

# SUB-ROSA



CHARLOTTE MILLS



# CHAPTER 1

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR DARREN MACKENNA YAWNED as she glanced through the glass to the empty outer office; it was rare for it to be so quiet. She tensed her aching shoulders as she looked at the stack of messages in her personal email account. Thankfully, nothing looked pressing, although an email from her parents caught her eye. Something about an old photo of her Uncle Conor—if there was such a thing as a black sheep in their family, it was probably him.

She scratched at her sore wrist, noticing the red scrape from the overzealous armed officer that had zip tied her at the scene. Keeping up appearances while undercover had a price, and playing the part of Sarah Doheny, the estranged wife of a dead drug dealer, had certainly taken its toll. Although the assistance of one PC Spencer had been gratefully received when it came to removing the cuffs. She'd even offered her wet wipes to clean up. Mac hadn't recognised the officer, but she hadn't exactly been a regular at the station lately.

She closed the webpage and clicked on her report. Re-reading the final paragraph detailing her account of the day's events, the words began to blur and merge into one long black line. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, hoping to make them focus for just a little longer.

The last few hours flashed through her mind—trying to save the life of an informant hadn't been part of the plan. Nor had being taken hostage by drug dealer, Karl Reid, or having a gun fired so close to her ear she could still feel the heat from the barrel. She sighed as she squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

Heavy footsteps echoed in the outer office followed by a tapping on her office door. The door knocked against the filing cabinet in her cramped office.

"I hear congratulations are in order."

Mac looked up at Superintendent Andy Blackwell. He was the only senior officer still likely to be here at this time of night. Although they hadn't officially worked together, he'd consulted on a couple of her cases since moving to the National Crime Agency.

Mac forced a smile despite her fatigue as she got to her feet. "Sir." She nodded. "We should have more than enough for a conviction." *If Reid's solicitor and the CPS don't fuck us over, that is.*

"Good work, Mac."

"Thank you, sir." She was only a Detective Inspector, but she'd probably spent more years working undercover than Blackwell had even been on the force. Knowing the right people certainly helped in this profession. Her body ached as she retook her seat. "I'm not sure Nesbitt will see it that way."

"He should make a full recovery, thanks to you."

She wasn't prepared for any informant to pay with his life which is why she headed straight for trouble in the hope she could talk her way out of it. Jackson, Reid's right-hand man hadn't been so lucky and succumbed to his injuries after a shootout at the scene.

She looked up at Blackwell. Why wasn't he reprimanding her for going in there? Detective Chief Inspector Greg Chambers, the senior investigating officer on the case had yelled at her for several minutes before he'd sent her to the paramedics to be checked out. Luckily, her hearing had still been screwed up at that point.

Blackwell was still leaning against the doorframe, a slight crinkle in his brow evident even in the dim light. Why wasn't he leaving?

"Everything okay?" She finally asked, sitting back in her seat.

"I-I've got some bad news, Mac. I wanted you to hear it from me first rather than on the station grapevine."

*Shit!* Was it Reid? Was he getting out? Maybe his fancy-ass lawyer had found a loophole and she'd wasted the last six months for nothing.

Blackwell looked awkward as he pushed away from the entrance to step fully into her office. He used his foot to back-heel the door behind

him despite there being no one in the outer office. “Dougie Parks has been found dead.”

She immediately sat bolt upright, despite the ache in her shoulders. “What—that’s—” Surely she hadn’t heard that right, that bloody gunfire from earlier was still messing with her ears. “Dougie? What happened?”

Dougie, as in *her* Dougie? He’d been her mentor and handler for six years, more than that—he was a friend.

“Suicide.”

The ground fell from under Mac’s feet and if she hadn’t been sitting down she would have fallen.

It was a single solitary word, yet it held so many questions. Why? Why would Dougie take his own life? The Dougie she’d known and loved was a fighter all the way. “But he, he wouldn’t—he’d never do that. He just—”

“He hung himself, Mac.” Blackwell dug both hands into his front pockets as he looked down at the floor. “I know you worked together for some time. Apparently he’d had a few problems lately.”

She struggled to comprehend what he was saying. *Problems*. “What—what are you talking about?”

Why hadn’t he reached out to her if things were bad? They had that type of relationship—at least she’d thought so. Guilt climbed up her chest. Why hadn’t she checked in with him lately? How long had it been since she’d spoken to him? Last Christmas maybe, longer.

Her job at the National Crime Agency had given her little free time over the last couple of years. Her chest tightened again as if Reid still had hold of her, dragging her away down a dark tunnel. Her hand went to her mouth almost muffling her next words. “What sort of problems?”

Blackwell finally met her eyes. “Drink.”

Dougie could drink, he was known for it. No, this was all wrong. “That doesn’t—” Her tone was harsh, voice raised to combat the blood pulsing in her ears. *Hung himself? No way.*

Blackwell cleared his throat wiping away her words. “He’d been suspended pending an investigation.”

