

PROLOGUE

WEDNESDAY, 8TH OF NOVEMBER

Costello pulled her car up outside the Haggerty family home. The large house on Balcarres Avenue would always be that to her – the family home. Now it looked cold and dead in the bright winter sunshine, rays glinted off the ivy-covered slates giving a sparkle to the bricks of the red chimneys. She looked at the stained-glass window, the multi-coloured mosaic of Botticelli's *Primavera* was just visible through the reaching branches of the monkey puzzle tree. Behind the tall wrought-iron gates the grass was verdant, the pebbles still raked into the neat furrows that had so impressed Archie Walker. On that day.

That dreadful day when she and Archie had walked up the path, Costello ignoring the sense of dread in her stomach.

The trees were tall and mature, even devoid of leaves they cast long spindly shadows over the wide road, old-fashioned, gently cambered. The kind of surface that leant itself to roller-skating, so Costello's granny had once told her.

She turned the Fiat's engine off, slipping down in the seat, thinking about another night she had parked in this very spot, that cold night she had seen Malcolm try to climb out the window

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above the porch, attempting to get away from his father. And Costello was convinced that *was* exactly what the boy was doing. Involuntarily, she picked up her mobile, looking at the blank screen. Malcolm had left her a message on her phone. A twelve year old wanting help from a detective to escape from a monster, to get away from his father. George Haggerty.

The bastard.

But she'd got the voicemail the following morning. When it was too late.

Six hours after he had summoned up enough courage to defy his father and call Costello, she and Archie had walked up this path, entered the family home and found Malcolm's body, curled up on the beige carpet at the foot of his parent's bed, Abigail Haggerty had her arms still wrapped round Malcolm, holding him close, giving her only son some solace as his short life slipped away. No doubt her own last breath had swiftly followed.

That image was seared into Costello's memory, Abigail and Malcolm, and the speckles and spatters of crimson blood on the mirrored wardrobe doors. She could recall the events up to that, walking into the house, opening the unlocked back door; the first warning sign. Then the music floating from above; 'The Clapping Song'. The element of theatre. Then upstairs past the little tear-drop of blood on the magnolia wallpaper, the stain the killer thought he'd cleaned away. Then into Malcolm's bedroom, too quiet. The Star Wars posters on the walls, the smooth R2D2 duvet cover decorated with a Celtic top, a pair of black leggings, two woollen socks, the trainers. They were arranged as if the child had been lying there, dressed and then spirited away, shedding his clothes and leaving them behind.

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In the car, Costello wiped an angry tear from her eye, remembering how she had paused on the top landing, alert to the smell of blood. She had hesitated, not wanting to go any further but the door of the master bedroom was open, intriguing and beguiling. And all the time that song was playing.

Clap clap.

At that moment Costello had *known*, that was George Haggerty's little joke. Clap, clap. He had looked right at her as he stood at his stepdaughter's funeral, smirking, slowly clapping his gloved hands.

Standing in the doorway she had seen the blood on the doors, the walls, the ceiling. She had to force herself to carry on willing herself to think past the iron-rich stench of the blood, the sweeter mulch of faecal matter. Her last memory was of Abigail lying curled, her arm up and over the smaller figure of her son; Malcolm's hands wrapped round her elbow, his fingers still gripping the lilac silk of her blouse.

At the time, Costello had presumed she would have the next day to sort it out.

She had been wrong.

What would happen if she didn't act now? What if she ran out of time? She gripped the steering wheel in frustration; her colleagues in major investigations had accepted George Haggerty's alibi as cast iron. To her mind only the guilty had alibis as good as that. George's alibi for the night his wife and child were killed was Police Scotland.

Costello knew she'd get the bastard, she had been watching his every move since.

She only had to wait. Bastard.

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She looked back at the gates, closed now to keep the media away from the 'Monkey House of Horror'. What secrets had been obscured by the monkey puzzle tree that had grown large in the front garden, hiding the windows from prying eyes?

Costello had only to wait twenty minutes before she saw some movement through the bare branches of the beech hedge. She had been following George Haggerty for a couple of weeks; she knew his routine. He would be going north to see his father in Port MacDuff now. She slid down further in her seat as the garage door opened, the gates swinging wide, the white Volvo rolling out majestically to park on the street. The driver's door opened and Haggerty, casually dressed for him in jeans and anorak, got out and walked back up the driveway, his shoes making no noise or indent on the gravel. True to his routine, he re-emerged a couple of minutes later, locked the gates closed behind him and walked briskly back to the car where he stopped and turned. He looked straight at Costello and smiled, clapped his hands together slowly twice, and climbed into the car.

