

CARO RAMSAY

SINGING TO THE DEAD



**BITTER
BETRAYAL.
SWEET
REVENGE ...**



Singing to the Dead
by
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He was supposed to have been at school, but his ma couldn't be bothered to walk that far. She couldn't be bothered most days now.

She'd been in such a hurry to get out the flat he'd not had a chance to put his jacket on. Once he'd gone back to get it and she'd locked him in and left him all night. So all he had was a wee fleece from the Oxfam shop, and that was soaked through and sticking to his back.

Shite, he was cold. He was always cold.

Christmas shopping at Woolies, she'd said, but she never made it further than the offie. So there'd be nothing left to buy presents.

It was getting very dark now; soon they'd be turning on the big light at the end of the playground. He sat on the swing, shivering in the slow-falling sleet, not daring to touch the freezing iron chains with his bare hands. If you work a swing up high enough, his dad said, you can kick the clouds up the arse. But that was two Christmases ago; a long, long time. He was only five then. If his dad was here now he'd give him a push, but he didn't know where his dad had gone to, and he was too cold to swing himself.

So Troy McEwen sat watching the lights come on one by one in the tenements, a growing patchwork of comforting brightness, and played a game with himself, betting which window

would light up next. The playground was empty. Everyone else was somewhere warm and bright and happy.

He watched his ma wiping the rain from the bench seat, using her sleeve like a big paw. She'd a huge coat on, made from a dead sheep; she'd got that at the Oxfam shop too. Now she was taking a bottle out the bag at her feet, unscrewing the cap. She always came to the same bench, her favourite place for a wee drink.

There was that old woman again, the one with the scruffy white dog. He waited to see if she had a go at his ma. It wouldn't be the first time. They hung about for a bit, the wee dog crapped on the path, then they bugged off up the road.

He wanted to see if he could give the clouds a kicking even though it was too dark to see them. So he shouted to his ma to give him a shove. But she wasn't listening. She didn't look up. She was taking another swig from the flat bottle with the stag on it.

He wanted to go home now. Maybe there'd be something to eat. So he slid off the swing and went over to his ma. He tugged on the sleeve of the dead-sheep coat, and she slumped sideways, her eyes hazy, unable to focus. Pissed again. She looked older than everybody else's ma, and he didn't like the way she pulled her hair back in an elastic band. It made her look like the dead cat he'd seen floating in the canal last summer. He could smell her whiskey breath through the rain.

He wasn't allowed on the roundabout in the rain ever since he'd fallen and broken his arm and they'd tried to take him into care – again. But she wasn't watching, so he'd not get a skelping. He pushed and pushed, went round once, twice, and got the wheel going really fast, all by himself.

Suddenly the floodlight came on. In the brightness he could see a syringe abandoned, close to the roundabout. Next time round, he'd kick it right on to the grass . . . But he stretched too far, his numb fingers slipped, and suddenly he was on the ground.

He lay there for a little while, whimpering, frozen hands stinging with pain. Then he rolled over and sat up wearily. In the floodlight he could see his knee skinned raw and tiny red bubbles of blood welling up. He'd ripped the knees out of his leggings. His ma would kill him.

Out beyond the light it was really, really dark. His knees and hands were hurting. And he was so cold.

Then a tall shadow fell between him and the floodlight, a grown-up wearing a long black coat, carrying a newspaper packet. The salty smell of the local chippie enveloped him.

'You've hurt yourself,' a kind voice said. 'I've just got some pies and chips to take home. Why don't you come and have some?'

He sniffled and wiped his nose on his sodden sleeve. All he wanted at that moment was for somebody to pick him up, cuddle him and take him somewhere warm.

And feed him a nice hot pie. With chips.

Wednesday, 20 December

I

Detective Inspector Colin Anderson held a handkerchief to his nose, trying not to breathe, his eyes watering in the acrid smoke, and looked at the remains of the ground-floor flat, 34 Lower Holburn Street. The fire had been out for half an hour but the whole place was still humming with the intense humidity of a tropical rainforest. Two firemen, boots squelching, emerged from the smoke-filled kitchen and stood for a moment in the sanctuary of the hall, sweat tracing veins of white skin in the soot on their faces. The younger of the two stared at the sagging ceiling, looked troubled and sighed. A close call but too late.

The older one gesticulated tiredly with a heavily gloved hand – Anderson could have a look if he wanted.

DI Colin Anderson tiptoed forward and squatted beside the black plastic sheet as Woodford, the senior fire investigator, lifted the corner. What lay beneath was only vaguely human. The crouching pugilistic pose, limbs contorted into flexion, clenched hands pulled up to the face, the muscle contraction – all were typical of a body caught in intense heat. Anderson leaned in for a closer look, coughing into

the back of his hand, and Woodford pulled the plastic away further. They knew it was the body of an old man – they surmised he was 76-year-old John Campbell – but the mass of charred flesh could have been anyone, anything. The body was black and yellow, darkened with dried blood, devoid of hair and eyebrows, clothing either melted on or burned away. Small patches of coloured fibre with frazzled strands were dotted around the shoulders. Had he been wearing something woollen? A cardigan, maybe dark blue? Anderson looked more closely and saw a melted button. He remembered his own granddad wearing those cardigans – Fair Isle with metal buttons like little medals. He picked this one up on the end of his pen, and looked at it closely. The lion rampant was still recognizable, its stance a cruel parody of the deceased. He slipped it into an evidence bag.

‘What time was it called in?’ he rasped.