The calmly delivered words were like fire in her veins. “Investigation?!” She shook her head. “Investigated for what?” Her tone softened.

Dougie wasn’t a model copper, no-one was. He was bloody good at his job though, he’d kept her safe in the face of danger countless times.

Blackwell held up his hands as if to placate her. "I don't know all the details, it sounds like he's been implicated in the death of a drug dealer."

She was on her feet, her chair clattered against the wall behind her before returning to the floor. "A drug dealer!"

Mac's mind clouded with confusion, nothing was making sense. She'd known DCI Dougie Parks for over ten years, and the one thing she did know was he would never cross the line. Not like that. He'd had plenty of opportunity, but he'd always done the right thing despite any feelings of disgust or anger he had towards a suspect.

He'd seen it in her once, a moral wavering, when the evidence against a battered wife could have easily gone missing. He'd pulled her to one side and set her straight.

Mac blinked away the memories as she focused her attention back on Blackwell. "What evidence do they have against him?"

He took a step closer to her desk. "I'm not sure, forensic, I think, that's all I know." He shrugged.

There was something very wrong here. "Where was he found?"

Blackwell's look of confusion forced her to clarify.

"Dougie, where was he found?"

"At home. Three weeks ago."

"Three weeks!" Had they kept this from her to ensure she didn't fuck up the Reid case. "Chambers knew about this?"

Her mind was racing. There had been nothing in the news, at least nothing she'd seen. But why would there have been? Mac had been halfway across the country. If it was suicide, it was hardly national news. Why hadn't she reached out to him?

Blackwell's mouth formed a straight line. She was pushing it considering his seniority.

"It only came across my desk yesterday, his Chief Con knew I'd worked with him before he transferred over to Cambridgeshire."

*Yesterday!* Bullshit, she didn't believe that for one second. The old boys' network was far too greased to leave a three-week delay in news like that.

She racked her tired brain— Dougie had started working in some records department somewhere in Cambridgeshire months ago. Mac couldn't recall exactly where.

It hadn't escaped her notice that Blackwell still hadn't answered her question about Chambers, which meant he didn't want to.

"You're due some leave, get your report finished and take a few weeks. The inquest's being concluded on Friday, in Chelmsford." He nodded to her briefly before turning to leave. His left hand landed on the doorframe preventing his exit, he twisted his head back towards her. "And Mac, make sure you check in with Dr Woods at some point."

Mac slumped back in her chair as Blackwell's footfalls trailed off. A psychological assessment with Dr Woods was the last thing on her mind right now. Her elbows landed on her desk, hands covering her face as her tears began to fall.

Her mind drifted back to the last time she'd seen Dougie. It was almost a year ago during an impromptu visit to Barnet Police Station. She was there to dig up some first-hand information for a couple of undercover legends she was creating for a case. Her years of experience working in organised crime usually meant she was first choice to go undercover. On this occasion her female attributes were not required, hence her backstopping role. It was only a few days before she had been seconded to the Karl Reid case.

She closed her eyes steadying her breathing as she pictured Dougie on that day. Walking through the dimly lit shelves of the basement records room, she'd found him hunched over a stack of files. She could spot his profile and awful taste in knitwear from fifty yards. He was certainly the last person she expected to see in the depths of Barnet Station. The last she'd heard he was still working in Chelmsford.

"Hey up, who let you in? Do they know you're down here routing around like a truffle pig?"

Dougie's eyes were wide as he looked at her, his open mouth quickly changed into a wide grin as he pulled at the glasses perched on the top of his head. "Mac!" A warmth appeared in his eyes as he looked back at her. "At least I'm meant to be here, what's your excuse." He stepped closer pulling her into a tight hug.

There was a familiarity to the grip of his arms around her, reluctantly she pulled away. "Just digging some dirt." She smiled back at him.

He'd aged since she'd last seen him, dark circles hung below his eyes.

She glanced around at the mass of paperwork that filled the table surrounding him. "Lost something?" She frowned knowing full well from working with him how meticulous he was with his clerical work.

"Something like that!"

"I just need to check on a few things, got time for a coffee before I go?"

"Always." Dougie grinned waving his hand towards the shelves of boxes.

"Fill your boots. Come and pick me up on your way out."

An hour later, they sat in a coffee shop a short walk from the station.

She smiled as he tore open his third sugar sachet and dumped it into his oversized mug. "I see you haven't cut down."

Jam trickled from the side of a large jam doughnut on a plate next to his mug. "What for? I've worn the same size clothes for thirty years."

Mac sniggered. "Whether they fit you or not."

"Exactly, so why worry." He stirred his coffee sucking the end of the wooden stick.

"What are you doing at Barnet?" She asked, taking a sip of her tea.

"Three-month secondment, covering for someone."

If she didn't know any better she'd say Dougie was being deliberately evasive. Why would he do that and with her of all people. Was this what it was going to be like now they weren't working together. She nodded unsure of how to proceed.

"What about you, backstopping now?"

