

Absolution

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CARO RAMSAY

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*To Jessie Ramsay
Born 1904*

*You can tell a Sheffield lass,
You just cannot tell her much.*

*White.
Nothing but white.
No sense. No awareness. Only white.
Nothing.
Then breathing.
Rhythmic breathing.
Nothing more than the ebb and flow of life.
She slept.*

Pain picked at her as she emerged slowly from the depths. Her hands were strapped to her sides, and she could feel bindings cutting into her wrists. The pain in her face – cracking, burning – was unbearable.

Thirsty. She was thirsty.

She tried to lick her lips, but her tongue was swollen, and as immobile as leather. Something rigid filled her mouth; she could taste chloroform and rotten meat. She sensed her face was covered, her mouth and nose blocked. Panic rose until she could not breathe, and she tried to roll her shoulders to break free. Deep-seated agony skewered her stomach, and she lay still, thinking she might die if she moved again.

A voice, indistinct, insistent, was repeating words over and over.

There was a distant memory... Somewhere... too far away to be recalled...

She felt a prick in her forearm and sank down deep into the dark once more.

PC Alan McAlpine climbed the concrete stairs to the DCI's office, past the rusty filing cabinet that had been stuck on the first-floor landing for two years. The yucca that crowned it, never a vital specimen at the best of times, had died in his absence.

'Alan?'

He hadn't noticed DI Forsythe pass him on the stairs, and turned at the sound of his voice.

'Good to see you, McAlpine. How are you? We weren't expecting you back for a while yet.'

'I'm fine,' he said bluntly.

'Sorry to hear about your brother – Bobby, was it?'

'Robbie,' answered McAlpine mechanically.

'No matter how heroic he was, it's still a terrible accident.'

McAlpine's only response was a casual shrug of thin shoulders.

'How is your dad coping?' Forsythe persisted.

McAlpine flicked his eyes up the stairs, wanting to get away. 'He's as you'd expect.'

'And your mother?'

McAlpine looked past him to a powdery, white patch of damp plaster. An image of his mother screaming burned into his consciousness, sobs racking her emaciated body

so violently he heard her rib crack, as loud as rifle-fire. The doctor holding up the syringe, tapping it to draw clear fluid into the plastic chamber, putting his knee on her chest to hold her still as he exposed bare wasted flesh to the needle...

He glanced at his watch. 'My mother's fine,' he said flatly.

Forsythe tapped him on the arm, a touch, nothing more. 'If there's anything I can do, just let me know. We've missed you in the office.'

McAlpine nodded up towards the DCI's office. 'Do you know what he wants me for? Graham?'

'DCI Graham to you,' corrected Forsythe. 'There was an acid attack on Highburgh Road, about two weeks ago, the 26th.'

'I know. So?'

'Surveillance at the Western, a watching brief. The lassie got it right in the face, very nasty. She's been in a coma until now, but there are signs of recovery. The minute she talks, we want somebody there.'

'So I'm bloody babysitting.'

'Think of it as a gradual return to work. You start tomorrow, day shift for now. All those pretty nurses in black stockings, they'll be all over a handsome wee laddie like yourself,' Forsythe chuckled. 'Gives a new meaning to getting back into uniform.'

On the twelfth day she woke. She lay not moving, and knowing she could not move, her face dry and crusty, so tight she could feel it crack. Something had happened, something so painful, she couldn't remember. And something else had happened – something wonderful...

Her brain gently probed each of her senses.

Her eyes were covered; she had a feeling of daylight from somewhere, yet all she could sense from her eyes was cold emptiness, a void where something warm and comforting used to be.

Her ears were full of fog, but she could hear somebody trying to move around and not cause disturbance, the flick of newspaper pages, swing doors opening and closing, soft bleeps and pings, the constant low hum of fluorescent lights, whispers...

She couldn't breathe through her nose, but she could still smell burned flesh, and fresh air tinged with the tart smell of anaesthetic.

There was a tube in her mouth. Something was keeping her breathing, wafting air in and out of her lungs, pain on the breath in and pain on the breath out, a peaceful calm in between.

She sensed somebody, someone else breathing, their face close to hers, a touch on her arm. She couldn't tell them she was awake. She wasn't sure she wanted them to know...

PC Alan McAlpine was bored, more bored than he'd have thought possible while still breathing, and he'd only been on duty for ten minutes.

Glasgow, July, and midday on the hottest day of the year. The sun streamed in

through the high Victorian windows of the Western Infirmary to highlight the dancing dust motes. It was his own fault. He'd told DCI Graham he'd rather be back at work than sitting at home watching dust settle.

And here he was, back at work – and watching dust settle. On a Saturday.

The cheap plastic seat was making his bum numb and his brain wasn't far behind. Five minutes finished the *Daily Record* quick crossword. He made a start on the *Herald's* wee stinker and got stuck at five down. He started doodling ampersands in the margin, waiting for inspiration.