‘A few minutes past ten, so an hour and a half ago,’ Woodford replied. ‘We were here in minutes, but too late is too late. There’s no debris underneath him, so he was already on the floor when the fire took hold.’ Woodford gesticulated with the back of his hand.

‘Is that suspicious?’ Anderson started to cough again.

‘Probably not. He was old, the smoke would have knocked him out quickly; or he could have had a coronary, collapsed, and that’s why the pan went up in the first place.’ Woodford pointed to where an

open can, a blackened cracked plate, and the remains of a knife lay on the floor. Part of a worktop remained, sticking out like a jetty. An oval-shaped biscuit tin with a picture of a green Bugatti on the lid sat waiting, incongruous, as if it had been kissed by the flames and rejected. Close by was a twisted plastic strip of tablets, and a seven-day dispenser melted into the shape of a blackened flower. ‘Signs he was on medication, would you say?’

‘Maybe. There’s no indication he tried to put the fire out?’ Anderson asked.

‘No extinguisher, no fire blanket and the smoke alarm was bugger-all use. The place went up like a . . .’

‘House on fire?’ smiled Anderson and nodded, signalling for the body to be covered up; his eyes were streaming so much he couldn’t see any more anyway, and the noise of the generator starting up was deafening. He retreated, looking at the firefighters in the kitchen, their boots tramping everywhere, contaminating the scene. *Site*, he corrected himself. Nothing so far to indicate that it was a crime scene.

He gingerly dipped his head under the door lintel, now supported by an inner metal frame, and felt the vicious heat eating through the soles of his boots. Even Anderson’s inexpert eye could tell the ceiling was sagging like a hammock.

One of the firefighters tapped along the wall none too gently with a hammer. ‘Do you think this is weight bearing?’ he shouted, keeping his eyes on the crack in the plaster that ran the length of the room.

‘Tap it any harder and we might find out,’ answered some smart-arse through the smoke.

Anderson knew they were on the ground floor of a four-storey tenement and felt his stomach sink.

Somebody handed him a hard hat.

Great.

He shuddered, casting his eyes round the room, as Woodford shouted and the generator was cut. The hammering died abruptly and all was quiet apart from the walls cracking and sighing as they relaxed after the intense heat. Anderson stayed still, thinking they were listening for further signs of life, but they had stopped only because somebody more senior was taking a phone call.

In the relative silence, Anderson turned back to look at the kitchen. Everything, in the aftermath of the rage that had passed this way, was consumed and blackened, warped and twisted. The lino on the floor had shrivelled into leaves that floated now on little pools of water. He could hear something still sizzling. Yet, amid all this destruction, this was still recognizably a kitchen. Two hours ago somebody had been cooking a leisurely Wednesday morning breakfast. Anderson noticed that the fridge, the same model as his own, had buckled under the pressure of sheer heat. The focus of the rage, the cooker, was a dark tangle of metal, with the odd bit of chrome stubbornly shining through.

A fire officer appeared with a video camera, nodding to DI Anderson for tacit approval to keep

filming. Anderson gave him the thumbs up, pulling the hard hat further down over his blond hair, trying to ignore the savage heat that gnawed at the exposed flesh of his neck and face. He knew a fire investigation officer could read a fire in a way a run of the mill SOCO never could; best leave it to the experts. The camera whirred into life, the operator complaining about the lack of light. Anderson felt the smoke irritating his throat again, and coughed deeply. No amount of money in the world could persuade him to do their job.

‘You OK?’ asked Woodford, holding his hand out. ‘You were a bit late for the barbie.’

Anderson smiled wryly and reversed out of the flat, keeping his fists clenched and his arms folded; it was easy to forget, to put a hand down and get a palmful of burns. The soles of his feet were complaining loudly; he was going outside to stand in a puddle. He started to cough in earnest, a dry hacking at the back of his throat. Then he retched.

‘Yip,’ Detective Chief Inspector Rebecca Quinn snapped down the phone. Its high-pitched ring tone made the fillings in her teeth hurt. Twice she had asked for a new one but she might as well ask to be made the next Queen of England. ‘Yes?’ she said again, but whoever was at the other end totally ignored her and said, ‘Left a bit, left a bit,’ to some unidentified other. ‘Wyngate!’ she shouted. The incoming code said Reception and there were only two

people at Reception – Costello and Wyngate. The latter, she knew, was unkindly but accurately known as Wingnut because his ears stuck out. At least *he* was easy to remember. DC Gordon Wyngate? The skinny computer geek, clever with no common sense.

‘Yes, ma’am. Wyngate at Reception, ma’am.’

‘I know that. What is it?’

‘You asked me to let you know if anybody else called in sick. Well, DC Burns just has. He’s got this throat thing,’ Wyngate added helpfully.

Burns? Burns? She flicked through the file in her mind. Burns? The big, softly spoken islander. So, they were another good man down. ‘Might be quicker to send me a list of who’s actually coming in,’ Quinn said in resignation.

‘Well, Vik Mulholland has a rest day but he’s promised to come in later.’ Wyngate gauged the pause at the end of the phone and added, ‘He’s the one who looks like . . .’

‘Yes, DC Wyngate. I know who he is.’ Any cop who looked like Johnny Depp’s better-looking brother was not easily forgotten. ‘Thanks for letting me know,’ Quinn said with slight sarcasm and put the phone down. Over sixty per cent of the squad was now off with either the flu or a throat infection, and it was Christmas next week. Just as well things were relatively quiet.

