code, supposedly acquired from an inside source. He would join the flight posing as an off-duty pilot who had hitched a ride. Once the plane left the cargo terminal, he would force the pilots to stop while Roy and Moss joined the plane in a false airport maintenance van. Then they would tie up the pilots, take the bonds, and get away in the van before anyone came to investigate. The whole scheme hinged on the delay between the plane stopping and the arrival of airport security. Any delay in opening the safe would be fatal, perhaps literally. They would drive to a prearranged point at the airport perimeter, where they would join Cat through a hole in the fence and drive away in a car provided by Roy's underworld friends.

"And if the code's wrong?" Moss had taken Livio aside after his presentation.

"The code is not wrong," replied Livio. "Look kid, this is what makes the job possible. If the code doesn't work, we just all go home and forget it." He splayed his hands to emphasize the point.

"And the money?" Moss insisted.

"What are you, a fucking union rep? That's the risk you take. Same as all of us." With that, he turned away and resumed chatting with Cat.

"Your friends are a little nervous," he told her. "Maybe this job is too big for them."

"Oh, they're just trying to impress you with their professionalism." She smiled at him disarmingly. "Now tell me more about Vegas."

"If the casino makes money the opening night, then it's cool, but if you start with a loss, then you might as well get out because you're always going to be chasing that gap in the cash flow."

"First I heard of a casino losing money," sniggered Roy.

"You'd be surprised, kiddo." Livio put his arm around Cat's shoulders and steered her away. "You should come over, take a look-see after the job," he told her.

"We'll see," she said with a smile as she disentangled herself and crossed to the door. They bid him goodbye, and the three of them left.

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"Don't worry, laddie, I've a backup plan," said Roy as soon as they got outside into the street. The three of them had left together at the end of the briefing, although Livio had seemed reluctant to let Cat go so soon.

She seemed to be almost her old self again. Moss had been relieved to find her in much better spirits than before he departed for Oxford. It took him a few hours to notice an added reserve about her, a reticence that had not been there before. Also, she was now Roy's official girlfriend, as she had explained to him gently but firmly when he tried to get her into bed. Still, she hadn't appeared to be at all put-out by Livio's interest. Or was that part of Roy's backup plan?

They went directly to Cat's apartment in another Glasgow City Council housing project, almost indistinguishable from the one they had just left. It was in the north-east corner of the fifteenth, and top, floor of a dirty white tower block. On a clear day, there was an impressive view of the city, but there weren't many clear days this time of year. Normally, she wouldn't have been entitled to it, but Roy had used his connections to apply some sort of leverage in the city housing department.

Roy wasted no time in getting to the point. He fetched the guns from their hiding place in the space beneath the bath: two ex-military Browning Hi-Power L9A1 semi-automatics. Moss didn't bother to ask where he'd got them.

"You must be off your head," he said as they moved back into the apartment's lounge. "You know what'll happen if we get

caught with these?"

"Calm down, just let me explain. They're only for show; we won't be shooting anyone." Roy hefted one of the weapons in his right hand and pretended to aim it. "Bang, bang." He smiled at Moss and accepted another can of McEwans lager from Cat.

"No ammo then?" Moss took a can, pulled the tab, and raised it to his lips. He tried to make eye contact with Cat, but she moved away toward the kitchen area and wouldn't be drawn.

"Don't be stupid," Roy was adamant. "Nothing is more dangerous than an empty gun. That's just asking for trouble." He placed the second pistol on the low table directly in front of Moss.

"Worse than a couple of kids," said Cat to no one in particular. She kept out of the argument, as though preoccupied with more important matters. Moss knew he was going to lose this one, though. It had always been like that - he could only ever win an argument with Roy if Cat were wholeheartedly on his side. And so it proved.

Roy's backup plan turned out to involve hijacking the plane at gunpoint, and it grew rapidly vaguer from then on as they consumed increasing quantities of alcohol.

"That would make it air piracy, a way more serious crime," Moss pointed out.

Roy just shrugged his shoulders and continued explaining his idea. Two hours later, they were shrieking with laughter at Roy's drunken impression of a New York Italian gangster.