Nobody spoke to him. He was invisible – though he'd been smiled at a few times by a slim red-headed nurse, her light blue cotton skirt swinging as she passed. Her shoes squeaked annoyingly on the lino, leaving a little trail of marks.

She had fat ankles, ugly feet. His interest died.

His glance kept returning to the clock, the jerky long black hand showing how slowly time moves for the living.

He thought he'd better phone home and find out how his mum was doing. Not that he really wanted to be told.

When she woke for the third time, they were close by, waiting for her to come round. A voice spoke – a man's – low, monotone. She picked up the words 'baby', 'daughter', 'doing fine'...

She heard a scream, a strangled cry that rose to a howl; felt skin rip from the roof of her mouth, blood swamp her throat The tide of air stopped. She choked.

The ventilator tube was abruptly removed, and something else was thrust into her mouth, something that gurgled and bubbled as it sucked the blood out.

A hand patted her as if comforting a frightened horse. Another voice –female – spoke kindly as the needle went in, and she felt herself floating again...

A baby. A daughter.

Their daughter.

They had almost made it...

PC McAlpine was staring into space. The smell of disinfectant reminded him of the morgue. The blue lino, great stretches of it as far as the eye could see, made him think of water, of somebody screaming and Robbie jumping into the darkness. Robbie having the breath crushed from him as the water enveloped him – screaming and more screaming. The blue hardened through his half-shut eyes, revealing itself as lino again.

He jerked fully awake when he realized the screaming was real, then felt a little foolish when he remembered where he was. The summary file of her admission had fallen on to the floor. Its contents, a single sheet of A4 paper, had floated out.

That piece of paper – the only key he had to her previous life. The file at the station was suspiciously thin. Ten badly typed pages, the sole result of days of police inquiries, had told him a grand total of nothing. A search of her bedsit had apparently thrown up nothing untoward. He decided to go and have a look for himself. The girl, early twenties, had been admitted, minus a handbag, a driving licence, a credit card. The only eyewitness statement said that a woman had walked out of a house; that a

white car, maybe a taxi, had pulled up. The witness had not connected the car to the woman at all; the first thing she knew was when the car pulled into the traffic and she noticed the woman – ‘youngish, blonde, slim but very pregnant’ – lying on the pavement. Six thirty on a bright summer Sunday evening in Partickhill. Nobody else saw anything.

McAlpine started to rub his temples, and something that had been curled in his subconscious began to flex and stretch. Why had she not screamed? Why had she not ducked or...? And who was she? Where was her paper trail – National Insurance, mortgage, wages, tax? She had nothing. She had swept away every trace of her existence as she moved. So she had something to hide. And she was clever. Skilful.

He tensed in his chair, one ankle flexing rapidly up and down as his mind raced. He could feel a tingle of excitement: this was no longer a surveillance job; this was an intellectual pursuit. But who had she been hiding from? Who had tracked her down? And how? It suddenly dawned on him that DCI Graham had guessed there was more to this story and had rostered his star pupil, knowing he would rise to the bait. McAlpine smiled to himself.

Well, two could play at that game.

And DCI Graham would come second.

The redhead emerged from the room, dressed now in a white uniform, her shoes still squeaking. McAlpine looked past her through the door, catching a glimpse of a slim, tanned foot lying on a sheet, and was shocked. He hadn't expected the victim to be so young, so fragile. The foot framed itself perfectly in his mind, clear as a photograph, before the door closed.

*

The fourth time she woke, the squeaky shoes came close almost immediately. ‘Lust relax now, sweetheart.’ Cold liquid dripped into the corner of her mouth, rolling sweetly over raw skin. She raised her head for more, feeling the skin round her lips crack, saw a shadow hover over her, then recede. ‘Second time she’s done that today.’

‘It’s been a fortnight but that’s her oxygen stabilizing at last.’ The tube in her mouth twitched, the voice receded. Then returned, louder. ‘Your daughter’s doing fine, the wee darlin’. She’s along in the baby unit for now – we’ll bring her in to you in a wee while –’

A harder voice, interrupting from the door. ‘What do those police expect?’

‘To question her, I suppose. She didn’t do this to herself.’

‘How’s she going to tell them anything, the state she’s in?’

The softer voice remained with her, droning on, confusing her. It was like a badly edited film: she was watching herself from a distance, closing the door, coming down the stairs carrying her bag, then clutching the handrail outside the door as a contraction hit her.

And?

On the street, falling...

Her skin on fire, her eyelids burned through, the pain in her eyes, the world going dark.

Then nothing.

The red-headed nurse squeaked along the corridor, a cup of tea in her outstretched hand. PC McAlpine took it, knocking her hand slightly, spilling a wave of tea down her white uniform.