Clap clap.

He drove away, without looking back.

George Haggerty was getting away with murder.

He was getting away with two million pounds in life insurance.

But Costello was going to stop him, even if it killed her.

Or him.

She smiled, turning the key in the ignition of the Fiat.

Preferably him.

ONE

SATURDAY, 25TH OF NOVEMBER

The Anderson house was quiet on a Saturday afternoon. All week it had been like Glasgow Central on Fair Friday, but everybody was out today. Colin Anderson had the whole house to himself. He was lying on the sofa, nursing a large Merlot and two sore feet after helping Brenda make an early start on the Christmas shopping. He was musing at the wine, as it swirled round the contours of the glass, admiring the patterns it left in the light of the wood-burning stove. His grandchild, Baby Moses, was asleep in his basket at Anderson's feet, an unexpected joy. The son of Mary Jane, a daughter Anderson never knew existed until she existed no more; murdered. Moses was a new member of the family, while Nesbit, the fat Staffie, was a constant fixture, curled up on the sofa, ears tucked in so he didn't hear the rain battering against the windows. *American Beauty* played on the DVD, with the volume too low to hear.

It was almost perfect yet Anderson was not at peace. He was still digesting the news that his partner for twenty years had resigned. Costello was gone. No notice. No chat. No good-byes. She had walked into ACC Mitchum's office unannounced,

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uninvited, and slapped her letter of resignation on the desk right in front of her boss.

Just like that.

Twenty years they had worked together, fought, made up and fallen out again, shared laughs, heartache and a few broken bones. She had always had his back. He had always had hers. At times, their thinking was polar, opposite points of the compass, balancing each other into a relationship that, while turbulent, was effective. Their track record proved that. Now she was gone. Brenda, his wife, had explained it simply. The events of the last few months had been too intense. Costello had found Archie Walker – though what the fiscal saw in his relationship with Costello, Anderson could not fathom. Anderson himself had found Baby Moses.

Brenda said that both of them had moved on and maybe George Haggerty had been the catalyst that finally separated them.

But then Brenda would say that. She had never really liked Costello.

He checked his phone. He was meeting the rest of the team tomorrow for fish and chips, a long-standing arrangement. Costello had been invited. She had declined.

Anderson could accept that she had resigned in a fit of pique, saying she could do more about Haggerty without the restriction of the badge. She thought ‘killing the bastard’ would do her more good than any counselling.

And she had been furious when her request to form a task force to investigate the murders of Abigail and Malcolm Haggerty had been refused. The case had been transferred to Complaints

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and Internal Investigations in general, and DCI hatchet face Mathieson and her puppet Bannon in particular, purely for clarity and transparency. To him, and Costello, it felt they themselves were being scrutinised and judged. The first two people on the murder scene, namely DI Costello and Procurator Fiscal Archie Walker, were members of the law enforcement community. And as the fiscal's goddaughter Valerie Abernerthy was Abigail Haggerty's sister, the press was having a field day.

Anderson had been a cop long enough to know that you could never predict how the deceased's nearest and dearest would react. But he thought that George Haggerty should have been distraught with grief over the murder of his wife and son instead of talking to the media, playing on the 'Monkey House of Horror' crap. The case had rarely been out the papers for the last six weeks. Every day there was another tasty morsel revealed by the press. One thing they were all agreed on: the police weren't coming out of it well. George Haggerty was the obvious suspect and he was the one man who couldn't have done it. Even ACC Mitchum let slip that he, too, had taken a very close look at that alibi. He had personally interviewed the two police officers who had caught Haggerty speeding in his white Volvo on the A9. One obvious suspect. Police Scotland were his alibi.

Yet, Costello had persisted that George Haggerty had killed his family.

He looked down at the bundle of pink skin in the Moses basket. His grandson, his link with Haggerty, the one reason they kept in touch. Anderson didn't like Haggerty, not the way his daughter Claire did. God, she had even drawn him a portrait of Baby Moses in pastel and had left it for him, signed and

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wrapped. Anderson wished she hadn't bothered. There was nothing he could define, nothing he could specify, just a very intense feeling of dislike. If he himself had one tiny piece of physical evidence against Haggerty, Anderson would have brought him in and every bone in his body would have told him that he had the right bloke. Every time he was in Haggerty's company, Anderson could sense smirking guilt.