"You guys in the union or what?" he said, waving a pistol. "Doncha forget who's boss around here."

### Chapter Three

Roy arrived at the hotel a few minutes before noon. Moss had been waiting in his room for the call from reception, and he went down immediately. He had been dozing, having returned to his room around two in the morning. He had collapsed on the bed, too tired to pull off his clothes. Nevertheless, he was awake again just before seven as usual and breakfasted alone in his room.

A stranger waited for him in reception. Gone was the wild red hair and the heavy cheeks. Here was an angular, hard-bodied ex-con with a close-shaven head. He stood five feet ten and wore blue jeans and a plain white t-shirt under a black leather jacket. On his feet were a pair of white sneakers.

"Where the hell have you been?" Even the voice was different. It sounded more mid-Atlantic in real life. *Sounds like a disk jockey.* "Thought you'd at least meet me off the plane." But the familiar crooked smile belied the harsh words. Moss advanced, and they embraced like brothers, slapping each other's backs.

"Hello, Red. It's great to see you at last. You're looking good." They stared at each other appraisingly for a moment.

"Is Cat here? I want to see her," said Roy. "Hell, I'm starving."

"Let's grab a bite. She can join us in the restaurant." Moss turned to the receptionist. "Could you call Miss Smith, room 312, and ask her to join Mr. Campbell and Mr. Moss in the dining room for lunch?" It would at least give her a few minutes. He led Roy into the hotel restaurant.

#

It didn't take long for Moss to realize that any changes were entirely superficial; it was the same old Roy underneath.

"You still fucking her then laddie?" Roy asked as they sat down at a table by the window overlooking the sea.

"Sometimes," replied Moss with a broad smile. Moss knew how to handle him. Head-on confrontation was best. Roy would sniff out and mercilessly pursue any hint of weakness.

"She must be getting a bit long in the tooth," guffawed Roy. "Still tasty though, I bet." He winked at Moss as they ordered drinks, both taking single malts from the local distillery.

"Not bad this," said Roy. He took a couple of sips, then downed the rest with a practised jerk of the head.

"Yeah. They've been making it here for a couple of centuries, but they only brought out this label quite recently." He hasn't asked about the money yet. They talked about whisky, cars, and football for a few minutes. Roy was a dedicated Glasgow Celtic fan.

"Bunch o'wankers," was his verdict on the current team. "Even worse than your lot."

Moss had never really been interested in soccer but he had long ago adopted the stance of a Glasgow Rangers supporter in the face of Roy's obsession. He suddenly realized that he couldn't name a single player in the team and didn't rise to the bait, signaling to the waiter for more drinks instead.

Cat chose that moment to make her entrance. She wore light blue designer jeans with high heels and a white halter top. Her long, dark hair cascaded over her shoulders. There were

glints of gold around her neck and left wrist. Both men rose as she arrived at the table.

"It's you," she wrapped her arms around Roy's neck, shutting her eyes. He grabbed her in a bear hug and kissed her just in front of her right ear. After a long moment, he released her, and they both sat. Cat dried her eyes with a tissue, and Roy smiled at them both, his eyes moist.

"The old firm," said Moss, raising his whisky glass. Roy joined him, and Cat raised a glass of water. They clinked over the table, and Moss tossed back the rest of his whisky.

"You're looking great lassie," said Roy. "It's like I never been away."

"Well, you seem to be on form yourself."

"You'd better believe it." Roy winked at her and patted her hand on the table.

They talked about the past while the waiter brought them more drinks. *He's putting on a show, thought Moss. So is she.* But Moss joined in too, he couldn't help himself. It was almost as if they had become those three kids again, after all these years.

"It's been a long time, Roy," said Moss. "Things change, life forces you to change. You have to adapt to survive. You know that better than anyone."

"Nothing's changed as far as I'm concerned," there was a hint of obstinacy in Roy's voice now. Moss had known he wouldn't be able to maintain his affability for long.

"Lighten up, you two," laughed Cat, picking up the menu.

"Yeah, let's eat," Moss followed her cue.