She glanced at the clock – quarter to twelve. The briefing was scheduled for noon but she’d start five

minutes early, just to unnerve the bad timekeepers. She could hear the remnants of the squad gathering on the other side of the blind. As usual, she was immaculately dressed in the navy-blue classic suit that she considered her uniform; her red hair was precisely pinned back, but her lips were pale. She opened her make-up bag, and applied her deep-burgundy lipstick carefully, pursing her lips, watching the coloured lower lip blot the stain on to the upper, checking her reflection in the mirror in the lid of the bag. It was one of her little rituals; just as Beryl Reid used to say that if she got the shoes right she got the character right, so DCI Quinn relied on her lipstick. Without it she was a human being; with it she was a cop. And a good one.

She checked there was no lipstick on her teeth, no loose hairs on her collar, and turned back to her desk. The pile of files added up to nothing much.

A seven-year-old boy called Luca Scott had disappeared thirty-six hours ago. The boy had more or less lived on the streets and it wouldn't be the first time he had done a runner. The family, such as it was, belonged to that inner-city underclass which was of no fixed abode but always seemed able to afford the latest mobile phone and a bad-tempered pit bull. Quinn sighed. She'd hoped to have rather more than this for the briefing update.

The next file was forty pages thick, a document circulated to all Strathclyde stations. Rock legend Rogan O'Neill was flying back into Glasgow airport,

and a brief itinerary of his castle-hunting plans was attached, plus details of the Hogmanay concert which had been rumoured but was now definite in the light of the Pakistan earthquake appeal. Nothing like a good disaster to jump-start a flagging career. There was page after page about the security involved, with special notes for Partickhill Station. No special budget or manpower, Quinn noted, just more work. Why did they not go to the old divisional HQ at Partick rather than this tiny station, built to fill a gap in the tenements where the Luftwaffe didn't miss? Partick Station was big enough and modern enough; it had the staff and resources. So, why had this landed at Partickhill? In fact, why had she been landed at Partickhill? All because some aging rock star was staying at the Hilton round the corner, with – rumour said – the compulsory blonde model girlfriend, or at least the latest in a long line of blonde model girlfriends. Quinn looked at the press photo of him. The years of Californian sunshine and Botox had not been kind; O'Neill was verging on the ridiculous. The memo gave his age as 'early fifties'. Quinn did a quick calculation – by that reckoning she was still in her late thirties. If he could take a decade off his age then so could she. Quinn lifted the lid of her make-up bag, and looked in the mirror, pulling at the folds of skin under her eyes. Maybe not.

She opened a few more bits and bobs, determined to make her way to the bottom of her in-tray before the briefing – she wouldn't put it past this lot to leave

something really important right at the bottom, then ask her about it. The usual pile of memos, her expenses form (last month's) . . . She pulled out a piece of stiff white card: *Alan McAlpine, 1960–2006*. His picture on the front of the funeral Order of Service looked back at her, a relaxed and handsome man with melting eyes and a smile that was more intriguing than friendly.

Eight weeks before, only eight weeks. Her predecessor, DCI Alan McAlpine had died a hero, and since then Quinn had sensed quiet smiles of support between DI Anderson and DS Costello, had witnessed the pinched words and understanding silences.

Before Quinn arrived, Partickhill had been their perfect enclave. DCI McAlpine in his mid forties. Colin Anderson, his favoured inspector, a few years behind and Costello a few years younger again. Their careers had flourished in McAlpine's wake but, with McAlpine gone, Anderson had been severely tested and he had stood firm. Very firm. And tight-lipped. Quinn knew there was a lot to the story of DCI Alan McAlpine – more than she would ever be told. As their boss, she was on the outside. As a woman, she preferred to remember McAlpine the way he was; handsome, complicated, vulnerable. She looked into his eyes again, those brown almond-shaped eyes, remembering the quiet hiss of the crematorium curtains closing, the subdued whirr of the coffin sliding into darkness. It could have been yesterday.

She looked at the photograph for a minute longer, pleasant memories stirring, and stuck it at the bottom of the pile.

She jumped as the shrill ring of the phone reprimanded her.

‘DS Costello here.’ Female, clipped, abrupt, only just this side of insolence.

‘Yes, DS Costello.’ Quinn spoke with pointed politeness.

‘Any news on Luca Scott, ma’am?’

‘Am I not supposed to be asking you that?’

‘Well, I’ve been trying to get access to his mum at the hospital, but no joy. There’s something else, ma’am – a Miss Cotter of Havelock Street ... that’s near where ...’

‘Yes, I know ...’

‘Well, she’s reported that her neighbour came home last night without her son and he’s not in the flat this morning. The mum is too drunk to remember where she’s left him. I checked on the database and it’s not the first time *this* boy, Troy McEwen, has been reported missing either, so in light of Luca Scott ...’ Quinn heard Costello flick over a page of her notebook, ‘... both seven years old, living within half a mile of each ...’

‘Send me up anything you have.’ Quinn pulled Luca Scott’s file from the small stack on her desk. ‘And get DI Anderson back here, as soon as.’ She hung up. She shut her eyes for a moment, willing the two little boys not to be connected. Not *two* missing

children, just before Christmas, not for *her* first case with this team – McAlpine’s team.

