X Marks the Spot Transcript

Narrator: I'm Richard Beanland, an officer with the National Crime Agency and this is Underworld: Behind the Scenes of the NCA.

This podcast series unearths the murky world of dangerous criminals and the incredible work undertaken by the National Crime Agency to bring them to justice.

David: Effectively, Thomas Kavanagh was the European head of the Kinahan organised crime group.

Nicola Tallant: You can't probably be a nice guy to be involved in drug dealing and organised crime, but he is a particularly sinister, dark character.

Andrew: I received some intelligence regarding a very significant cache of firearms in a field in Northern Ireland.

Barry: It's a case of why are we going here? We didn't pick this ourselves, somebody has brought us to this area. So it's the potential of a booby trap.

David: The primary role of an officer in the National Crime Agency is to protect the public. We went on to recover you know 11 firearms. So a real variety of absolutely deadly weapons.

Andrew: These weapons in the hands of any organised crime group would be shocking, to say the least.

Nicola Tallant: It shows how this tough guy can't stand the idea of spending time in prison to such an extent that he is willing to bring down anybody around him.

Helen: We had excellent relationships with both the Spanish National Police and the Guardia Civil, both of whom had dedicated fugitives units who were really good at locating and arresting people.

David: I think what you can see is a determined effort internationally to have an impact on a dangerous organised crime group.

Narrator: This is the story of the downfall of Thomas Kavanagh, a major figure in the Kinahan cartel who orchestrated the importation of multi-million-pound drug shipments. You will hear how the NCA's work to put him behind bars triggered an audacious plot by Kavanagh and his associates, one that would see years added on to his prison sentence and the NCA recover a large cache of lethal weapons.

Episode 3: X Marks the Spot

[ARREST AUDIO]

Narrator: In 2019, the National Crime Agency made one of the most significant arrests in its history when they detained Thomas Bomber Kavanagh at Birmingham Airport as he returned from a family holiday in Mexico. Kavanagh was a high-ranking member of the Kinahan organised crime group, or OCG, and at that time effectively ran the Europe arm of the Irish gang's operation. But an extensive investigation by the NCA had linked him to large-scale drug importation worth more than 30 million pounds.

David was the NCA's senior investigating officer for the operation, codenamed Hornstay.

David: Thomas Kavanagh - his nickname is bomber - he's somebody that's well known to law enforcement in the Republic of Ireland and in the UK. The NCA started to understand and build a picture around that individual and his network of criminal associates that were involved in the importation of controlled drugs and his involvement with the movement of firearms. Effectively, Thomas Kavanagh was the European head of the Kinahan organised crime group. We would say, for want of a better word, he was the CEO for the Europe Supply Network and had control of that logistical side of things from his home in Tamworth in the Midlands.

Narrator: Originally based in Dublin, the Kinahan OCG is now widely known as one of the world's most significant drug smuggling networks. Meanwhile, Kavanagh had his own criminal history of drug dealing in Ireland, but had worked his way in with the

Kinahans after moving to England in the early 2000s. Nicola Tallant is an irish journalist and host of the Crime World podcast.

Nicola Tallant: The Kinahan cartel started as a grouping in Dublin that brought together sort of young - a brat pack, really - of dealers, many of whom who are coming from a next generation of dealers, in particular the Kinahan brothers, Daniel and Christopher Jr. And they brought together a young grouping really under the Kinahan boys. They initially were street dealers, but over the next couple of decades they become a force on the Costa del Sol. And they then progress onwards to becoming one of the most significant drug dealing operations in the world. You know, they would go on through the years between 2010 and 2020 to grow and grow. And in particular, you could see that happening in the UK under the leadership of Thomas Bomber Kavanagh, who, of course, was another one of these very ambitious guys that would have been involved in drug dealing here in Ireland in the 1990s. He would have been one of the key targets of Gardai. He went to the UK but he certainly didn't leave behind his ambitions or his involvement in criminal enterprise. He would have known very significant members of the Kinahan grouping from his Dublin days and both in tandem, seemed to grow particularly during the 2000s. Bomber Kavanagh is taking hold of a significant portion of the drug market in the UK and also in Ireland, and the Kinahans are just one step ahead of them in Spain, where they're wholesaling directly to the two countries.

Narrator: It was through those connections that Kavanagh assumed logistical responsibilities for the Kinahan's wholesale drug network in the UK and Europe. By 2019, his standing within the OCG meant that when he was arrested by the NCA, he believed he was untouchable.