‘Sorry about that,’ he said, getting to his feet. He smiled: he knew how to use his charm. ‘Have there been any phone calls about her? Anybody asking after her? Any visitors? Anything?’

‘No. No one. The hospital chaplain came immediately, and his assistant’s been in a few times to see her and the baby. Just doing the usual. Apart from that, nothing.’

‘So who is she? Any ideas?’

‘Is that not what *you’re* supposed to find out?’ She raised a saucy eyebrow.

‘You must have some idea.’ He smiled again.

‘She has no face,’ replied the nurse, all sauciness gone, and McAlpine’s smile faded.

‘And when she was admitted? Was there nothing on her, no wee bit of paper with a phone number, a contact-in-the-event-of-an-emergency?’ He gave her the full benefit of his charm.

‘I was on when she was admitted, and she had an overnight bag, that’s all. There was nothing that said anything about her.’ She began to sense his frustration.

‘Honestly.’

‘But has she a name?’

‘We gave her a number. She was in labour when they brought her in, so we did an emergency section, just past midnight. It was a wee girl. We’ve put her in with her just now.’

He sat back down, anger burning inside him, knocked the cup of tea down his throat and handed it back to the nurse.

Pregnant? Acid in her face? He shuddered at the cruelty of it.

With the warmth of morphine in her veins, she imagined the pain waving to her as it went, floating away on a sea of blood. It left her senses so sharp she could hear water gurgle in the pipes next door, could distinguish between the different phones at the end of the corridor. She could hear the policeman outside, stirring a cup of tea, the spoon tapping against the side of the cup. She could hear her daughter, breathing beside her...

In... out... in... out....

She could listen to that for ever.

They were talking about one of the policemen outside. ‘He’s lovely, isn’t he, even though he’s so short? Kind of bite-sized? Huge kind brown eyes, like pools of—’

‘Sewage?’ the older voice suggested. ‘He’s not a Labrador.’

‘He doesn’t have a girlfriend, you know.’ There was a slight giggle. ‘I bet I get a date with him before the end of the week.’

'Too good-looking for his own good, that one,' the other voice warned. 'It'll be tears before bedtime.'

She heard the creak of the door opening, a bump as it closed, then silence. She tried to imagine his face, a noble handsome face, eyes of burnt umber, hair the colour of sun on mahogany, and tried to give him a smile before he faded away to a cloud of morphine.

It was quiet in the hospital in the hour of the dead, that slow hour between 2 and 3 a.m. It reminded McAlpine of the night shift at the station. The clock clicked round, its tick ominously loud in the silence of the corridor, and music floated through from the IC station, where a nurse had a radio on quietly. He'd been sitting here, on and off, for the best part of four days. For something to do, he got up and went to the coffee machine down the landing.

The door of IC 2/3 opened; the red-headed nurse and the older one came out and returned to the station.

McAlpine also walked to the station, where he sat and sipped the vile coffee, deep in thought. He knew there was something nagging at the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite touch it. He crushed the cup in his hand and chucked it in the bin. He heard a noise, a faint squeak. The door of IC 2/3 had been left open, and it moved slightly to and fro in the draught.

He looked up and down the corridor. Nobody was paying the slightest attention to him. The older nurse was on the phone, and the redhead was looking at her knee, picking something from the skin.

He got up, placed his hand on the steel handle of the door.

The room was a tomb of dark silence. He looked round, giving his eyes time to adjust. He had a vague sense of freshness, the smell of sea salt, not the stale air of his mother's room. In the dull light he saw the incubator in the corner, empty, the white cellular blanket rumpled at the bottom. They must have taken the baby away for a wee while, to do whatever nurses do to babies.

She was lying in state. She could have been in a sarcophagus, the only movement the slight rise and fall of her stomach as the ventilator hissed and sighed life into her. He was unable to pull his eyes away, transfixed by the gauze that covered her face, her death mask, tantalizingly opaque, lines of blood beneath it like butterflies trapped in a web. He knew she was beautiful.

He stood back and took a deep breath.

He crossed himself.

Her feet looked cold in the blue light. He picked up each foot delicately by the heel and smoothed the white cotton underneath. Fine delicate feet with long elegant toes, a dancer's feet, fragile and cold under his hands. Chilled. His finger traced the length of a vein on her instep, then caressed a little flaw round the base of her toe, a perfect white smile of a scar.

She was being pulled from sleep, up to the light. She lay quietly, listening to the silence, listening to the breathing at the end of her bed. She knew she was being

studied. All her life men had looked at her, and she knew this too was a man.

She heard a deep sigh, felt a hand touch her foot. She waited for the prick of the injection.

Nothing, only the soft stroke of flesh against flesh. Slow, soothing A grip on her heel, firm yet delicate, almost a lover's caress...

'You're not supposed to be in here!' The redhead was standing behind him, the look of a dispossessed wife on her face. 'You could infect her.' Her voice dropped. 'Not that it's going to make any difference.'