Anderson watched the Merlot, tipping it to the left and right. 'He has a watertight alibi,' he said out loud, 'and no motive at all.' He looked at his grandson, blowing bubbles in his basket. 'Well, none that we have found.' Moses ignored him but Nesbit cocked an ear. 'George Haggerty did not kill his wife Abigail or his son Malcolm. He couldn't have done it.'

To his mind the best way of getting Costello back was to prove her wrong and get DCI Mathieson and her team to prove that somebody else did kill Abigail and Malcolm. Then maybe Costello could get closure and move on. And then she might come back into the fold, as it were. He could see how the lack of progress in the case might have frustrated his colleague. The killer had ghosted in and out the house, without leaving a trace. Or a trace that belonged to there because it had a right to be there. The Haggertys were not a social couple so the only 'other' DNA in the house belonged to Abigail's sister, Valerie Abernethy, and she had stayed overnight only a few days before the killings. No fingerprints, no footprints but the blood spatter had left a clean zone where the killer had stood and that indicated they were slim, five foot ten or more. George was five seven.

It had also really annoyed Costello to learn that social worker Dali Despande's proposal to pilot a new fast-track child protec-

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tion service had been side-lined, again. Looking back, Anderson thought, maybe she hadn't been right since the Kissel case, that child being starved to death, neglected by a mother who didn't care, let down by a failing social work system. It had taken that little boy weeks to die. Costello had sat in the court and relived every minute of the harrowing abuse. Then Malcolm? Costello had in her head that Malcolm was a vulnerable child.

Then she had walked into that scene, a scene so awful it was reported that the crime scene photographer on duty had been off work since with stress, unable to cope with what he had seen.

Still none of it was any of his business. He had to walk away and leave it to Mathieson and Bannon. He had his cold case rapes to work on. Mitchum had given him one more week before the file went back to the freezer.

ACC Mitchum had been very clear: Anderson's loyalty was to the force.

Not that there was any conflict of loyalty; Costello had not been in contact for twenty-one days.

'MONKEY HOUSE OF HORROR'.

The tabloids hadn't been able to resist that.

Valerie Abernethy looked up at the familiar ivy-covered eaves, the two red chimneys, the big, stained-glass window all hidden from the road by the majestic monkey puzzle tree. Had it been a happy family home for her sister? The gutter press thought so. A happy family home that became a scene of slaughter.

Valerie took a deep breath, trying to calm the panic. They wanted her to walk round the room where her sister had breathed

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her last, shielding her son from the blade of a knife. She was aware of the investigative team hovering at the bottom of the gravel drive, pretending they were giving her a little moment to catch her private thoughts. She knew she was under scrutiny.

Well, they could stand there, out in the rain, a little longer. Valerie placed her hand on a petal of the stained-glass flower, a delicate stem with Mackintosh roses. The glass felt slightly warm to her touch, almost soft under her fingertips.

The front door was familiar and welcoming, painted claret to match the colours of the roses. The brass knocker that Malcolm used to polish managed to shine, even in this god-awful weather. The door was open. They wanted her to go in alone.

She had no idea when she was last here. Her memory had large gaps.

A lump caught her throat. This was too difficult. She tried lifting her foot to get her up the step, one stride and she'd be in the house. Nothing happened. Her leg was leaden, stuck to the red tiles. Valerie recognised that feeling, an old enemy returning.

She needed a vodka.

She closed her eyes and stepped up. She had to do this for Abigail. For Malcolm.

She was now stock-still, one foot up, one foot down and with her fingertips still resting on the glass window. There was movement behind her. Archie Walker was about to intervene and offer his assistance.

She needed to do this on her own.

Valerie turned her face up to the sky and took a deep breath. The raindrops spat at her with disgust, stinging the skin of her cheek. She didn't think it would be as hard as this.

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Did she remember that night six weeks ago? Could she remember, vaguely, walking out the hospital? Standing in the light rain in Great Western Road, watching the traffic? She was probably looking for an off licence. Then there was a smell of perfume she could recall, something familiar she recognised from Abigail's house. Was that merely an association of ideas, her imagination filling in the blanks?