"It's just for a case in Southend." There was no harm in telling him. "It's a Carwash thing."

He raised his eyebrows as he drank from his mug. "Carefulness costs you nothing, careless may cost a life."

"I know." She nodded fully aware how operations can get out of control.

"What have they got you doing?" She was determined to get a straight answer out of him.

"Oh they've got me flitting about all over doing secondments and covering for people. Mainly tying up loose ends and checking through stuff, cold cases that sort of thing. Never staying long enough to upset anyone."

"I doubt that." She figured there was a reason they weren't in the police canteen. Dougie had a knack of annoying just about anyone when he set his mind to it. "I thought you'd be looking for a quieter life now." She shrugged. "You've put your time in."

“Trying to get rid of me?” There was a sharpness to his words she hadn’t been expecting.

She looked up meeting his eyes. “Never, who else can support the knitwear industry singlehandedly.”

Dougie let out a long breath. “I’ll be gone soon enough.”

Mac tried to hide her confusion at his veiled hostility. This wasn’t the usual light-hearted Dougie that she’d worked with for years. She tried a different subject. “How’s your sister and the boys?”

“Good.” A smile had pulled at the left side of his face. “Mark’s got a little one on the way.”

“Really? That’s great. A new member for the Star Wars movie marathon nights.”

“You loved it.” He held up a hand. “Please don’t try and deny it now, you’ll put me off my doughnut.”

The truth was she did love being part of a solid team. Knowing she could rely on them to have her back whatever happened. It had been the marker for her career and something she’d tried to create in her future work environments.

“He’s in construction, right?” She remembered Dougie talking to her father about his nephew when he’d visited for Christmas.

“Yeah, he’s set up a joint business with another guy. He’s doing well.”

Mac sighed as she wiped away an escaping tear. Dougie’s demeanour hadn’t seemed that out of place back then considering the situation she’d found him in. But maybe there was more to it. How long had he been in trouble?



## CHAPTER 2

IN NEED OF SUPPLIES, PC Ash Spencer made her way to the local express supermarket she'd passed on her journey through Brygg earlier. Her transfer from Luton Station to Brygg last week had been quicker than she'd expected. She'd known two years ago that this day would come, but hadn't realised quite how settled she'd get in the meantime. Thankfully her new home looked clean and tidy, if a little worn. The cool air inside the shop was refreshing after her walk in the sun. With her items bagged up and paid for, she made her way outside.

Hearing angry voices, she turned and saw an elderly man with a dog surrounded by two young men and a woman. They were all talking at once, but from the snippets she was able to make out, the elderly man was accused of bumping into the female. Before Ash could get any closer, one of the males pushed the old man making him stumble backwards.

She immediately sprang into action getting between the elderly man and the pusher. "Everything okay here?"

There was panic in the old man's eyes as he looked at her.

The young male she guessed to be around fourteen was not so impressed. "What's it got to do with you, just piss off!" He spat his words at her as he tried to get around her towards the elderly man.

She did her best to get in his way while keeping a sneaky eye on the other two. "I'm a police officer and there's CCTV watching your every move. So unless you want to be charged with assault, I suggest you and your friends move on." She hoped that would de-escalate the situation.

The sneer on the lad's face increased as his two friends laughed behind them.

She clenched her jaw, realising she would need to be more succinct with her message. Taking the youth by the arm she led him a couple of feet away. "Listen to me fuck face, if you want me to wrestle you to the ground and embarrass you in front of your little friends, then wait for uniformed officers to arrive so they can drag you off to the station and go through the embarrassment of calling your parents to come and collect you, we can do that. I haven't got anything else planned for the rest of the day; have you?"

She watched as a mask of boredom slipped over the lad's face. He made a show of shrugging out of her loose grip and walked away as the others jeered at him.

She turned her attention to the old man. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, a faint smile on his face. "Thanks."

"No problem. Have a good day." She crossed the road towards her new home— convinced she'd already made a difference to someone. Welcome to Brygg.

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Mac jogged up the steps of Chelmsford City Hall—the coroners' court had recently moved to the new building with its glass façade. It had been almost a week since she found out about Dougie's death. In that time, she'd finished up in Manchester and paid a fleeting visit to her flat in London. As much as she tried to get back to normal she still couldn't reconcile recent events and now her reluctance to attend the hearing had made her late. The finality of it all scared her. If it could happen to Dougie then it could happen to anyone. They were both cut from the same cloth—or at least she'd thought they were. The Dougie she'd known wouldn't have taken the life of a drug dealer and certainly not his own. Yet, according to Blackwell, he was accused of both.

In Dougie's words, she was stuck behind the eight ball. Or was it a dog in a manger? She rarely understood his sayings.

Pushing through the glass doors she scanned the information for directions to courtroom two.

An inquest meant Dougie's death was unexplained or unexpected to some degree and Mac was clinging to the hope of being able to make sense

of all this. She found the room she was looking for and climbed the short flight of stairs to the next floor.