'You don't think she's going to survive?' McAlpine asked. 'Why? Surely it's only her face?'

'Her face, her neck, her arms, her hands, her tummy.' The nurse's voice softened a little as she approached the bed, folding the yellow blanket over the bare feet. 'Poor lass. She was pregnant and lying in acid. It burned deep. It's sad. Come on.' She gestured to him to follow her to the sluice room, where they kept the spare kettle. He had to hurry to keep up. 'It's the depth of the burn that matters. You know your body is basically water? If your skin comes off, as hers has, you leak, leading to dehydration, leading to failure of all the major organs. There's nothing we can do for her, except wait.' She pulled two mugs from a cupboard. 'Sometimes they get an infection that glows in the dark. Gives them the heebie-jeebies in the morgue if they don't wash the body properly.'

'If she's as ill as all that, why keep her tied up? Hardly likely to do a runner is she?' asked McAlpine.

The nurse sighed, tilting her head to one side, as if forming an explanation for a slightly stupid child. 'Her instinct would be to claw the dressings off, and that would allow infection in, so she's tied for her own good.'

'So she lies there in frustration?'

'But safe from nasty bugs as long as daft cops don't keep going in and out, touching her.'

McAlpine ignored the jibe. 'She was pregnant. She would have attended a clinic. Where would she go, do you think, in the West End?'

'You not from round here?' she asked, fishing.

'No, Skelmorlie.'

'Now that's a one-horse town.'

'And the horse died of boredom. What prenatal clinics are near here, then?'

'Might be the Dumbarton Road Clinic, but women like that, you know, they don't exactly look after themselves, do they?'

'Women like what?' McAlpine bridled.

'Well, you know, that end of Highburgh Road, down on her arse. She's a hooker. Must have been.'

McAlpine shook his head. Vice would have had her on file. She had no phone numbers, no... He shook his head again.

'And you'd know?' The redhead licked her lips slowly. 'She was a hooker, I tell

you.'

'You talk to her when you're in there? Do you think she can hear anything?'

The nurse blew on her coffee, pursing her lips and looking at him through the steam. 'It's never been proved that people in coma have any awareness of anything, but we put the baby in there just in case she can hear or sense something. She's probably brain-damaged, deaf, dumb and blind.'

'Should play a mean pinball,' McAlpine muttered.

Every day that passed her sense of smell got stronger. She knew he smoked. He wore aftershave, he smelled nice.

And she could smell the sweet milkiness, the soft breath of the little person, the little bit of herself who lay by her side, so close but too far away. More than anything she wanted to touch her baby, to cuddle and caress her. She needed someone to lift her up and place her daughter in her arms.

She thought about the policeman, the young one with the kind brown eyes, sitting just beyond the door.

Kinstray, the landlord at 256A Highburgh Road, was blind and hunchbacked. He stood in the narrow crack of the door, wearing a beige cardigan that was more holes than wool, one red hand held up to protect rheumy eyes from the sun, the other feeling the card carefully between his thumb and the palm of his hand.

Would that be more polis?' he asked.

Two minutes of monosyllabic conversation revealed that Kinstray had little to add to his statement. His speech was so Glaswegian McAlpine found himself subconsciously translating everything the man said. It was a sin what happened to the lassie, he said. She was quiet; he'd heard she was a looker, but he wouldn't know, would he? She paid her rent in advance.

'How far in advance?'

'Right up tae the end o' July. Paid it aw up front, the minute she arrived. Wisnae too bothered when ah said she wouldnae get it back if she left early.'

'And she'd been here for...'

The bony shoulders shrugged. 'Months.'

McAlpine sighed. 'How many months? Look, I'm not interested in how much she paid you, but I need to know when she came here.'

'April, it was. Four months.'

'You didn't know she was pregnant?'

'If I'd known that, she wouldnae've got her foot in the door. That's just trouble. I foond oot later, though.' He sniffed in disgust.

'And you didn't know her name?'

'Don't know she ever told me, son. Paid cash. No need for references, ah ask nae questions. It's no' against the law.'

McAlpine thought it probably was against some law somewhere, but continued, 'No visitors?'

‘How would ah know, son? She wis in the top room, she’d her own bell. Came and went as she pleased.’

‘But you did see – *meet* her, at some point?’ McAlpine probed gently. ‘You must have gained some sense of her, some impression? Tall? Thin? Fat? Clever? Thick?’

Kinstray’s tongue probed at the side of his mouth, thinking. ‘Slim, young, she moved light on her feet, even heavy with the child. She wore a nice scent, like spring flowers. She was polite...’ He sighed slightly.

‘Local?’

‘Wouldnae’ve said so, son. She was polite but’ – he considered – ‘she wis carefully spoken, like, you know? Not stuck up but polite, like a lady. Well brought up now, that’s what ah would say.’ He nodded as if the answer was the best he could do and he was pleased with it.