David: At that stage he was really confident. He felt that he was far enough away from this not to have any worries at all. It was only subsequently, as the investigation from our perspective developed, that I think it started to dawn on, on Thomas Kavanagh exactly what we had. We'd built a substantial case against him technically and when it was presented to him, in interview, well he took a turn for the worse, really, there's no other way of explaining. He, he had a problem with his breathing and the interviewing officer at that stage had to stop the interview because they thought he was having a heart attack, but in reality, I think it had dawned on him the weight of evidence. Over the course of a number of interviews, it had been presented to him. Having listened to all of that, I think he knew what was, what was coming.

Nicola Tallant: He had already kind of slipped the net before. Certainly, in Ireland he had no really significant drug convictions. So this time he realises, there's a moment, an

instant when he realises, oh my God, I'm actually facing serious drug charges here. And he kind of gets weak. And I mean, he has to be taken either to the hospital or the doctors are called.

Narrator: NCA officers had gathered substantial evidence, with support from An Garda Siochana, the Irish national police, that demonstrated Kavanagh was behind large scale drug importations into the UK. We had recovered sizable loads of cocaine and cannabis that had been hidden in industrial equipment. We'd found communication devices with messages that referred to him as the Gaffer, and found evidence he was in contact with criminals in Europe to orchestrate further shipments. After his arrest, we also raided his gated mansion in Tamworth, where we recovered an alarming array of weapons hidden under his bed, which included a stun gun and several large knives and swords.

David: The sentence for somebody involved in the importation of class A and class B controlled drugs in the quantities that he was involved in put him at the at the high end of, of that kind of activity. So the sentencing bandwidth was significant and was probably, you know, going to be double figures and probably going to be in excess of 20 years.

Narrator: Now on remand, the veteran crime boss was anxious at the thought of being handed a 20-year prison sentence after discovering the sheer weight of evidence against him secured by the NCA. So he began to think of ways he could improve his situation from behind bars. His first step was to enter a guilty plea at a hearing in July 2020. This ensured he would receive a degree of credit and a sentencing reduction from the judge. But Bomber wanted to take things further.

David: So prior to Thomas Kavanagh being sentenced for Operation Hornstay, there was intelligence provided to, to the National Crime Agency, and that intelligence was accompanied with a hand-drawn map. That hand-drawn map provided the location of a large cache of, of lethal firearms, of weapons. The map indicated it was in the Newry area of Northern Ireland on the border. The map itself was just on clear notepaper, almost a classic treasure map, X marks the spot, with a number of lines indicating roads, the perimeter of the field, a gateway and making your way so many yards into a field and, and there was literally an X on the map.

Narrator: The hand-drawn map was provided to the NCA via Bomber's legal team in an envelope with the single word Kavanagh written on it. It included instructions such as

'climb gate and take 20 paces' and 'as you look into that area on the right at the top, there is a tree stump about halfway in'. Being helpful to law enforcement in exchange for a more favourable outcome is not unusual for those facing criminal prosecution, and demonstrated that even someone of Kavanagh's standing feared losing his freedom and the luxury his life of crime it afforded him.

David: Thomas Kavanagh was living an extravagant lifestyle by, by most people's working standards. He lived in a what can only be described as a gated mansion. You know, it was a significant detached property worth at least half 1 million pounds. You know, he spent much of the year going on holiday with, with his family. You know, he was arrested returning from a, from a family holiday, Christmas, in Mexico. That had cost tens of thousands of pounds because all of the family had gone. There was indications from his lifestyle, from the search of his properties, where, you know, high value items were recovered in his home, handbags, shoes, coats and, all of these were worth thousands and thousands of pounds, having been bought for cash in shops, you know, high end stores, such as Harrods. Nobody is immune from wanting to minimise the impact of a sentence because beyond everything else, Thomas Kavanagh was a father, a grandfather, a husband. He would want to spend time with his family. And, and in my experience, people in those circumstances will do things to reduce that sentence in a way in which they feel comfortable with justifying, for whatever reason.

Narrator: The intelligence was shared with our team based in Northern Ireland as well as the PSNI, and an operation was put in place to safely recover the weapons. Here's Andrew, the NCA officer who oversaw the operation that day.

Andrew: 21st of May 2021. The intelligence was quite descriptive about where we should go and, and search. Northern Ireland although obviously it's peacetime, there's still obviously pockets of, I suppose, minor terrorist difficulties. So first thing is the veracity of it. Are the National Crime Agency and perhaps PSNI being led there purposefully? So I needed at that stage to test the veracity and...should we do that? For want of a better term. I did speak with the originator of that intelligence.