Mac took a calming breath as she reached the door. She opened it a few inches and slipped inside before closing it quietly behind her. They'd already started. She quickly scanned the room, taking in the rows of black chairs facing away from her. Several chairs on the front row were occupied, the remaining attendees were dotted in the rows behind. Mac slipped into a seat near the back on the left of the narrow aisle. The large room had the look of a modern lecture theatre and lacked the charm of a traditional courtroom.

The coroner sat behind a table at the far end, the woman's shrill voice echoing around the room as she addressed the people sat on the front row.

Mac recognised Dougie's family. She had met Dougie's sister, Grace, a couple of times over the years. Her son, Mark, had left her the message about Dougie's funeral.

As for Dougie's recent colleagues, she had no clue; the coroner simply referred to them as Jimmy and Peter. She tried to lean to one side to get a better look at the two men, one had a ring of greying hair, the other was younger. Mac made a quick note of the names in her phone as the coroner continued.

"The first document I need to refer to is the post-mortem conducted by Dr Headley. An external observation found ligature marks confirming the mechanism of death and corresponding to the scene. It was also discovered that Douglas had consumed alcohol prior to death. I don't need to go into detail, but it has been brought to my attention that at the time Douglas had several stresses in his life. The next piece of evidence is to be given by Detective Constable Michaels, if I can ask you to take the oath."

As Michaels mumbled through the oath, Mac couldn't help wondering if it was his first time in a coroners' court.

"Thank you. Can I ask you to state your full name, rank, and the station you're attached to, please?"

"Detective Constable Greg Michaels. I am currently placed at Saffron Walden Police Station in Essex."

"And that is not the police station where Douglas Parks worked?"

"No, ma'am."

“To put the situation into context.” The coroner paused. “Until there is evidence to the contrary, the police proceed on the basis that all deaths in the community are suspicious. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“So your first notification of this death came from a neighbour who raised concern when the curtains hadn’t been opened. The neighbour then called Douglas’s sister, Grace Quinn, and shortly after the discovery, the police were called. When you attended the scene did you see anything that might have raised concerns—had there been a disturbance or anything of that kind?”

Mac frowned as Michaels stared into the small crowd on the left of the room. He looked nervous as hell as he pursed his lips.

“Officer Michaels.” The coroner prompted.

“No, ma’am.”

“Thank you. And when you attended the scene, you found several of Douglas’s personal effects. Is that correct?”

“That’s correct.” Michael’s gaze was still fixed on the attendees.

Mac tried to follow his eyeline, and craning her neck, it looked like he was staring at the two suit-clad men the coroner had referred to as Dougie’s colleagues, Jimmy and Peter. *Who were they?*

“There was paperwork of both a personal and work-related nature. Is that correct?”

Michaels took a drink from a small glass of water in front of him before answering. “That’s correct, and a mobile phone and laptop.” His voice was rough as if the water had gone down the wrong way. He coughed to get control of himself, glancing at the coroner apologetically.

The coroner waited a beat before continuing. “And there was alcohol at the property?”

“Yes, there were empty whisky bottles and beer cans.” Michaels was back in control, his focus on the two men.

“And more in the fridge or at the property?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“There were communications found at the scene which you have provided to us. Is it fair for me to say that they are farewell notes to some degree?”

“I would agree with that.”

*Notes.* Tears stung the back of Mac's eyes. Hadn't she deserved a note, something to explain all this?

"Following your attendance at the scene you took accounts from various people— family and colleagues, and the impression I have is that the accounts were consistent."

"Yes, ma'am, that is correct."

Mac needed to get her hands on those reports.

"So what we can see is that Douglas had been struggling for the last couple of months as he moved towards retirement."

*Months.* Her jaw clenched. Why hadn't he reached out to her?

"And nobody believed that he would behave the way that he did. Is that correct?"

Michaels had the decency to bow his head a little. "That's correct, yes."

Finally, something she could agree with. This was not Dougie's M.O. She just needed a way of proving it.

"Now," the coroner continued, "when the inquest was first opened in June there was some concern as to whether Douglas was involved in the death of a young man in the course of his job as a police officer in Cambridgeshire. From the paperwork in front of me that is no longer the case. Is that correct?"

Michaels looked away, back into the crowd. "Yes, ma'am. He is no longer suspected of any involvement."

Mac had done her own investigations into Dougie's so-called involvement—a low-level drug dealer by the name of Dion Goodwin had been found dead in an abandoned farm building in the middle of nowhere, in rural Cambridgeshire. Goodwin had been tied to a chair, tortured, and suffocated. Nothing was found on the first sweep of the scene. It was only on the second sweep a couple of days later that a carrier bag was found. A bag that was found to be the murder weapon, with a conveniently placed receipt inside that led straight to Dougie. His elimination prints were checked against those found on the bag and bingo, they found a match for *one* of the sets. It was all a bit convenient as nobody could be placed at the scene, including Dougie. There were no witnesses, no CCTV, nothing. It wasn't until after he'd died that they revealed that the evidence had miraculously become compromised or gone missing, resulting in no charges ever being

brought. Which also meant Dougie could not be fully exonerated—leaving a stain on his good name.