‘How long have you been here, Mr Kinstray? In this house?’ McAlpine asked.

‘Thirty-two years, thereabouts.’

‘Could you place her accent?’

Kinstray smiled, a sudden rush of humour lightened his face. ‘Wisnae English, she spoke it too well.’

‘I know what you mean. You don’t mind if I look around?’ McAlpine chose his words carefully – this wasn’t an official visit.

‘Dae what ye want. You boys took a load o’ stuff away. Told them, end o’ the month, any’hing in her room is in the bin, unless ye can get somebody tae claim it. Shame.’ He tutted, arthritic fingers feeling for the door handle. ‘Shame.’

The building was tall, narrow, stale and dark, and uneasily silent. As McAlpine reached the second-floor landing, someone came out of one of the rooms and locked the door behind them. McAlpine registered the prime example of Glaswegian manhood immediately: dirty-haired, undernourished, hardly out of his teens and scared of his own shadow.

‘Just a minute,’ McAlpine called, as the youngster made to scuttle past him to the stairs. ‘Number 12A, up on the fourth floor – did you know her?’

McAlpine stood in his way, receiving a nervous flash of stained teeth.

‘Did you?’ he repeated.

‘No. No... I wouldn’t be knowing about that. She never spoke to me, but she would pass a smile on the stairs. That’s all.’

McAlpine noticed the Highland lilt. Not a Glaswegian, then. ‘Pretty girl?’

The ratlike teeth flashed again, the thin fingers grasped the leather book he was holding even more tightly. McAlpine saw a glimpse of compassion, a slightly pained expression, before the young man dropped his eyes to the book he was holding, his thumb riffling the gold-edged pages. McAlpine recognized the Bible.

‘I wouldn’t be knowing about that,’ he repeated, eyes still downcast.

McAlpine was about to ask him if he was blind as well, but the young man stood back, gave a slight bow and turned to go down the stairs. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be late for a lecture.’

‘But you know she was badly hurt? Sunday? 26th of June. Teatime? Do you remember – ?’

‘Sorry, I can’t help you.’ The blue eyes looked more troubled, guilty even.

‘Look, pal, one question.’ McAlpine’s voice whiplashed down the stairs. Where would you say she was from?’

The other man stopped, shrugged. ‘I couldn’t tell you that. But I saw her with an *A to Z*, so she wasn’t from round here.’ He sighed and looked up to the ceiling. ‘I’m sorry, I never spoke more than two words to her.’ And he was gone, taking his guilt with him.

McAlpine lit up a Marlboro on the top landing after the four-flight climb, leaning outside the single toilet, flicking the cracked terracotta floor tiles with the toe of his boot. The smell of stale urine seeped out on to the stairwell. He tried to see those little feet padding their way through there, and couldn’t. He pulled the nicotine deep into his lungs, kissing a plume of smoke from his lips to freshen the air.

The door of bedsit 12A opened with the touch of a fingertip to reveal a room frozen in time, circa 1974. The fluttering of the tiny drawings around the bed gave McAlpine the impression somebody had just walked out of sight. The air was heavy with mould and dampness; the chill in the air had been hanging there for years. McAlpine ground his cigarette underfoot and took a deep breath before going in. Going through dead men’s stuff was one thing. This was something else.

A narrow single bed with a white plastic padded headboard under the cracked roof. The bedding had been dumped on the floor in a routine police search, the mattress left crooked on the base.

Everything was brown, beige or mouldy, and the room stank of depression. He shivered. He couldn’t imagine those beautiful feet treading across that filthy carpet, creeping down the cold stairs to the smelly toilet. He couldn’t place *her* in this room at all; it was all wrong.

The smell was getting to him. He opened the door of the fridge and closed it again quickly. The meter had run out, the fridge had stopped chilling, and mould had launched biological warfare. He took a deep breath, opened it again and had a closer look. Nothing he could identify, but the botanical garden where the salad tray used to be suggested a healthy diet. Another thing that didn’t add up.

Under the sink he found bleach, cloths, pan scourers, washing-up liquid and a rolled-up pair of rubber gloves. He sniffed around the drain, poked his finger down the plughole and withdrew it covered in black paper ash. In two minutes the ring holding the U-bend was off, and he watched as the plastic basin filled with thick inky water. Nearly a fortnight had passed, but he could still smell the evidence of burning. He swirled the basin as if panning for gold and fished out tiny flakes of unburned white paper. Thick paper, non-absorbent, glossy on one side, the remains of a photograph, maybe more than one. He stood up, staring at his blackened fingertips. Why – if she was thinking of coming back?

There was more here, more for him to learn. He took a closer look at the little drawings, each held by a single drawing pin: sketches of hands, feet, noses, arms, legs,

ankles. Some were of faces, perfect tiny portraits, all of the same man.

He smiled to himself. 'Steve McQueen?'