David: Given the location of it, there would have been considerations for, potential for any cache of weapons in Northern Ireland to be booby trapped so the risk was very high. So, there was dialog between, you know, the, the UK investigation team and that team to make sure there was an understanding of what was taking place.

Narrator: Andrew and the NCA team were joined by a police search advisor or PolSA from the Police Service of Northern Ireland. It was Barry's job to plan and manage the search of the area outlined in the intelligence, and helped coordinate the recovery of the weapons if the intelligence proved to be accurate.

Barry: I went, spoke to them, took a look at the document and the information that was on it. And then I, I did a bit of map appreciation first to look at the area where initially it was looking at. I then went and did a reccy of the area myself, just basically a drive past, scoping it as I went past and then I did a bit of a walk past. It was a big area, so it didn't look out of place, somebody just walking past the area. I did that, then went back to the base and started looking at 'well how can I cut that down with the information I have? Where's the best place to start and what am I going to need to achieve the objective?' I didn't know the provenance of the information so it was a case of is this going to be information to get police into that area? Is this just to bring us in for something else to happen? So I had to consider stuff like that with our background. I then decided well I've been down. Where this is, nothing looks out of place.

Andrew: Yeah. It's quite a quite a few conversations with the police search advisor around it regarding sort of routes in, how we're going to make sure that the area is cleared. And again, I was probably able to convince the police search advisor that, that I was satisfied it was not a come-on situation in Northern Ireland. I suppose when you look at, a large amount of weapons buried in a field, it's always at the forefront of your mind. Is this or are we safe in doing this recovery, or are we being led to that area for some other reason?

Barry: So then I had to look at the area itself. It was agricultural-cum-woodland, an area. I was looking for weapons so metallic. I sorted out my resources, I got my search teams all ready. Then I said to bring metal detectors, it's a big area, and here's what we're looking for. So the metal detectors would be the best way to find them.

Andrew: It's worth pointing out at this stage, it was probably one of the worst days I've ever seen in Northern Ireland. Although it was obviously late spring, it was absolutely pouring with rain, continual heavy, heavy rain. So, yeah, that obviously had to be factored in when we're going out to the scene, to effectively ask a police PolSA, and his search team, his technical support group to start digging and how we could, if we found stuff, do our best to cover this, forensically.

Barry: With our history here, we treat all searches like that as a potential come on. It's a case of…Why are we going here? We didn't pick this ourselves. Somebody has brought us to this area. So it's the, the potential of a booby trap. So everything is slow time. The type of thing is we don't, we didn't go through the four-bar gate because it's the most obvious entry point. When we're doing search operations here, that's still a consideration that we have.

Andrew: Once we got to the area which we believed we should be digging in, obviously metal detection devices etc and, we start digging, where there's indications to the police search team and, yeah, without too much digging, probably five, six inches below the ground, they found the first holdall, which obviously contained several weapons.

Narrator: The search was caught on Body-worn video camera, some of which you're about to hear, which captured the moment officers found one bag containing seven guns and a second bag containing four more. The team also recovered a large amount of ammunition.

BODY CAM FOOTAGE

Andrew: It's certainly not every day that you find, well, firstly the first bag, then the second bag and 11 firearms and ammunition being recovered. That's certainly the first time in my career, of many years, I've ever recovered so many weapons. There was some submachine gun, some rifles and some Glock pistols as well. So absolutely surprised. I suppose the other thing worth pointing out, the bags were just like sports holdalls. They weren't actually waterproof sacks or anything like that. So I was quite, quite shocked at that, why somebody would bury such a major cache of weapons in two sports holdalls.

Narrator: After the weapons and ammunition were recovered from the site, our officers set about trying to find evidence of who had placed them there. This involved neighbourhood inquiries and checking CCTV in the area.

Andrew: This spot had in my honest opinion, had been very well chosen. It was not overlooked by any houses and it was down a very small country road. So, none of that bore any fruit for us. I thought it was, at best, a very quick transit hide would probably be the best way to describe it. Yeah. It wasn't long term storage, like they were in a

concrete bunker or anything that. They were buried, as I said earlier, five, six inches probably below ground.