“Officer, from your examination of the scene, is there anything that you would like to draw to my attention that you consider to be relevant?”

Michaels opened his mouth and then paused for a second. “Only that the house wasn’t locked when we got there. The front door was unlocked.”

The coroner nodded before turning to the attendees in the front row. “Can I just turn to you Grace. Do you have any questions you would like to ask the police officer?”

“No.”

“Thank you, I don’t have anything further for you, officer. So all it leaves is for me to do now, is to sum up the evidence. Douglas was a relatively healthy man who had been struggling with his circumstances. Very sadly, at the time of his death, he was not behaving in a way that anybody could have predicted would result in him taking his own life. He had not sent any messages or asked anybody for help. He had alcohol in his system at the time of his death, so it is very difficult for me to know if this was a premeditated act or whether it was something impulsive.”

The coroner shuffled through her notes for a second before continuing. “I am not satisfied that he took this action in a premeditated, calm state of mind. Of course that may well be the case, but I have to be satisfied on a balance of probability. I *am* satisfied that he took his own life. I am satisfied that no third party was involved. I cannot be clearer in my own mind that he intended to take his own life. So for that reason, the conclusion I return with is a narrative conclusion rather than a verdict of suicide, which would mean I need to be satisfied that all the actions he took were designed to end his life at the time. Do you understand my verdict?”

The coroner focused her attention on the front row of family members. “So that completes the investigation and the inquest. Not predictable and therefore not preventable. Please take that away from this today. It is impossible to predict these types of events.”

Mac glanced across to see the two men Michaels had been staring at were already leaving. Her first thought had been to pay her respects to Dougie’s sister and family, but maybe she should go after them. She glanced across the room—Grace didn’t look to be in the right frame of mind to be imposed upon. Her sons comforted her as they spoke to the coroner.

Decision made, Mac released her hair letting it drape across her face. As she took out her phone she moved quickly out into the hall, closely followed by Michaels and the two men. If she got a photo she might be able to ID them later. As they entered the foyer from the stairwell she discreetly took several pictures as they passed in front of her.

She exited the building and hung around by the entrance, wanting to get their car registrations as they left. Her wait paid off, as a few minutes later, a large white SUV with two familiar-looking occupants drove past the entrance. She opened her notes app and tapped in the details as she walked back to her own car.

With the coroner's conclusion still ringing in her ears, Mac thought about the notes Dougie had left behind. Where was hers?

Unless she already had it, she re-considered the weird email message she'd received. She'd thought little of it at the time. She opened her laptop and pulled up the email. It looked innocuous enough. A quick note from her mother with a family photo. Or was it something else entirely?

*Hey Sweetheart,*

*Thought you might like a photo of your uncle Conor before he lost all his hair.*

*Love mum x*

The address where it had been sent from could be the one her father used for his construction business. She would check with her parents later, but it didn't look like the type of email her mother would send. They were of an age where they preferred the telephone when contacting her. She doubted she'd ever actually replied to one of their occasional messages. There weren't even any others to compare it to in her inbox. She clicked on the icon to compose a new email and began typing the first few letters of her father's email address. Two options automatically popped up in the box.

Mac picked up her phone and opened the camera app zooming in she focused it on the two addresses. They were similar except the most recent one had been altered slightly, the last words were in a slightly different order. Crafty.

That at least confirmed her parents hadn't sent it, but it was too personal to be a random phishing attempt, besides, there was nothing to click on. It had to be from someone that knew her personally.

It had to be Dougie. A message just for her. If it was, then she should be able to figure it out. What did Dougie used to say, '*You need to get inside of the head of the person sending the message.*'

Mac sat back in her seat and studied the email again; there was something there, why couldn't she see it? It had arrived in her personal email account almost three weeks before the undercover operation had concluded, and after Dougie had died. She closed her eyes for a second, her brain starting to frazzle. Taking a breath she scrolled down to the photo at the bottom of the mail where she found a small line of text: *written at 23:17 on the twenty-fourth of June*. She'd still been working in Manchester then, but more importantly, it was the day before Dougie had died. Someone had scheduled it to be sent. Why would they do that? Why would Dougie do that?

She scrolled up to the black and white photo. Uncle Conor smiled back at her, at least he looked like Conor as a younger man—she hadn't laid eyes on him for several years.

Mac closed her eyes. What the fuck was going on? First Dougie, now this. Or as she corrected herself first the email then Dougie.

She closed her laptop and started her car. It was time to visit her parents. She needed answers.



## CHAPTER 3

MAC SWITCHED OFF THE ENGINE and looked out the side window. The sky had begun to darken creating a silvery light illuminating the white, low fencing that edged her parents' front garden. She blew out a breath as a large drop of rain landed on her windscreen. Her mother would be out in a minute asking why she hadn't come inside.