A quick search of the small drawer by the bed revealed nothing; it had already been searched, he could tell by the casual disruption of the contents. She had folded over page 72 *Jane Eyre*, a battered old copy bought from a charity shop for 10p, the only book in the room.

Behind the door was a coffin of a wardrobe showing signs of woodworm rampage. A quick look revealed a few clothes, carefully placed on individual padded hangers. He pushed them apart with his palms, knowing good silk and cashmere when he felt them, examining the names on the labels – MaxMara, Gianfranco Ferre. That was more like her.

A white dressing gown, thick heavy towelling, hung on a peg on the door. He read the label and smiled, sniffed the collar. It smelled of flowers, bluebells?

He glanced at the single pair of shoes lying in the bottom of the wardrobe, black, kitten-heeled, leather, with a perfect velvet bow. He flicked them over to glance at the size, knowing what he would see. Size 35. European.

Sitting among the detritus of evidence – the cardboard boxes of knives and assorted blunt instruments, bag upon bag of jumble – was a quiet little black handbag, its velvet bow clearly visible through the plastic.

'That one there, the black one,' McAlpine said, pointing. 'Middle shelf, third one from the end.'

The production officer bit a mouthful from his bacon roll before lifting the bag from the shelf and pushing it across the desk.

'What contents were listed?' asked McAlpine.

'See for yourself.' The production officer fixed the A4 sheet on to a graffitied clipboard and turned his attention back to his breakfast.

McAlpine read from the list. 'Perfume, Scent of Bluebells; three pencils, HB, 2B and 2H – somebody with an artistic touch... a comb, blonde hair on it, a tube of mascara, a book of first-class stamps.' He flicked the page over, then back again. 'So – no bits of paper, no credit cards, no receipts. A normal woman's purse is full of crap.'

The production officer shrugged and wiped a smear of butter from the corner of his mouth.

McAlpine opened the plastic sleeve, lifting the bag clear. It was curiously heavy, lined in silk, hand-stitched, its clasp made of pleated goatskin. He tipped it, spilling the contents. And checked them against the list. Perfect match. He put the contents back in the bag, his sense of unease growing. Every answer he found led to another question. His fingers felt something hard trapped between the silk lining and the leather shell. He worked his fingers round the top, found it and passed it through a cut, not a tear. He pulled out a gold-faced man's watch and a fold of cardboard cut from a Kellogg's Cornflakes packet.

'You checked this?'

The officer backhanded some crumbs from his mouth. 'I wasn't on duty when it

came in. No ID in it, so it's of no interest.'

McAlpine's fingers caressed the watch, the lizard-skin strap and the hinged fastening, which clipped down flat. She had petite wrists; this was a man's watch, far too big for her. Had she brought it with her because it was part of him? A way of bringing something of him with her? McAlpine turned his back slightly on the productions desk, making a point of looking closely at the bag, while prising the fold of cardboard open. Wrapped in a web of Sellotape was a ring, plain silver with a single diamond. A lover's ring. Another thing too precious to leave behind.

It was McAlpine's first Saturday night on duty, his third night shift in a row. He had come to prefer these nights to the day shift. Outside, Glasgow was sweating. The hospital was quieter, cooler, the nurses friendlier, and the sleeping beauty alone as often as not.

It had become a habit with him to slip into her room, to have one-sided chats about anything and everything. Sometimes he got the feeling she was listening, that there was an awareness behind that mask. Sometimes he wasn't so sure.

As far as the hospital was concerned, McAlpine was invisible. The nurses had dropped their guard around him completely, and he could harvest little snippets of information from their indiscreet conversations, or from the papers on the aluminium clipboard at the end of her bed. *Slight improvement, reflexes plus plus.* A list of drugs, mostly unpronounceable. He ran his finger down the column, some dosages the same, others getting less – even he could understand that. She was getting better.

He thought about the fine muslin that covered her face. He had got into the habit of screwing his eyes up when he looked at things, seeing the world her way. It was like looking up through thin ice, the ice getting thinner every day. When she broke through and took her first breath, he would be there. When she said, 'My name is...' he *would* be there. He could see her perfect features, hair wet and smoothed back like a marble sculpture, could see himself cradling her beautiful face in his hands, lifting her clear and carrying her away. *With this kiss I shall wake you.*

As he walked back, he heard a nurse on the phone, her little gurgling laugh like a teenager's. He'd bet she wasn't talking to her husband.

Their eyes met.

She looked away quickly and cut the call short.

He strolled back to his seat, thinking about women. How deceitful they could be. Or how wonderful.

He heard a cough, indistinct at first, then again. And again.