They were good – Anderson and Costello – McAlpine’s hand-picked little squad, a tough team to crack. But the king was dead, long live the queen. *Long live the Quinn* – she allowed herself a little smile. DI Colin Anderson was the one she had to break. The tall fair-haired intelligent one, who thought before he spoke, each action considered. She had expected some resentment from him that she’d taken over from McAlpine, but there was nothing. Well, not exactly nothing – more of an indefinable something, as if he were merely going through the motions, like a clever pupil with a slightly dense teacher. Quinn had been hoping he would blow, say what he had to say and get it over with, but so far, nothing. Anderson was respected by the whole squad; he would accept the hand he was dealt and get on with it. But Costello wore her resentment of Quinn like a badge of honour. No way she could get between those two.

But Mulholland, the good-looking fast-track boy, was anybody’s slave for promotion. He hadn’t been at Partickhill long enough to be bonded to the other two. She had heard nothing but excellent things about DC Mulholland from Divisional HQ. Maybe dangling the carrot of promotion was the way to cut the Partickhill pack.

Quinn smiled – they were McAlpine’s hand-picked team no longer.

They were hers.

Annoyed, she saw the picture of the old DCI looking up at her with some reproach; he had worked his way back up to the top of the pile, just as he had in life. *Bastard*, she muttered to herself, picking up the Order of Service and wondering where to put it. The bin seemed disrespectful, and in any case someone might find it there.

She knew she was not the only one who had succumbed to McAlpine's charms more than once in the last twenty years, not by a long chalk. She spun her leather seat round, away from prying eyes, and stroked his picture against her cheek before feeding him slowly into the shredder.

She sat for a moment, watching him go. Then she stood up.

Five to twelve. In-tray empty, desk tidy, lipstick in place – she was ready.

2

The mouths of the tartan-clad observers swelled into perfect pink Os as Squidgy McMidge broke the ranks of the massed pipe marching band, picked up Callum the Caber and prepared to fling him in the great Scottish tradition, scraping his front two legs into the ground like a bull ready to charge.

Squidgy tottered and teetered, his eyes scrunched into walnuts, as he began his run-up. As the midge's six little legs gained speed, they whirled like Formula One wheels, first in mid-air and getting nowhere then, as they made contact with the ground, he hurtled along and punted the Caber high into the air.

As Callum upended, so did Squidgy.

Completely airborne, Squidgy McMidge posed in a vast expanse of cloudless powder-blue sky. A fat little insect with a cheeky grin, six legs akimbo, his wings as useless as a neatly folded parachute, he drifted and ran out of pages.

Eve Calloway eased her body weight to the back of her wheelchair and smiled. She was pleased. It worked – *Squidgy* worked. On each page of a series of little notebooks shoplifted from the local supermarket was a simple drawing, almost identical to the

ones before and after, but as she ran her thumb down the free edge and flicked them Squidgy McMidge, with his evil beady little eyes and his dangerous grin, came alive. Squidgy McMidge, the new face of Andy's Appeal for the victims of the earthquake in Pakistan. But the midge needed a little more colour. Maybe a little purple kilt . . . She ran her thumb a second time across the ends of the pages, and as Squidgy took the run-up again and tossed Callum the Caber high in the air, the faces in the crowd left the page in a series of hurried lines.

Eve rubbed the tension from her eyes and glanced at the clock. Midday. She had been drawing for over an hour, losing herself in giving life to her cartoon. Squidgy was a difficult child, demanding his life on the page. She picked up the furry purple midge, a prototype for a kiddie's soft toy, and looked into his beady little eyes. He looked happy – well, as happy as he ever looked.

Eve arched her back; she was sore, and her bum was numb. She needed sugar. She reached forward and made an assault on a family bag of Maltesers. Stuffing her mouth full of chocolate, she caressed the midge gently with the fleshy part of her thumb, saying goodbye for the moment, and sighed. The vinyl cover of the chair squeaked beneath her weight as she pressed the remote control, turning up the sound as the TV returned to the news coverage.

A UN spokesperson was talking about the threat of hypothermia hanging over the victims of the

earthquake. *'The death toll is rising every hour, and will rise with every further hour that passes,'* she declaimed. *'Many of these deaths are preventable, but there's a desperate need for blankets, tents and warm clothes –'* Eve picked up the remote ready to kill the sound, but paused. *'Eight-year-old Andy Ibrahim, who flew from Glasgow to stay with his cousins two days ago, is known to be among the survivors ...'* A news agency photograph of a traumatized child tied up in a filthy blanket appeared on the screen. *'... his grandparents are still listed as missing. His friends in Scotland have set up an appeal in his name to help all those affected by this terrible human tragedy. If you want to help, donations can be –'*

Eve zapped the sound impatiently. 'Ah, bless them; it fairly brings it home, Squidgy, doesn't it? One minute the wee guy is on the terraces watching Rangers getting gubbed, the next he's under a pile of rubble with his dead granny. There but for the grace, et cetera.' Squidgy's piercing black pinhead of an eye watched as Eve stared into the middle distance, whispering to him. 'And while our hearts bleed for them, Squidgy, we can't deny it has propelled us into the big time. You were in the right place at the right time.'

Squidgy remained silent in the belief that his genius would have taken him to the top anyway.

'You'll be worth a bloody fortune if we play our cards right – one hundred thousand Squidgy McMidge car aerial decorations are hitting the shops tomorrow, at a quid a time ... *A quid a midge* ... and

if you want to fork out a fiver, you can have a Squash-a-Squidgy.’

Squidgy’s eye caught her own, demanding an explanation.

‘It’s a soft midge that you throw at the wall and it squeals with demonic laughter.’ She tossed a Malteser in the air, catching it expertly in her mouth.

Unimpressed, Squidgy remained silent.