*'No longer suspected of any involvement,'* she couldn't get those words out of her head. Was it because Dougie was dead or because the evidence was paper thin? Either way, it stank of a cover-up. She needed to do some more digging. Starting with the email she'd received.

Exiting her car, Mac shouldered her duffle bag as she closed the boot. She wasn't sure how long she was staying. She was only just getting used to having time on her hands again. It was always a big adjustment coming off a full-on job, and right now she just wanted something familiar—something to tether herself to. Her parents would never question why her visits had been so infrequent over the last couple of years. Her mother had been so excited when she'd called to say she was coming, Mac hadn't had the heart to tell her about Dougie over the phone. She moved around to the passenger side. Opening the door, she used her free hand to grab the fresh flowers from the footwell.

She locked her car and ambled up the driveway taking in the peace and quiet of the semi-rural location. Her eyes were quickly drawn to the horizon in search of movement or anything out of place. She scolded herself as she kept on walking—she was still in work mode. Her parents probably didn't even lock their doors despite her copious warnings. Their converted

barn stood on the outskirts of a small town outside Chelmsford and they'd lived here for over fifteen years. Her mother hadn't been able to leave the grimy city of London behind fast enough. She was a country girl at heart. The area proved to be a good compromise as her father could still drive into London for his construction work.

Mac had brought Dougie here for Christmas once. Her parents had insisted on it after she'd told them his sister was going abroad for the holidays. Not that he'd needed much persuasion with the offer of some good home cooking on the menu.

Mac finally felt her shoulders relax. It was good to be home. She didn't even get a chance to knock before her mother appeared in the open doorway a wide smile on her face.

She dropped her bag as her mother pulled her into a tight hug.

"Mo leanbh." *My child.*

The whispered words brushed against Mac's neck as she relaxed into her mother's warm arms. It had been the name her mother had used for as long as she could remember. "It's so good to see you."

Her mother pulled back holding Mac at arm's length for a moment. Although her mother was several inches shorter than her, she more than made up for it with exuberance.

Mac struggled to push the words past the lump that had formed in her throat. "It really is." Holding up the flowers she offered them to her mother. "These are for you."

"Oh they're beautiful, thank you."

The tall frame of her father appeared in the doorway.

"Ah you're here. She's been waiting at the window all morning."

Her mother dutifully slapped his arm in reply before returning her attention to Mac.

The look on her mother's face made her realise she'd been away for far too long this time. She eyed her father briefly before unzipping the side of her bag where her hand quickly found what she was looking for. "And this is for you." She offered the vintage bottle of Irish whisky to her father. "I thought we could crack it open later."

Her father grinned as he studied the label. "We can do that. Come here." He stepped forward, pulling her into a warm hug.

"Come in before it rains on us."

Her mother eyed the size of her bag as she dropped it by the stairs on the way in.

“Work okay?”

Mac followed her into the large kitchen. “Yeah, good.” She pulled out a chair and sat at the kitchen table. If she had to guess from the subtle aroma that filled the room, her mother had been baking some type of fruit pie. Her hands stretched out, feeling the familiar surface—they’d had the same table for as long as she could remember. She brushed the pads of her fingers against the smooth ripples in the wood’s grain, where years of wear had worn away the summer growth leaving the harder winter rings creating tiny ripples along the surface.

Her father placed the bottle on the table before turning to switch the kettle on. Her mother stood at the sink arranging the flowers in a vase. This was what Mac needed, mundane normality. She smiled at the scene of domesticity in front of her as they worked together to make some tea.

“I’ve got a bit of time off, so I thought it’d be a good time for a visit.”

“Ah, grand.” Her mother tweaked at the flowers before placing them on the table.

Mac waited for them to settle in their seats. “I-er, had a bit of bad news the other day.”

Her mother put her tea back down on the table. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine mum, it’s Dougie...”

“Dougie?” Her father piped up, “I thought you didn’t work with him any longer.”

“I don’t.” Tears began to bulge. “He’s dead, he err...” She struggled to form the words. “They say he killed himself.” She saw no point in mentioning the death he’d been implicated in—it wasn’t true, at least in her mind.

Her mother’s hand went to cover her mouth.

“*They say?*” Her father questioned, his eyebrows raised. There was incredulity in his tone.

Her mother frowned. “Why....would he—”

“I don’t know.” Mac had nothing, no explanation to give them. What little she’d found out in the last couple of days made no sense to her. “I’d lost touch with him lately.”

“I’m so sorry, love.”

Her mother's words were the comfort she'd been seeking since first hearing the news. Mac offered a weak smile, as her mother's free hand covered hers. The warmth did little to ease her conscience. She needed to know why.

"I'm sorry." Her father laced his hands together on the table. "He was a good man." He got to his feet. "We should raise a glass." He opened a cupboard and returned with three small tumblers.