They ordered. Roy went for traditional highland fare, venison with potatoes and turnips, while Moss ordered steak and Cat a salad.

"You won't stay trim for long if you eat like that every day," said Cat.

"Have to make sure I get plenty of exercise then," Roy

smiled back at her.

They talked about old times for a while, then Roy began asking questions about their business interests. Cat was mainly into real estate. She had properties, mostly apartments, in several cities and vacation spots around the world.

"I tried a couple of retail businesses, but I always ended up losing money. Apartments are safer, and the building managers can usually look after things for you."

"Yeah, I guess a girl always ends-up getting screwed." Roy guffawed, impressed by his own wit. "What about you?" he looked at Moss, becoming serious. "What's your excuse?"

Moss told him about the nightclub, the garage, and the real estate portfolio. The food arrived, and they ate in silence for a while.

"This is good," said Roy, savouring the meal. "Beats prison food." He belched. "Pardon my French."

"Mostly commercial properties," said Moss, resuming his explanation. "The market is more stable."

"Well that's all very well and good, but what about me?" Roy's voice was ominously calm.

"I've earmarked some..." started Moss but Roy cut him off.

"I had plenty of time to work on this inside," he said. "According to my calculations the money from the job should be worth nearly ten million today. My share is a quarter and that's what I want. Two and a half million dollars."

"Roy, that's unrealistic. We just haven't done that well." Moss had known it would come to this.

"Look, I've earned it. I did my time, and yours too. Now it's your turn to make an effort."

"Of course, I know but it isn't quite that simple".

"And that's not all," Roy put his hand on Cat's arm. "You've been messing with my woman. I should kill you just for that." He smiled but it didn't reach his eyes.

"It wasn't like that," said Cat, ashen-faced.

"Hadn't you better wait until you get the money first?" Moss had to calm it down, stay rational and engage Roy's self-interest.

"I'll try," said Roy. "But don't make me wait too long." He stood up, hauling Cat to her feet as well. Some of the other diners were staring at them.

"I think we'll go for a wee nap," said Roy, looking at his watch. "Meet you in the lobby at, say, seven?"

"Okay."

"First thing Monday, we'll go find a bank for the first instalment." He turned and walked toward the door, pulling Cat along with him. She followed meekly and didn't make a fuss. She too, had known it would come to this.

#

She held Roy in her arms for a long time after they had finished. They lay entwined on the bed under a sheet that clung to their bodies. The curtains were drawn back and the room was illuminated only by the moonlight streaming in through the window. He held on to her tightly, his head on her shoulder, as if afraid to lose her again.

"God, I've missed ye lass", she was surprised to feel his tears against her breast.

"I know," she murmured, "me too".

"He treat you well?" he meant Moss. "Heard you got hitched, after the job".

"Oh yes, babe. He was nice." We needed each other with you gone.

"I understand, babe" and he did too. It had always been like this, right from the early days at the orphanage. There was never any sexual jealousy between them. Cat had been intimate with both of them since adolescence, but she had always been Roy's girlfriend first and foremost.

"Ha ha, nice guys never get the girl." Roy was only half-joking. She knew he had always suspected that she secretly preferred Moss. One secret she must keep at all costs.

“He isn’t you, babe”, she replied. “It just wasn’t the same”. She knew what he needed to hear.

“I know,” Roy seemed mollified, relieved that she had felt the need to repeat the lie.

If it was a lie, she was never quite sure. She had always been careful not to let Roy see how much Moss meant to her, afraid that it would tip him over the edge. Of what she wasn’t sure, Roy had never been violent with her in any way, or even threatened to be. Maybe it was his relationship with Moss that she was worried about. They had always been rivals, not just with her, but in almost every aspect of their lives. Or was it that she was simply afraid for the three of them?

Nevertheless, Roy’s fragility had been her secret responsibility from the start, after he had saved her from the bullies. She had immediately sensed it under his bravado.

She had almost forgotten this central fact of her life during Roy’s long prison term, but now here it was back in force. She could see that prison had not been kind. Roy had reinforced his tough exterior, but inside, he was the same scared, resentful kid.