‘And by the time Madam Tightarse has finished her interview at Radio Scotland, you might be heading up the *entire* appeal.’

Squidgy showed his total lack of appreciation by falling off the table, and bouncing silently on the carpet. Eve sighed, wondering whether to pick him up with her grabber, or leave him lying there with his purple legs in the air until Lynne-the-Tightarse came home. She turned back to the TV, her attention pricked by a face she knew. And there he was, Rogan O’Neill, flying into Glasgow with his perfect smile, with his perfect girlfriend and their perfect life. She grabbed the remote to turn up the sound, and the slow seductive strains of the opening bars of ‘Tambourine Girl’ underscored the emotional tableau as Rogan kissed his super-young bimbo supermodel before kneeling down to kiss the tarmac of the runway.

‘Arse!’ muttered Eve, leaning forward in her seat slightly, listening intently as Jackie Bird’s voice-over announced, ‘... *Rogan O’Neill is donating all the profits from his New Year concert at Hampden Park to Andy’s*

Appeal. And, twenty years after it was first recorded ... she paused for dramatic effect, *'... the re-release of "Tambourine Girl" is storming up the charts and is hotly tipped to be the Christmas Number One. So, go out and buy your copy now. It's all for a good cause.'* The CD cover appeared on the screen, with the image of his girlfriend Lauren McCrae, lying in a tambourine. Eve pointed the remote at the screen, pressed Off with her podgy thumb, and watched Rogan fade to black. For a minute she was quiet. She stared out the window at the ever-falling rain, her pretty face frozen in thought.

'Bastard,' she said quietly.

Vik Mulholland was sitting on one of the bench seats outside Marks and Spencer's, absent-mindedly forcing his fingers into his leather gloves, watching the kids on the carousel in the middle of the Sauchiehall Street precinct. Frances was late, she always was. A quick check up and down the street, but he couldn't see her through the Christmas crowds. Vik went back to looking at the carousel; each of the animals had a collar of tinsel and a Squidgy McMidge stuck on an ear or an antler.

He took a small tube of lip salve from his pocket, removed his gloves and dabbed his lips slightly, twisted the tube closed and replaced his gloves. He checked the street again. Still no sign of her.

He watched a man in a fine woollen Crombie kneel at the feet of his overexcited little daughter and fiddle with her red wellington boots with their border of yellow flowers. The fair-haired girl then kicked up her heels, admiring the red flashing lights that ran in sequence down the sides. Mulholland was impressed; he might get a pair of those for his wee cousin. The man lifted his daughter on to a fearsome-looking pink bird and stood back, ready to line up a photograph, as the carousel took off again. The festive mood was

spoiled somewhat by the music – ‘Tulips from Amsterdam’.

Mulholland sighed, his breath billowing as he watched the large pink bird sail past, the little girl giggling with delight, the lights on her red wellingtons flashing as she stuck her legs out.

Still no Frances; she was twenty minutes late. It puzzled him that he wasn't put off by her tardiness. But soon she would appear, strolling along Sauchiehall Street, ignoring the looks of admiration from passing men, and Vik would feel a thrill that she was there, for him.

He leaned back, letting a few falling raindrops kiss his face, recalling the first time he'd set eyes on her, standing on the pavement with her arms round a small boy. There had been a mild RTA – an old Jag had slid in the sleet and rear-ended a Honda – and the drivers were having a bit of a set-to. Vik Mulholland had never been known to intervene if off duty but when he saw the long-haired beauty protecting the child like some dark guardian angel, he was hooked. Once he had made sure both drivers were unhurt he was surprised to find that she hadn't been in either car. She had looked up at him, the swathe of dark hair falling to one side, and he was lost for words. She was so beautiful.

But he'd regained enough sense to ask her name.

‘Coia,’ she said. ‘Frances Coia.’ Her voice was low, slightly husky. She had the most amazing eyes, huge and brown, her irises flecked in gold, yet her skin was

ivory, like porcelain. She was older than she had appeared at first sight. He asked her to repeat her address, even though he'd got it the first time, just to hear her voice again. Beaumont Place was a small cul-de-sac of once-splendid but worn apartments, just round the corner from the station.

Then of course, having seen her once, he had spotted her again the very next day, going into the Oxfam bookshop in Byres Road. He abandoned the Beamer and sneaked up on her as she lost herself in a battered copy of the *Oor Wullie* annual, one of his own childhood favourites.

He'd said hello, she'd looked right through him. He had ploughed on regardless, telling her that the wee boy in the Honda was fine and that the mother wanted to pass on her gratitude.

Then she had smiled, and he had asked her to join him for a coffee outside Peckham's. They had ended up sharing carrot cake. And then a bed in the Grosvenor.

And now his heart was in freefall.

He sensed her slip on to the seat beside him; he caught a waft of her patchouli oil. He opened his eyes, looking at her profile as she gazed up at the heavy sky. He watched a tear of rainwater meander slowly down the arc of her cheek. She winced slightly, opened a bottle of mineral water and swallowed a tablet.

'Is your face still sore?' he asked, resting his hand on her shoulder.

Eyes closed, she nodded almost imperceptibly. She never complained.

‘See that wee lassie with the lights on her wellies?’

‘Yeah,’ said Frances, but she didn’t look.

‘What’s she riding? A pelican or a half-cooked turkey?’ he asked as the pink bird flew past, its tinsel scarf flowing behind.

She answered without opening her eyes. ‘It’s a flamingo.’