"He was." Mac nodded as her father opened the whisky and poured three small measures, placing one in front of each of them. She glanced down at the amber liquid as it swirled in her glass, the aroma of oak filling her nostrils. It reminded her of Dougie. It was his tippie of choice if they were out drinking.

"To Dougie." She raised her glass. A tear slipped down her cheek as she tipped back the glass. Heat filled her chest as it slipped down, culminating in her stomach.

Guilt weighed heavily on her shoulders. Finding out what exactly he'd been working on the last few months might help her understand the circumstances at least.

She used her shoulder to wipe away the tear as it worked its way along her jaw line, her thick ponytail brushing along her back with the action. She was sick of seeing Sarah Doheny every time she looked in the bloody mirror. She wanted to be Darren Mackenna again. She didn't usually have to impersonate a known person and with a request to her mother, she hoped to be able to draw a line under it and move on.

She brought her hand and pulled at the thick ponytail, with the coloured contacts long removed her hair extensions were the last step in her return. "Can you cut my hair, mum?"

Her mother grinned. "Of course I can." She placed her hands on the table as she got to her feet.

With her mother gone, Mac took the opportunity to ask about the email she'd received. "Have you sent me any emails lately?"

Her father frowned. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

There was no point in worrying him without more information. "Oh, my account is screwed up for some reason. I need to set up a new one. I'll email you the new address when I've sorted it out." It was the answer she'd

been expecting, she just needed to check it was Conor in the photo. Her mother would know her own brother despite the decades that had passed.

Her mother returned with a towel draped over one arm, scissors and comb clamped in her other hand. "I have to say I almost didn't recognise you when I opened the door earlier."

Mac smiled. Her mother had no idea how much she'd had to change her appearance —along with most other things—to do her job. She had trouble recognising herself sometimes.

"You haven't had long hair like that since school."

"I know." Mac hated it. She'd resorted to tying it up in a ponytail to tame it. Her hair had the annoying habit of growing outwards when it got beyond a certain length. Bouffant had never been her preferred style. "These extensions have been driving me mad."

"Extensions, Jaysus! This was for work?"

She nodded but said nothing more as she removed her hoodie for her mother to drape the towel over her shoulders. She pulled it tight in the hope of avoiding any cuttings escaping down her back.

Her mother bent to retrieve a spray bottle from a cupboard near the sink, filling it from the tap.

Mac half stood, pushing her chair back away from the table into the space that separated the table from the kitchen units. Her mother released the hairband from her hair, a sharp comb parted several layers of thickness before the cool water penetrated down to her skin.

"So, you still renting a room at that place in...where is it, Fulham?"

"Yep." There had been little point in having her own place lately after her breakup with Harry. Breakup was the wrong word; there had been no harsh words, they simply stopped calling each other almost two years ago. She let out a long breath, it was certainly a lot cheaper considering Mac hadn't even been living there for the last eight months.

"Not seen Harry lately, I expect, with all your work."

"No."

The last she'd heard, Harry was moving up to Scotland after getting a new job in Edinburgh. She'd probably gone by now. Everyone seemed to move on. They'd drifted in and out of each other's lives for almost three years when work allowed. A relationship born out of convenience more than anything else.

Her mother made the first cut with the scissors and familiar, cool air radiated around her neck.

Her parents were the one constant in Mac's life. "She's moved away I think—new job."

Mac caught her father's glance in her mother's direction; they needed no words of communication. Her father got to his feet offering her a sad smile as he picked up his glass before heading across the room to the sink. "I'll leave you to your 'Dear Frankie' moment."

"Our what?" Mac asked in confusion.

"Nothing." Her mother slapped him as he passed her on the way. "Just your father's idea of a joke."

Mac waited till her father closed the door to his study. "So who's Frankie?"

"Oh, it was a radio show back in Ireland. Frankie gave out relationship advice to women. There was no divorce back then so quite a few were tangled up with married men. I don't imagine Harry fits into that category."

"Oh." She half smiled. "No." Harriett Green was not the marrying kind. Mac shook her head before remembering she was having her hair cut. She stared at her phone, the question burning a hole in her brain. "Did you email me a photo of Uncle Conor?"

"What?" Her mother paused, her fingers stilled in Mac's hair. "Now why would I do that?"

Conor had hardly been a constant in her mother's life since their move to England, although he still appeared in stories whenever any of the family got together. "I thought it was a bit weird. It does look like Conor. Young though." Mac reached for her phone. "He's outside a car lot somewhere."

"Your father probably sent it." Her mother's fingers continued, the sharp snip of scissors continuing as Mac unlocked her phone.

The cogs whirled with possibilities. Her mother had been her father's unpaid personal assistant since he'd started his own business years ago. She had a mind like a steel trap for things like this.

Mac blindly offered up the phone. "Here. That's him, right?" There was silence for a moment as her mother stilled again. She risked turning to see her mother's reaction.

"It is. Well, it looks like him." Her mother frowned at the image. "It's not taken in Ireland though, the number plates are all wrong."