He looked up and down the corridor, opened the door and slipped inside. She was lying as usual, arms at her side, her body jerking with the spasm of each cough. The gauze was slipping from her face, revealing a line of fresh blood. He lifted her head a little, cradling the weight of it. She coughed again, louder, the force of it racking her body, but then the blockage cleared and her head lolled back slightly. He placed her head gently down on the pillow, and, as she slowly exhaled, he could feel her body deflate. Not like any corpse he had touched but not like a living person either; she was suspended in between.

He leaned over, looking at her closely, two faces separated by a wall of muslin and silence. He adjusted the gauze over the curve of her cheek; he twirled the wisp of blonde round his finger. She didn't pull away. He thought the veining of blood underneath was fainter, the scars beginning to heal. He stood back, regarding her, thinking how she would have been. She was young, slim and fit; her calves had been firm, her ankles still slender despite her pregnancy, her toenails perfectly cut. Even the scar round the base of her toe was smiling.

'Do you mind?' he said. 'I need to see.' He lifted up her left hand, rolling back the cotton wool padding on her palm, where the burning was deepest, where she had lifted her hands to her face. The nails were long and shaped, the back of her hand was covered in smooth tanned skin. He traced a thin band of white at the base of the third finger. He felt – imagined – that she pulled her finger away from his touch.

'I'm sorry, but I had to know. It's fine,' he said. 'It's fine.' He put the hand down carefully, reluctant to let her go and leave her. He held his hands over hers, warming them as he studied the monitor, a single fluorescent line firing across it, hiccuping every now and again, left to right, left to right.

There was a movement... a something...

He turned and looked at her. 'You OK?' he asked. *Bloody stupid question.*

Nothing, just the wheeze of the respirator.

He moved towards the door, opening it and closing it without leaving the room. She sighed, and he watched her relax, her head dropping slightly in heartfelt relief.

He smiled and took one last look. He walked back slowly to his seat in the corridor, deep in thought, and sat down, his arms folded, his eyes never leaving her door.

'I'm official this time. Official.' His voice was still deep, polite, conversational, sexy, but there was something else. This time it wasn't going to be a monologue. 'Look, sweetheart, I think – I know –you can hear me. And that leaves you with two options. Either I can sit here and talk to myself and feel like a right prick, or you could talk back.'

She so desperately wanted to talk to somebody; it had been months since she had said more than good morning to another human being. And she wanted to hold her baby in her arms; the pain of not having that was worse than anything. She considered her options, who she could trust, who she couldn't. She didn't have much choice.

'The fingers on your left hand aren't too bad. The right hand sustained a bit of damage, I'm afraid. Can you move your thumb?'

She knew she could not move her hands; her fingers were bound together, not tightly but restricted. She moved her thumb, felt her skin crack and a searing pain shoot through her palm.

'Good.' His hand rested on hers, his fingers warm.

She moved her thumb again, easier, less pain. She felt tearful, tense, yet she so wanted to say something. He kept talking, his voice steady and reassuring. He tapped the tip of her forefinger gently. 'What about this finger? Can you move that?'

It was difficult, a small movement, but he saw it. 'Good. So we'll make it a finger for yes, and the thumb for no. That OK with you, sweetheart?'

She thought for a moment, then twitched her finger.

'You fancy a wee chat? My name's Alan.'

Yes, I know. She twitched her finger.

'Look, love, we know what happened to you, and we can find out who did it.' Strong words, but the voice remained friendly. He sounded very young. 'But the first problem is, we don't know who you are...'

She listened hard to his voice, so young, so sympathetic. But so few words – could she judge? She kept still.

'Do you have any memory of what happened to you, anything at all?'

Conversational? Concerned? She kept still.

'OK, OK.' He didn't speak for a while. She wondered if he was going to trip himself up, imagined him contemplating his next question. 'Look, I'm not stupid, and I don't think you are either.' The voice paused. 'You made a good attempt at covering your tracks, but a trained eye can always see things.' She felt fear prickle at the back of her neck. 'You were in labour, yet the last thing you did before you went out that door was to wash bits of burned photograph down the sink. Must have been important to you.'

She heard him move, shifting closer. 'Somebody got to you. They'll come after you again. You know they will. They might come after the baby.'

He wasn't threatening her; he was stating fact. She was sure he would hear the panic of her heart as it slapped against her chest. She kept her fingers still.

After a moment he said, 'If there's anybody we could contact for you, let them know how you are?'

She stayed still.

His voice softened. 'What about the guy who gave you the ring? Your husband? Fiancé? Was he involved in the attack?'

The thumb jerked. No.

'He's a good guy, then?'

Piet, smiling at her, on the yacht, the wind ruffling his hair, his Steve McQueen smile... she watching as the flames ate the photograph, the black flakes disappearing down the drain in a torrent of water...

Eventually her finger twitched.

'I see.' She felt his fingers, warm and soft, caress her hand. He had the same gentle touch as Piet.

This was a man used to talking to women.

I want to hold my daughter.