He squeezed her shoulder gently, and she smiled.

‘You know, Frankie . . .?’

‘Don’t call me Frankie,’ she whispered. ‘It’s Fran.’

‘Fran, I’m about to say something to you that I have never said to another woman.’

She arched a perfect eyebrow.

‘Let’s go to Marks and buy a nice curry.’

But Frances wasn’t listening. She was looking at Santa pushing a garish tinfoil-clad wheelie bin with sodden earthquake appeal posters on its sides and reindeer dancing round a makeshift Squidgy McMidge holding a golden trumpet, a red balloon issuing from his mouth saying: *Gie’s yer cash!*

‘Look at that – DEATH TOLL 76,000 AND RISING – It even has that boy’s picture on it, that wee Andy, out there with no shelter . . .’

‘One specific face to tug on your heartstrings, Fran, that’s all it is,’ Mulholland added.

But Frances seemed not to hear him; she was busy scrabbling coins from her purse, her eyes welling up as they settled on the picture of Andy Ibrahim.

‘You give them your last penny,’ said Mulholland, knowing there was no stopping her. He planted a kiss on her cheek. ‘And I’ll buy the curry.’

Detective Sergeant Costello was sitting uncomfortably on the huge leather settee in Sarah McGuire’s cream and beige living room, her feet sinking into the deep-pile carpet. She sipped her tea, trying to ignore the strong perfume of the Earl Grey, Typhoo being her own preference. It was half past twelve, at the end of a fourteen-hour shift, and her headache was getting worse by the minute. Sarah, an intelligent, attractive woman in her mid-forties, was leaning forward slightly, listening intently, legs crossed at the ankles. She was wearing black mules and pristine woollen slacks – John Campbell’s daughter was the effortlessly groomed type. Beside her, her darker-haired, chubbier teenage daughter Karen, even though still dressed in the blue uniform that she had been wearing when the cop car picked her up from her private school, displayed the same faultless veneer as her mother. Sarah McGuire’s handshake had been firm and accompanied by the discreet rattle of good jewellery. Costello noticed the band of pale skin where until recently a wedding ring had been.

Costello pulled her short blonde hair tight behind her ears and sneaked a glance at her mobile – no message yet. She had been furious at Colin Anderson for pulling her off the Luca Scott enquiry and even

more furious when she heard that Quinn had told him to do it. The minute Luca's mum was capable of coherent thought she wanted to be there. The doctor had been firm to the point of obstructive, his patient was to remain under sedation until they could ascertain the nature of any injuries sustained during her fit. Costello's argument, that the woman must have some idea where her son would go, was met with a sympathetic shrug and a closed door.

Costello looked out the window at the manicured garden, the electric gates. Luca Scott had nothing, he was little more than a street kid. The girl sitting opposite her on the settee, Karen McGuire, had everything. But money wouldn't bring Granddad back.

'Do you know what happened yet?' Sarah toyed with the single strand of pearls at her throat, one mule swinging from her toe with an incessant rhythm that was getting on Costello's nerves.

Costello noted that Sarah's tone of voice was careful, not accusatory. PC Gail Irvine had already backed off to stand by the window; Costello knew she was on her own. She decided on finely edited honesty. 'We're still trying to piece it together. Did he have problems with his heart or anything?'

'No, he had painkillers for his knee. He'd been on them for as long as I can remember,' said Sarah, still pulling at her pearls.

'And were they in some sort of daily dispenser?'

'Yes, he had a dosset box so he would take them

with his meals.’ Sarah nodded. ‘Oh, and a tablet to stop them affecting his stomach.’

‘So, Karen,’ Costello turned to Sarah’s daughter, who was now visibly calmer. ‘Did he seem his usual self when you saw him on Saturday? He wasn’t complaining of feeling ill?’

‘No. Well, he had the previous week, but just a headache. The tenants upstairs had been playing music all night and he’d run out of his headache tablets.’ She rubbed her eyes with her fists, suddenly childlike. ‘He asked for some more, Mum, remember?’

‘Yes. I bought him some more on Friday on the way home from tennis,’ Sarah put in. ‘Headeze they were, but he’d had them before. They didn’t upset his stomach or anything.’

‘So, he seemed his usual self?’ Costello moved to the edge of the settee, before it swallowed her.

‘He was going on about his Christmas dinner, how he wanted the sprouts cooked properly. And the weather. And he was reading the *Radio Times*, complaining that they were moving *Top Gear*.’ Karen recalled the memories in a single rush. ‘He was complaining about everything – *The Great Escape* being on again, the team Celtic have chosen . . .’

‘Him and every other Glaswegian bloke, eh? Did he live on his own?’

‘Since Mum died,’ said Sarah, a faint smile through the tears. ‘He was very independent – too independent at the wrong time, but what can you do?’

‘How often did you see him?’ Costello kept her voice friendly.

‘Oh, I’d hand in the shopping on Saturday lunch-time. On a Wednesday night we would go round and . . .’ The tears started again, ‘. . . play Scrabble.’

‘He always cheated,’ said Karen, folding her arms. ‘He’d put in words that nobody else knew.’

‘My dad used to do that as well,’ lied Costello, trying out a slight smile. ‘Well, either that or he couldn’t spell.’ She paused. ‘Mrs McGuire, I believe your husband is coming over?’

Sarah nodded. ‘Tom? Yes. We’re separated now, but he always got on great with Dad. They’d have a pint together on a Thursday – the Clutha Bar. Dad always had a whisky chaser; it would last him all night.’