David: The primary role of a police officer, of an officer in the National Crime Agency is to protect the public. So when a piece of intelligence comes to light that provides an opportunity for us to recover firearms and take them out of criminal circulation, then it's vitally important, I think, that we respond to that effectively, and we use partners internally and externally to get the resources in place to do that safely. We went on to recover a, you know, 11 firearms. There were a mixture of Scorpion machine pistols, heckler and Koch submachine guns, self-loading pistols, AK 47s. So a real variety of absolutely deadly weapons, you know, and it's vitally important I think that when there is those opportunities to follow these kind of things through, that we do that and we do that quickly and we do that effectively.

Andrew: These weapons, in the hands of any organised crime group would be shocking, to say the least. The harm they could cause, obviously, to rivals, to law enforcement, whenever they would perhaps choose. It was a good day's work. Yeah. And we were all very satisfied.

David: The volume of weapons recovered at that time, I think, was one of the most significant seizures of firearms in Northern Ireland for quite some time. The fact that there was self-loading pistols together with, you know, automatic assault rifles and machine pistols, it's a great seizure and a significant opportunity for sustained public protection in recovering that range of, of weapons and getting them out of criminal hands.

Narrator: It was a job well done by all involved. Our officers had worked with the PSNI to action the intelligence shared by Thomas Kavanagh, and as a result had removed almost a dozen lethal firearms from circulation. Kavanagh, who was still awaiting sentence for the drug importation charges, would have been hopeful that he was about to secure a significant discount to a lengthy prison sentence. But unknown to him, this case was about to take another strange twist.

David: The sentencing discount would be significant, and it would be weighted based on what information was provided and on what commodity was recovered. You know, this is a fairly well trodden path by individuals who are facing lengthy terms of imprisonment to try and reduce their sentence by providing support and help to the, to

the authorities to get a reduction in sentence. I suppose the unusual factor in this particular case was that Thomas Kavanagh had set all this up.

Narrator: In a bold move for a criminal of his standing, Thomas Bomber Kavanagh was so desperate to avoid a lengthy prison sentence that he had decided to offer up intelligence to the NCA. The only problem was, for reasons only truly known to himself, he was unable to or didn't actually want to share genuine intelligence. So instead he decided to hatch an audacious plot to manufacture a show of good faith. He would instruct criminal associates on the outside to assemble that cache of weapons in Northern Ireland, so he could bring it to the attention of our officers, hoping the gesture would secure a sizable sentence reduction. To understand how this came to light at the NCA, we have to go back to 2020 when, unbeknownst to criminals around the world, French law enforcement had gained access to EncroChat. The encrypted messaging platform was used by criminals to communicate with each other, including key associates of Kavanagh, believing it was out of reach of law enforcement.

David: Operation Venetic was the overarching name for the National Crime Agency effort and investigation into the criminal encrypted communication platform named Encro. It was an international effort between the National Crime Agency and international partners to exploit and infiltrate that encrypted communications network, and, and without doubt, is the most significant result against serious and organised crime in the last 20 years.

Narrator: A dedicated team of NCA officers began working to attribute tens of thousands of handles or usernames to criminals around the world and analysing hundreds of thousands of messages. That meant that at the same time as David, the Operation Hornstay SIO, was dealing with the upcoming legal proceedings against Bomber, a separate team working under Operation Venetic had identified EncroChat handles being used by members of the Kinahan cartel and key associates of Kavanagh.

David: When Operation Venetic was running, there was an opportunity to start working through some of those handles to look retrospectively at conversations that were taking place, criminal conversations that may involve movement of drugs, movement of firearms, the murders of individuals, movement of money, and all of those things presented opportunities for the NCA to exploit and be able to continue to target and, and disrupt organised crime. I was aware that there were conversations that had been attributed to associates of Thomas Kavanagh and in fact, one of his sons that were talking about the movement of firearms. Even at that stage, there was a theory, a

working that I had that one hypothesis for this could have been that… is this a plan by Kavanagh and associates to stockpile weapons and hand them over to get a reduction in sentence? But I think the fact that there were arrangements and handovers of weapons that talked about movement of firearms in Liverpool, they talked about the movements of weapons in Holland, they talked about the movements of weapons in Ireland, in all these different locations. I wasn't sure whether this was just daily business. And this was just a group of criminals that were talking about supplying guns to other criminals. A that early stage, the context of what those weapons were being acquired for wasn't clear. It's only subsequently when, Operation Briered got a better understanding and started to go through all the different relevant handles that there was available, that were part of these conversations and attributing all of those handles, that it became much clearer that that's exactly what was happening.