'But I'll have to call you something. What do you fancy?' His hand was still stroking hers. 'You have long blonde hair. Rapunzel?' She had no idea what he was talking about, but she could tell he was teasing her. 'Alice in Wonderland? Oh, I know – Anastasia. They can't work out who she is either. Anna for short.'

Anastasia and the rest of the Romanovs? They had had their precious stones, their diamonds, all the wealth they could take with them, sewn into their clothes. They didn't make it.

She could remember holding a pile of uncut pure diamonds, almost warm to the touch, in her hands. They were secure now, wrapped in black velvet in a safe-deposit box in Edinburgh. They were safe, safe for their child, but she herself wasn't. A tear of pain bit into her eyes to remind her. Her life was precarious.

'I've got a present for you... we took them from your room –your ring, the watch, it's all there.'

Her finger twitched.

'Here's the ring. I thought it was silver, but Mappin & Webb tell me it's an imperfect blue diamond set in platinum, a one-off. Why were you in a bedsit with a diamond worth a fortune?'

There was no response.

'Did the guy who owns the watch give you the ring?'

Again her thumb twitched, twice.

'OK.' The voice was conciliatory. 'Just make sure someone doesn't take them. Things go missing in hospitals, you know.'

Her finger twitched three –four – times.

Silence hung thick around them for a minute or two.

'Anna, are you saying you want me to keep them for you?'

A single twitch of her finger.

'All right, I'll keep them safe, I promise.'

She heard the chair scrape, sensed his shadow move, as he stood up.

'The wean looks fine.' Wean? A word she didn't know. 'They all look the same to me, but the nurses seem to think she's a pretty wee thing. Do you have a name for her?'

She heard him walk over to the cot. 'Can I pick her up?'

Her heart began to race. Maybe, if she concentrated really hard, he would know. She raised her finger.

'Well, look at you, eh? Oh, don't cry now.' Then his voice changed. Have you seen – sorry, held her?'

Please. She twitched her thumb. Oh, understand – please.

'She's got blue eyes, blonde hair, extremely pretty. Takes after her mum.'

She twitched her thumb at him, telling him he didn't know that, turned her head as far as the dressings would allow. The baby was quiet now.

Please.

'Here.' His voice was nearer now. She could smell mint – he had just cleaned his teeth. He guided her hand the inch or two the restraints would permit to something on the bed beside her, something warm, breathing, living. Anna, meet your

daughter. Small person, this is 'your mother.'

Her daughter's head. Her fingers, stiffly at first and painfully, were exploring all the little pulses and bumps and fontanelles, seeing as blind people see, creating a picture in her mind of downy eyebrows, little wisps of eyelashes, the soft chubby flesh of a cheek. Her daughter.

'Here, feel this.' He moved her fingers down a little. A tiny hand. Her daughter's hand.

'You've no idea how small her hands are. So wee.' He was talking like a daddy. 'My brother had hands like spades; always had to stick them in his pockets for photographs.'

She picked up the 'my brother had' –past tense – and the wistful tone. Had he lost his brother young? Yet he sounded so young himself, younger than her perhaps.

After a moment he spoke. 'So small, so full of life.' He fell silent again and then said, 'You wonder how they survive, that will to live. The older cops talk about cases – you know, abused kids, starved kids, battered kids – but somehow they keep going. As they say, the trick is to keep breathing, no matter what.' Minutes passed, and she could feel the silence congeal between them. Then he spoke again, his voice sounding desolate, bereaved.

'Do you think dying is a passive process? Because I think that's what my dad is doing. When you have had enough, you give up breathing. Maybe death isn't something that comes up and gets you. You just let it happen. But my mum...' He was holding back tears, she could hear it in his voice. For a while, all she heard was the rush of the ventilator; he didn't trust himself to speak. My mum – she's got cancer, you know. It's spread bloody everywhere. She'll die of a broken heart, of course. No bloody cure for that, for losing a favourite son. But she'll choose when she dies. And if Robbie hadn't died, then she'd have chosen to keep going' – she tried to crawl her fingers over the blanket towards his – 'because she'd have had something to live for. Her favourite son. I can't help thinking, when she heard, it must have flashed across her mind– why Robbie? Why not Al –' He stopped abruptly. She could hear a monitor bleeping somewhere outside, the banging of doors as somebody was rushed to Intensive Care, another human drama. Anyway, life goes on.'

She felt a caress on the top of her head, gone before it had registered.

He had kissed her.

His mother was dead.

He was eating soggy chips from a newspaper, sitting on a rock, nothing in front of him but Dunoon on a cold wet morning. The baking heat of the previous week had given way suddenly to overcast skies, and the brisk wind coming in off the Atlantic chopped up the water of the Clyde. The view gave him no comfort; it looked like eternity had been coloured grey.

Her passing had been simple in the end: no last-minute grasp at life, no desperation to hang on to the final breath.

McAlpine had popped his head through his mother's bedroom door at midnight,