“What do you mean?”

“They’re not Irish plates, they should have ZF or Z something at the end.”

Mac studied the number plates—how had she not seen that?

Was it a code? The only person she knew who used codes was Dougie. He’d often use them when they worked undercover. This usually involved a number cypher that could be sent or handed over as a phone number to prevent suspicion. A simple message issuing a warning about someone or something, it was rarely required. Still, it had proved invaluable on occasion. One thing was for sure, if Dougie had something to say and he wanted to keep it between them, he would find a way.

Mac placed her phone on the table. She hated the thought that Dougie felt he couldn’t contact her in a more conventional way. What or who was he scared of?

“How’s that?” Her mother’s hands landed on her shoulders.

Her fingers fiddled with the blunt ends of her hair at the back of her head. At least one thing was normal again. “Much better, thanks mum.”

“You’re the original wash ‘n’ go girl, aren’t ya!”

Still seated she smiled up at her mother, unable to deny the truth of her words.

“Now, let’s clear up this mess and I’ll make some more tea.”

“I can do that.” Knowing her mother would protest, she added. “You stick the kettle on if you like.” Placing the towel on the chair, she grabbed the small broom from the cupboard under the stairs.

Dougie had gone to a lot of trouble, not only to find a photo of Conor but also send her a hidden message. As she swept up her discarded locks into a pile she made a mental to-do list starting with deciphering the message in the email.

\* \* \*

Mac lay on the bed in her parents’ spare room. The screen of her laptop provided the only light. With her parents in bed, she took the opportunity to scrutinise the email again.

She scrolled to the photo, enlarging it to fill the screen. The image was black and white, shot in the seventies by the look of it. Conor wore a dark suit with a woolly jumper underneath, the large collar of his white

shirt poked through at the neckline. His bushy moustache matched his mop of hair, although on closer inspection, Mac could see his hairline had started to recede at the sides. Large sunglasses covered his eyes. It certainly resembled Conor, even her mother had said so. Which begged the question: how the hell had Dougie got hold of the photo?

Thankfully, Mac's mother had pointed out the number plate discrepancy. Several rows of cars were lined up behind the figure, each with large puffy digits stuck to the windscreens indicating the prices. The ground looked rough and muddy, not your average professional car dealership forecourt. The industrial grey metal fencing behind the cars reminded her of school when it had lined the boundary of the playing field.

Enlarging the image as much as possible, she inspected it in sections. When she got to the cars closest to the figure she could see the prices had been changed. It was subtle and almost invisible unless scrutinised closely—the outline of some of the numbers showed distortion where they had been overlaid.

Mac tapped on her laptop to zoom out, grabbed a pen and jotted down the prices of the cars. If they'd been photo-shopped there had to be a reason.

With all the sale prices written down, she checked over the number plates of the four cars she'd identified. They had also been modified. Some had a letter or digit too few or too many. Her confidence grew as she jotted them down, separating each one with a line.

Mac focused on the text of the email. She scanned the words again, seeing if anything stood out. Dougie was a fan of key word ciphers, but without the key word there was little chance of breaking the code. *Sweetheart*, maybe? She could try it after she'd decoded the numbers.

Using some scrap paper, she drew out the alphabet code as she remembered it. A equalled zero, B equalled one and so on. She tried it on the numbers first—it was gobbledygook. It didn't even make anything resembling words. Frustrated, she scribbled it out.

The word *sweetheart* kept popping into her head; it wasn't a word she recalled Dougie using, there had to be a reason for it. Sometimes he would jump the starting letter forwards several steps to make it less obvious. There were ten letters in *sweetheart*. She wrote out the alphabet again and added the code with A equalling K. This time she tried it on the number plates first—it didn't look promising.



BRYGBADFRAMDCHEKSAFEBOX. Not wanting to give up just yet, she tried the car price digits. LKATGLVER. She stared back at the letters, unsure if she'd made any progress at all.

However, there was the odd word that was recognisable, so using her pen she separated out the obvious words BAD, SAFE. She focused on the letters in between trying to make up words. It took her a second to realise Dougie had missed out some letters. She still couldn't figure out the first word, but the rest was beginning to make sense. BAD FRAMED CHECK SAFE BOX. The first part still meant nothing—BRYG?

Well, the email certainly confirmed her initial thoughts about Dougie being framed. Safe box confused her for a second until she remembered the hidey hole he'd created at his home to store delicate information and valuables. The other part of the code was less clear LKAT could be LOOK AT, but GLVER meant nothing to her yet. A name, possibly? Someone Dougie had his eye on?

From what she could recall, Dougie had been working on cold cases, tying up loose ends; nothing more than that. Yet somehow he'd managed to get himself framed for murder. She needed to find out more about Dion Goodwin and why Dougie had been implicated in his death. One thing was clear: she needed to pay a visit to Dougie's home in Saffron Walden.

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# Sub-Rosa

BY CHARLOTTE MILLS

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