Matthew: So Hornstay was being dealt with, we were approaching the criminal proceedings. There was obviously lots of hearings going on. Briered came out of Hornstay so they almost sat alongside each other, but without a definitive link if that makes sense, the only link being potentially some of the people that are linked to Kavanagh are now linked to these handles.

Narrator: Once it became clear the Kinahan Cartel messages related to a specific plot to assemble a stash of weapons, Operation Briered was launched under the Venetic umbrella and the team turned its focus to proving exactly how Kavanagh had bullied and manipulated his associates into carrying out that plot. NCA officer Matthew was brought in to run that operation and set about identifying which associates were involved and what handles they used on EncroChat.

Matthew: So in addition to Thomas Kavanagh, you had, Thomas Kavanagh's brother-in-law, Liam Byrne, also assessed to be a high-ranking criminal with… obviously with links to Ireland. It's assessed that once Kavanagh was arrested under Operation Hornstay, Liam Byrne then stepped up to play a more significant role in Kavanagh's absence, so therefore becoming another trusted lieutenant of the, the, Kinahan OCG. You had Thomas Kavanagh's son, Jack Kavanagh. He was assessed to be actively making contact with other criminal associates in order to obtain firearms for the purposes that his father was seeking to get them. You had, Peter Keating, again, another well trusted Kinahan associate, also based in the UK now, or at that time, having previously obviously grown up in Ireland and been based over there. His role again was looking to obtain firearms for Thomas Kavanagh for, for his overall plan. And Sean Kent, who was based in the Liverpool area, and seems to have made a connection with Liam Byrne and the overall Kavanagh OCG. Again, his role was seen to obtain

these firearms for the overall purpose. It started off with the Venetic handles and talk about firearms, obtaining firearms and the potential attribution of these handles to people like Liam Byrne, Jack Kavanagh. I think as the sort of side by side parallel progress, trying to attribute these handles and the approach from Kavanagh, leading up to the recovery, you then have a bit where it converges and obviously within the messages, then if you look at other handles that they're in contact with, they're talking about the plot for your dad, etc.. You know, there's also talk about the madness of approaching the NCA and offering up those weapons and stuff like that. So then it almost appears like the two things that are merging to be the same plot, in effect.

Narrator: Work to attribute the handles was complex and time consuming, but often involve things like identifying personal photos that have been shared. Sometimes criminal handles would mention they had visited a certain location at a certain time, meaning officers could go and collect CCTV imagery from the location and identify who that handle belonged to.

Matthew: I think initially under Briered, we only had a couple of data sets for a couple of handles, and then it was requested to have the other data to get a fuller idea of the entire plot. In the initial stages, it was all about attribution of the handle and trying to corroborate particular events that are mentioned within the messaging. So, for example, Sean Kent talked about someone potentially trying to mug him, and jumping in the lake. Turns out there was some kind of incident report around that, you know, the same day, same type of circumstances that you could then relate that and say, okay, that matches up with the messaging on here and it's linked to Sean Kent. So that's another point. In the early days when the, when a Venetic pack comes through, it's about… especially if there's only a suspicion if it's linked to this person, it's about…. Right. How many different areas can we conclusively say that 'yes, they are using the handle'. It could be something simple as they're sending a selfie of themselves.

Narrator: The team identified several handles that were being used by Kavanagh's son Jack, his brother-in-law Liam Byrne and Sean Kent, including FarmCleaner, BasilBadger and ThiLive. They never mentioned Thomas Kavanagh by name, but instead referred to him using nicknames such as Pops, Mick or Bighead, while his son was called Junior. Sean Kent was called Scouser and Byrne was nicknamed Footballer or Gargler. The Kinahan gang also relied on slang terms when referring to guns, ammunition and cash. For example, ammo was often referred to as sweets or food, while firearms were dubbed tools, straps and yolks.

Matthew: To be honest, I think that's how they would speak normally in, in their day-to-day life. When they're dealing with this, they're probably not going to sit in the middle of some place and say, oh yeah, I'll buy those three machine guns off of you and give me all the bullets for them. They'll just talk slightly differently to not bring attention to themselves. We have expert witnesses who can comment on those types of messages, comment on the types of firearms they might be referring to. Once more and more of the messages got analysed and there was… there's a plot going on within the messages… 'We need to get these guns'… On the side of that, there's a chat saying 'Oh getting these guns and giving them to the NCA is madness'… 'Oh I've spoken to the son. When I fronted him up about talking to the NCA, his face dropped'… So you're sort of like reading all that. On the side of it, you've got what's happening with Thomas Kavanagh, his offer of information, what's happening with the recovery and then you're sort of piecing it together - okay, well that… that's very similar to what's being described here in these messages. And we suspect some of the handles are linked to close associates of Thomas Kavanagh. So eventually it starts to almost merge together.