‘He had a load of old pals,’ said Karen. ‘And they’d sit around the bar and talk about the war. Granddad’s got lots of books about it; he’s lent me some for my modern history project.’ Karen indicated a pile of books, lying on their sides in the bookcase. Costello tilted her head to read the titles, but she only recognized one.

‘Karen has her prelims just after Christmas. It’s a very important time,’ Sarah confided, as her hand reached out and covered her daughter’s. ‘We’ve invested a lot in her education.’

‘Of course,’ Costello agreed, before asking, ‘This might be a strange question, but was it usual for him to have a chip pan on at breakfast time?’

It was Karen who answered. ‘Yes, he liked a chip buttie, with brown sauce. It had to be HP,’ she said with a hint of scorn. ‘He would have got up late, especially if the folk upstairs had kept him awake.’

‘Mrs McGuire,’ said Costello, concentrating hard. The heat in the room was making her eyes pound, she could feel her lids dropping, and she wanted to take her jacket off but couldn’t because of the stain on her jumper. ‘It’s just possible, and I emphasize just possible, that he had a heart attack and collapsed. He was definitely unconscious when the fire took hold.’

Sarah latched on immediately. ‘So, he didn’t suffer.’

‘No, he didn’t suffer at all,’ said Costello, hoping it was true.

Sarah nodded, as if finding a little comfort in that. ‘I don’t understand. He saw his GP only last week. He said he was fine,’ she added lamely.

‘Can you give us the name of his doctor? And his dentist?’ asked Costello, glad to see Irvine was scribbling down the details. ‘We’ll need to do a post-mortem to find out what exactly happened.’

Sarah’s mouth opened but she did not speak. She glanced at her daughter.

‘Maybe we could discuss this at another time?’ Costello offered.

‘No, no. It’s fine. I thought you only . . . I wasn’t expecting it.’ Sarah shuffled slightly on the settee,

smoothing down the legs of her trousers. ‘The doctor told him he was fine,’ she said again vaguely. ‘But you say you still need to do a . . .’

‘To establish a precise cause of death. But there’s no sign of foul play – that was the first thing we checked.’ Costello could sense her sight starting to drift. ‘Do you have a recent photograph of him? It’s always useful.’

‘Help yourself.’ Sarah indicated the array of pictures on the sideboard.

‘I’ll make sure you get it back,’ said Gail Irvine, stepping away from the window and choosing one.

‘I’ve just remembered – I didn’t see him on Saturday. I dropped Karen off with his shopping, because I had a call to make from the car to rearrange a tennis match . . .’ Her voice broke, suddenly guilty.

Costello let the silence drift, then when she spoke her voice was firm. ‘Did your father have a cardigan? A Fair Isle cardigan, blue with a white pattern round the neck?’ She patted the collar of her own jacket.

Karen thought for a moment, white teeth biting into cherry-red lips.

‘Wee silver buttons with the Scottish lion on them?’ prompted Costello.

It was Sarah who answered. ‘Yes, he’s had that cardigan since Karen was a baby. He had new ones in the cupboard, presents.’ She tutted. ‘But he would never wear them. Why do you ask?’

Costello shrugged vaguely, glad that she had not seen the body, glad that no memory of it could show

on her face, glad she wouldn't have to take out the silver button in its sterile little bag and ask: *Do you recognize this?* She knew Sarah was looking at the gap on the sideboard where the photograph of her dad had been.

'I can come down and identify him, if that would help.'

'I don't think there'd be any need. It's not something we do a lot nowadays – visual ID is a bit old-fashioned.'

'I would like to see him.'

'Better not,' said Costello, as quietly as she could, shuffling right to the edge of the settee as a precursor to getting up and leaving.

'Oh ...' It took Sarah a moment to absorb what Costello had actually meant. Then she sat up briskly. 'What about the flat?' she asked.

'The flat?'

'Yes, Dad's flat and the three above. How badly were they damaged?'

Bloody hell, your dad's just burned to death, Costello thought, but said, 'That'll all be in the Fire Master's report.' Then she added, 'If you can wait till then.'

Outside in the rain, Frances stood looking at the Virgin Megastore, its windows covered with posters for Rogan O'Neill's re-release of 'Tambourine Girl'. The posters showed his Canadian supermodel girlfriend, all blonde hair and endless suntanned legs, coiled inside a tambourine as if she were swinging in

a hammock. Vik went over to Frances and put his arm round her.

‘I bet you didn’t know the original cover for that was designed by a graduate of Glasgow Art School,’ he said, wondering whether those were tears or rain-drops on her face. ‘Must be worth a bloody fortune now. And did you know ...’ he paused for effect, ‘... that nobody knows who the girl is who actually says that husky *goodnight* at the end of the record?’

‘That’s because only the really sad listen to it right to the very end,’ she said quietly, a slow tear falling on her cheek. ‘It was explained at the time as a mistake in the master tape but the mystery did the sales no harm. Who was the poor little tambourine girl? That’s what they all wanted to know. It made his career, that song.’

‘I just want to know what the bloody song is *about*, that’s all.’ He glanced at his watch. Work was calling. ‘I’d better get a move on.’

But Frances was staring at the blonde model, coiled in her tambourine. ‘Nice, isn’t she?’

‘If you like that kind of thing. But I’ll make do with you.’ He kissed her cheek, tasting the salt of her tear. ‘Come on. Where are you going? I could drop you.’

‘Just up to the Western. I have an appointment for my face.’

‘Your face looks fine to me.’