## Chapter Four

Moss was in the lobby just before seven. He tried not to think about what Cat might have had to put up with all afternoon. It wasn't jealousy as much as fear that Roy might have harmed her. He had spent much of the afternoon on the phone. To Emile in Brussels arranging for him to wire a hundred thousand pounds to the Oban branch of the Clydesdale Bank. Then to an old drinking companion and distant cousin for an entirely different kind of arrangement. He had driven out to a barn-like building at the southern edge of town, under a painted sign that read 'McCallum & Sons, Monumental Masons'.

The proprietor, a heavily-built man in blue overalls, greeted him politely and plied him with an excellent single malt before eventually leading him out to a wooden shed in the yard at the rear. Here he examined Moss's driving license and made a discreet call by cellphone out of earshot before offering-up the object of the visit - a black Walther PPK automatic and a box of 9mm ammunition. Moss checked it over in front of him and put everything into the battered old brown leather briefcase he had brought along. He stowed-it in the Mercedes' spare wheel compartment and left.

Back in his hotel room he had spent an hour cleaning and greasing the gun before loading nine rounds into the magazine.

He inserted it into the grip and worked a bullet into the chamber before setting the safety. Then he wrapped the gun in a white linen napkin from breakfast and put it back into the briefcase, making sure there was nothing else in there that could identify him.

Roy and Cat appeared in the lobby at almost seven thirty.

"Hope we didn't keep you waiting," said Roy with a smile that reached his ears but not his eyes.

"No problem. I've been making arrangements for tomorrow morning."

"Good. I'll want to see your books as soon as possible after."

Moss ushered them both outside to where the white Mercedes was waiting. He took a closer look at Cat. She avoided eye contact but seemed well enough, although he noted that she moved with a certain stiffness.

He drove them inland for a few miles, nobody spoke again until they entered the spectacular scenery of the Pass of Brander.

"Nice," said Roy. "I'm a city boy myself but I like a bit of greenery. I hope you've got a good dinner lined-up."

"The best fresh salmon you've ever tasted," Moss tried to lighten-up. He pulled into the driveway of what looked like a big country house. It was set back from the road on the opposite side to the bank of Loch Awe to their right. Moss parked close to the ornate front door and they went in.

They were greeted by a young blonde in a starched white blouse and black skirt. At Moss's request, she took them to a table by the window at the back of the restaurant. From here they could look out over the car park to the waters of the loch beyond, now moonlit. The ruin of Kilchurn Castle was visible out on the loch, it had been lit-up and from this vantage point appeared to float on the water.

It was a calm, relaxing setting. The food was excellent and

the service prompt and friendly. They began to slip back again into their old roles, as if the intervening twenty years had been some kind of misunderstanding - now unraveling. Moss saw again the tousle-haired youth with the zany sense of humor and the wild streak.

While Moss and Roy laughed their way through a series of reminiscences and half a bottle of whisky, Cat was more reserved. She joined-in sporadically, drinking little. At the end of the meal, she hung back while Moss led the way to the door. It was dark outside now, Moss's watch showed just after eleven.

As they reached the car, Moss reached into his pocket for the key and pressed the remote unlocking button. Roy opened the front passenger door and was maneuvering himself through it when Moss picked-up a stone and hit him just behind the left ear. Roy grunted and tried to turn back when Moss hit him again on the temple and he slumped unconscious into the seat. Moss pushed him the rest of the way in and shut the door behind him. He ran around to the driver's side and yanked open the door for Cat to get into the rear seat.

"Come on, we have to be quick." He glanced back toward the restaurant, hoping that nobody had seen the fracas. He got in and started the engine, then pulled out onto the road and turned left, heading toward Dalmally. It took them less than five minutes to reach a quiet country lane, and Moss pulled over just as Roy was beginning to stir.

They bundled him out of the car and onto the grass verge. There was no other way; both of them knew that. Roy would never let them be, even if they managed to raise the money. Moss looked around, then picked up a piece of granite half the size of a football. He raised it to bring it crashing down on Roy's head when Roy suddenly squirmed and lashed out with his right foot. The blow caught Moss behind the left knee, and he buckled, losing his balance and dropping the stone.