Narrator: Our team were looking at thousands of messages between the gang members and making efforts to unpick the references to the movement of firearms that was being discussed. It became clear the plot started as early as April 2020, months before Thomas Kavanagh had admitted the drug importation charges. Frantic exchanges took place between Bombers associates as they discussed at length how they could get hold of weapons and how they could move them. Despite being in the middle of the Covid pandemic and lockdown. One message sent from Kent urged Byrne to 'keep on locating them things for him'. He added: 'He said try to get as many of them as you can. Only chance he's got of getting a good result out of this case mate.'

Matthew: So I think everyone thinks of organised crime groups as like a really strict, rigid vertical group with like a hierarchy and you don't dare interact with another organised crime group, but they're more like this… A lot of it is like a syndicate. So they will have loads of associates that aren't primarily part of the group, but it's someone that they know. If I need access to something, be it transport, drugs, that they haven't got access to at that time and they desperately need to move some products or firearms, they all interact with each other. So certainly what we saw in Briered was Liam Byrne and Sean Kent. They're engaging with Liverpool based OCGs that aren't necessarily strictly under the Kavanagh/Byrne leadership, if that makes sense. Almost like you're just going to go and buy, I don't know, you need a new door for your house. So you go and shop around, go to different places and then… oh, these lot, they just need firearms because they offering them up somewhere and they need a lot of them quick. So they're asking around. There's lots of messaging to other individuals saying, oh, do you know where I can get hold of pistols, MP5s. I think there was

grenades even mentioned at one point. So it's almost like mass marketing where they're trying to, trying to get a load of people to, to sell them firearms.

Narrator: Messages from Jack Kavanagh to Peter Keating asked: 'what's the crack with them other things coming?' insisting that his father needed 'everything ready once this virus f**** off'. Another message from Jack Kavanagh told Keating 'I know pressure in there is another level. 23 hours a day and can't even get on the basher, then waiting on this court date and wanting those other yokes. Madness'. In one exchange, Kent messaged Keating telling him that 'Mick' is saying 'time is running out' for him, to which Keating replies: 'I'm doing all I can mate. If I had someone to drive them anywhere, I'd have got all this done weeks ago.'

Matthew: Obviously the more evidence we got in terms of messages and inquiries to back up those messages and attribute them to people then it became clearer that, yeah, those weapons have been put there in a different way as to how they've been claimed they've been put there. It's suspected that there was a Go-Between from the prison, and that Sean Kent had an associate who was also serving time at that prison. In terms of that message getting out, it appeared that Sean Kent was able to pass on messages to Liam Byrne, Jack Kavanagh, as to what Thomas Kavanagh was seeking for them to do or instructions, almost. A lot of it was pressure, as if to say, like he needs them now. He needed them yesterday. Like, what's going on?

Narrator: The messages made it clear that Kavanagh had his associates running around, desperately trying to arrange for a cache of weapons to be assembled so they could dump it at the chosen location in Northern Ireland. But it was also clear that some members weren't happy. Peter Keating called the plan mad and said Bomber was pushing his son Jack, 'a soft kid', to instead be a criminal, which he described as a 'fucking joke'. So how exactly did Thomas Kavanagh feel comfortable orchestrating this plot to speak to law enforcement? And how did he have these important members of the Kinahan cartel running around for him, jeopardising their own freedom to help him reduce his sentence? Here's Hornstay SIO David.

David: To exert authority across the UK, in the Republic of Ireland and in, in wider… near Europe, in Holland, Spain and in other countries, there's got to be fear. There's got to be fear of consequences by not doing certain things. If you cross this particular group, there are consequences. I think when you're dealing with individuals of that calibre at that level then the ultimate sanction for you not complying with what they want you to do is serious violence and death.

Nicola Tallant: You can't probably be a nice guy to be involved in drug dealing and organised crime, but he is a particularly sinister, dark character. To get to the level that he's got to, you have to instil fear in others to keep control and power. And that's exactly what he, what he has done over the years. I think when the NCA raided his property in Tamworth and we saw photographs, for me, they were so significant, they showed the levels of weaponry he had in his bedroom, under his bed. He almost collects these items. Bomber Kavanagh is known to have doled out punishment himself with his bare hands.