Her good mood had passed. ‘I’ll catch the bus and walk the last bit, get some fresh air.’ Her eyes

narrowed as she looked into the dreich damp of Sauchiehall Street. It was miserable. It was catching.

‘Well, if you want to die of hypothermia, go ahead. But I’ll take the grub and bring it round after work.’

They both had their hands on the handles of the bags, standing face to face. He hesitated, thinking about kissing her, but contented himself with looking into her brown eyes with their little gold flecks, her face framed by a black pashmina.

She blinked slowly, a last raindrop fell from her long lashes on to her cheek, then she smiled. ‘I’ll manage,’ she said, tugging the bags towards her.

As he hugged her goodbye she looked over his shoulder catching her own reflection in the shop window; the scarf round her head, her tall thin figure clothed completely in an ankle-length black woollen coat, made her look like an image of a medieval saint. Beyond her reflection, two tinselled Bang & Olufsen widescreen TVs were silently chattering away: the Scottish news headlines, footage of rescue teams scabbling over rubble in Pakistan, a factory conveyor belt dense with jostling Squidgy McMidges, a school picture of Luca Scott, and then a shot of the Joozy Jackpot amusement arcade. She pulled free from Vik and walked up to the window for a closer look but the screen was already back at the studio. The polished lips of the redhead reading the news moved with animation. Her ginger eyebrows were raised in a pleasant arc, not frowning with professional sincerity. Good news then. Both screens

changed to a picture of clouds and more clouds, the dark rain-filled clouds of a Scottish winter. A subscript announced that Rory McLaughlin was reporting from Glasgow Airport.

Frances screwed her eyes up slightly as a plane shimmered through the clouds and disappeared, only to reappear closer, much bigger.

The image switched to a crowd of young fans and some not so young. The badges, the scarves, the T-shirts and the hats all said one thing – ROGUE. Somebody's granny in a wheelchair was wearing an 'I love Rogan' badge; she held it up and kissed it for the cameras. Then the picture moved quickly to the plane door opening, and there he was, Rogan O'Neill, standing at the top of the steps in black leather. He lifted his sunglasses, waving, lips to his fingertips, kissing the air of his homeland. Then he turned to smile at the beautiful blonde woman, who followed him down the steps. Lastly he knelt down to kiss the tarmac.

Frances placed the palm of her hand flat on the window – separated from him by a pane of glass and twenty years.

Never really separated at all.

'Look at that bloody rain,' Costello said, peering out through the glass panes of Sarah McGuire's front door. 'And it's cold enough for snow.' She tightened her jacket round her in readiness for a quick dash to the car. 'Gail, you hang on till the husband gets here.'

Find out how the land lies.’ Costello looked at a wedding photograph of Sarah’s parents on the wall in the hallway, her father looking uncomfortable in a dark suit and Brylcreemed hair, pencil tie, a single flower in his lapel, and her mother, in a boat-necked wedding dress, ballerina length, smiling shyly. The similarity of daughter to mother was striking.

‘What do you mean, how the land lies?’ asked Irvine.

Costello lowered her voice. ‘If she gets talking, find out how amicable the separation and divorce really are. There’s a GSPC magazine on the coffee table, lying open at the West End property pages. Look at this place – would you want to move from here? Posh Newton Mearns postcode? Brand-new Porsche outside? Electronic gates? And Karen’s at private school.’ She mimicked Sarah cruelly: ‘*We’ve invested a lot in her education. And those are not fake pearls round her neck.*’ Costello added as an afterthought, ‘If your dad was burned to death, would you be worried about the state his bloody flat was left in?’

‘Are all those statements connected?’ asked Irvine, slightly confused.

‘Call it instinct, call it snobbery, but that magazine is open at a page of properties far inferior to this, and she doesn’t strike me as an inferior sort of woman, that’s all. If her dad owned all of 34 Lower Holburn Street, then he’d be worth a bloody fortune.’

‘How can you be so suspicious?’ asked Irvine, horrified. ‘She’s just lost her father . . .’

‘My point exactly. The suspicion goes with the territory; we’re cops, not bloody agony aunts,’ Costello said. ‘Find out the story with the husband and the break-up, and be a bit nosy with regard to the finances. I’ve a feeling something is wrong here. Those tears didn’t convince me.’ She pulled her mobile from her pocket and called a memory-stored number.

‘You might be right. I was in pieces when my dad died.’ Irvine looked as if she were about to cry, right there and then.

‘Didn’t know my dad, and what you never had you can’t miss.’ Costello smiled at her, phone clamped to her ear. ‘Wingnut? Is Quinn the Eskimo not in her igloo?’ She pulled a face at the answer. ‘Look, I’m feeling rough, I think I’ve a migraine coming on, so I’m clocking off before it gets worse. Leave a message for her, will you? It’s just gone one now. I’m leaving PC Irvine here to wait for the hubby, then she’ll get back to Partickhill asap for the update at two . . . No, I’ll be blind and unconscious by then.’ She closed her phone.

‘But you’re going to miss the update? You really feel that bad?’

‘Yes, but if I get a good kip, I’ll be in tomorrow. Luca’s mum should be available by then; I can get moving on that. Can you get in touch with the dentist?’ Costello ripped that page out of her notebook.

‘Leave anything you get on my desk and I’ll deal with it tomorrow. Don’t bother to type it up. We’ll do it all in the one report.’

She walked towards her car, her head thumping, and put the rest of her notes into her handbag. Like she said, she would deal with it tomorrow.