David: You know, he's an imposing figure. You know, he's somebody that's, he's been at the high end of criminality for many years. And you don't, you don't maintain that position without some level of authority around you.

Nicola Tallant: When we get to a stage that we realise that he's concocting this plot to hand over the guns, I think that shows really interesting other elements of his personality. I think, first of all, it shows how this tough guy can't stand the idea of spending time in prison to such an extent that he is willing to bring down anybody around him within this plot. And it also, I think, shows that he was willing to use his family, his son. So he's a complex character. He's very violent, very frightening, very determined and domineering. But he's also somebody who maybe just doesn't have it in him to suck it up and do his time.

Narrator: The plot had failed, and in March 2022, Thomas Kavanagh was jailed for 21 years for his role in the multi-million-pound drug importations on Operation Hornstay. Meanwhile, our officers from Operation Briered had arrested and interviewed him about his efforts to move firearms and pervert the course of justice, at which stage he made no comment. Sean Kent and Peter Keating were also already in custody in relation to other offences, which meant all efforts turned to Liam Byrne and Jack Kavanagh.

Matthew: Jack Kavanagh and Liam Byrne had already fled, so that then set us in motion to make inquiries and research, and use the ILO Network to try to establish and identify where they had gone to.

Narrator: You may be familiar with our fugitive work from episode six of the first season of Underworld. That episode, Most Wanted, explored how we used our network of international liaison officers and global partnerships to track down wanted fugitives, no matter where they thought they could hide. In September 2022, our ILOs in

Spain were tasked with finding the two outstanding co-conspirators. Here's Helen, the NCA officer who worked in the region at the time.

Helen: I was an international liaison officer and pursuing British fugitives who had fled the UK in order to evade justice was a key part of my role. You are the conduit between UK law enforcement and Spanish law enforcement on any criminal matters. In September 2022, the UK investigation team was preparing a TACA warrant, which is an international arrest warrant, which would allow Byrne to be arrested internationally. Working with the Spanish National Police, I was able to provide intelligence in relation to Byrne's footprint in Spain, which included things like hotel stays, travel in and out of the country, things like that. And from that, it was evident that Byrne had a long-standing connection to Spain, both in terms of his criminal activity and also a place where he liked to spend time with family and friends socially as well. There were links to Majorca and other parts of Spain as well. So areas that these crime groups normally frequent are either the south coast of Spain, the Costa del Sol or the east coast around Alicante, Benidorm sort of area. The investigations team had reached out to us as ILOs because, as I said, we have those partnerships with the Spanish authorities, which can lead to some really good access to their intelligence. So first steps were to confirm his historical links, which we did. Once the TACA warrant was issued, I then worked with the Spanish police to ensure that travel alerts were placed on all of their border systems, which would basically alert us if he were to travel into or out of Spain.

Narrator: Those travel alerts had also been set up for Jack Kavanagh, and it proved effective as on May 30th, 2023, Helen was notified that he'd been arrested at Malaga Airport, transiting from Dubai to Turkey, and was awaiting extradition.

Helen: We think that was to go on a family holiday. He was remanded in custody pending extradition proceedings, so albeit that was quite lucky, we had, in fact, worked with the Spanish for a number of years beforehand, to build up the intelligence around the Kavanagh family as well, who were obviously very well known as criminal associates of both the Byrnes and the Kinahans.

Narrator: Meanwhile, the net was closing in on Liam Byrne and the team were looking at possible locations in Majorca, where he had existing associations.

Helen: We had excellent relationships with both the Spanish National Police and the Guardia Civil, both of whom had dedicated fugitives units who were really good at

locating and arresting people, so they would use a wide range of tactics to do that. The Spanish weren't able to identify an actual address where they were staying. They did historically have numerous properties on the island which members of the Kinahan crime group would use. You know, they'd all swap and change and stay in different places at different times. It was in May 2023 when our international liaison officer in Dublin notified us that Byrne had travelled to Majorca from Dubai, where he was believed to have been residing at the time. I engaged with the fugitive unit of the Spanish National Police and requested urgent travel and hotel checks. I then researched addresses previously owned and rented by members of the organised crime group in Majorca, passed these over to the National Police. Whilst I was doing that, the Spanish police actually identified incoming travel for members of the Byrne family from the UK and Ireland over to I think it was from Dublin actually over to Palma de Majorca, which suggested basically they were getting together for a family holiday.

Narrator: We spoke to Anastasia from the Spanish National Police for season one. Here's a never before heard clip that details how the SNP helped us catch Byrne.

Anastasia: The interesting thing about this fugitive was that he was not living usually in Spain. He was living in Dubai. He escaped there from UK and as we know in Dubai, he had a very high, lifestyle. And he kept working from there, but he decided to come to Spain, to Majorca, to meet his family. We used this moment to perform surveillance and to finally do the arrest. First, we've managed to find where was parked the car he was using due to intelligence of NCA. And once we detected his car, we only had to wait for him to appear. And he was arrested having dinner with, with his family.

Helen: So it took about nine days of intensive searches by the Spanish National Police, on Majorca. And Byrne was eventually located in a restaurant in the Alcudia area, which is a really popular tourist area. He was having dinner there with his family. And he was arrested and remanded on the international warrant. It's certainly high pressure because you don't want to miss any opportunities. We were very fortunate, the Spanish, we'd worked with them on the Kinahans over a number of years. So as soon as we mentioned the name, they surged a team over to Majorca straightaway and were looking around the area they thought he might be. So he was extradited to the UK with the kind assistance of the National Extradition Unit. And that was back in December 2023, when officers from the NEU went over to Spain and brought Byrne back to the UK to face trial.

Matthew I was present there for his extradition. He was very quiet, very polite even to the officers and custody. It did feel – I don't know - in hindsight like quite an achievement to get him back because he was quite high profile. It was a bit more complicated with Jack Kavanagh. He was literally detained within the same week, but he put in several appeals.

Narrator: One by one, the OCG members were brought back before UK courts and convicted of firearms offences, while Bomber, Kent and Keating were additionally convicted of conspiring to pervert the course of justice. In 2024, they were handed prison terms of between 4 and 6 years.

Matthew: It's a good feeling because you think everyone's work has actually contributed to a positive outcome like, you know, particularly Liam Byrne, someone who's not served a custodial sentence here in the UK before. Thomas Kavanagh has now… his time in prison is now extended. And the others, they've got those convictions now so.

David: I think I've had the privileged position to be senior investigating officer on a really high-profile investigation. This was a team effort. I was the second SIO. There was another SIO before me. The joint efforts of everybody involved in the, in the case were determined to get to a successful outcome. And I suppose that's the strength of the National Crime Agency, that we're able to adapt and take on different investigations, at different stages and it's only successful when you bring all the parts of the team together at the right time to get the evidence.

Andrew: Certainly the amount of weapons, why not give law enforcement the opportunity to recover perhaps one handgun, but 11? I think it shows the reach the members of that transnational organised crime gang can go to.

Nicola Tallant: I think what he underestimated was probably the relationship that had developed between the NCA and the UK, and the Garda Siochana here. These were two police forces that literally were working together, and the power and the strength of that is shown in the takedown of Kavanagh, and he has been taken down and taken out in both countries.

Matthew: Probably one of the highlights of my career. It's the type of work, like, you kind of envisage doing when you join the NCA. So yeah, it's definitely something you can be proud of later on.

Narrator: The NCA continues to work with law enforcement partners around the world to disrupt organised crime groups such as the Kinahan Cartel. In April 2022, the US Department of the Treasury announced sanctions against the gang, a result of close collaboration between the US, An Garda Siochana and the National Crime Agency. The US Drug Enforcement Agency also offered up to $5 million for information leading to the arrest of Christy Kinahan Senior or his sons Daniel or Christopher. In July 2025, the National Crime Agency also worked with partners to secure confiscation orders that meant Kavanagh must repay more than 1 million pounds made from his criminal enterprise, or face an additional 12 years in prison.

Nicola Tallant: I think the public have come on a learning curve, maybe with all of us, which is how long does it take to take down a cartel? And it's not something that happens overnight. It's something that is slow and consistent, but it can happen locally first. I'm talking about locally, I suppose, in Ireland, where up to 70 members of the wider Kinahan organisation are now behind bars and the next phase is obviously coming fast and furious towards the top command.

David: I think what you can see is a determined effort internationally to have an impact on a dangerous organised crime group. You know, there are a number of operations that have taken place, including Operation Hornstay, Operation Briered. These are all things I think that must put pressure on the, the individuals at the very top of this, which is Daniel Kinahan, Christy Kinahan and his younger son Christopher. In terms of how they feel, I don't know. Perhaps one day we'll get to find out.