Another pause.

A rustle of impatience from the drive.

That would be the boss, a small fascist detective with hard flinty eyes. That cop was mistaken if she thought her pillar-box red lipstick distracted from the incipient Hitler moustache. Her junior officer, the big bearded bloke, kept a good four paces behind her. Like Prince Philip.

Fascist and Beardy, it was easier than remembering their names.

Valerie heard footfall behind her as the cops and Archie, here in his role as her godfather, not in his professional capacity as the chief fiscal, were walking up the gravel driveway. They were only moving because it was too wet for them to hang around outside but it still felt like harassment.

Bugger them. She would do exactly what DI Costello had done on the day she had discovered the bodies. Valerie pulled away from the front door and made to walk briskly round the house to the back garden.

She turned to confront Fascist and Beardy, wishing them away. They were standing across the path, blocking her way. Archie gave her an encouraging smile.

The rainwater ran down his face, to be cast off as he nodded

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his head. They were getting soaked through. Even better, Fascist had a sour look on her face, her lippy was about to run.

Valerie took a deep breath and walked in the back door, recognising immediately the stink of the forensic cleaning team, a scent she knew well from her days as a fiscal. This no longer smelled like Abigail's house; these rooms were no longer infused with the aroma of roses, fresh coffee and George's aftershave. She walked through the pristine utility room, the kitchen – everything neatly tidied away – to the back of the hall where her boots touched carpet for the first time. Was this where Costello had spotted the tiniest smear of blood on the wall, blood that somebody had attempted to clean?

Valerie wondered how easy that had been to wipe away; probably easier to erase it from the wall than to erase from the memory. Fascist crept up behind her, coughed in irritation.

'Is there anything missing that you notice?' she asked in her snippy voice. 'We have a comprehensive list of the items that Mr Haggerty has removed and we have the crime scene photographs and . . .' That earned her an elbow in the ribs from Archie, now standing beside her. Nobody wanted to be reminded of that.

'Anything missing?' confirmed Valerie, thinking that her sister's smile was 'missing', the hugs from Malcolm were 'missing'. The house was a mausoleum.

'Anything?'

Valerie looked around, climbed the stairs to the half landing and *Primavera*, resplendent in coloured glass on the west-facing window. The view east was totally obliterated by the monkey puzzle tree. It was an easy escape route; this window, down to

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the roof of the porch, a short slither to the ground. It was reported Malcolm had tried to escape that way once after an argument with his father. This was actually an easy house to gain entry and exit without being observed; the monkey puzzle tree hid a lot. She turned to look down at her companions, then up through the balusters to the upper landing, with its expensive Persian rug on an expanse of oak flooring. And a plain magnolia wall. Valerie screwed her eyes up to concentrate on what she wasn't seeing. On her previous visit she had stared at the gap on her nephew's bookcase for a full minute before realising that Malcolm's favourite Lego toy, the Millenium Falcon, was gone.

'Well, there was a picture there, a pastel. I suppose George took that, he always liked it.'

'What was the picture? I don't think he has mentioned it.' Bannon checked his iPad.

'A painting, it was a painting. A rowing boat on a canal, under willows, weeping willows. How fitting is that?' She turned to the other three. 'Uncle Archie? Did you say there was music playing when you . . . found them?'

Archie nodded, teary. 'Yes, that kid's song, it was on repeat on the CD. It had been playing for hours. "The Clapping Song", the one w-where . . .' Archie stuttered. 'Where the monkey got choked and they all—'

Valerie stared at the gap on the wall. 'They all went to heaven in a little rowing boat.'

KIERAN COWAN DROVE ALONG the loch side, through the dark night and the streaming rain. The engine of Ludwig, his 1977

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Volkswagen Camper, hummed along nicely as the windscreen wipers beat a regular tattoo on the glass. The left one squeaking at the end of its sweep, the right one responding a millisecond later with a resounding *thunk*. He had been intending to fix that, but after a fortnight of constant rain, he had got used to the noise. It provided an irregular backbeat to 'Life in the Fast Lane', which blasted out the old Clarion cassette player at full volume.

He was used to this road. He would be able to drive even if the wiper gave up the ghost and fell off completely, spinning over the top of the van and flying into the night sky. He had driven Ludwig to Ardnamurchan once with a cracked windscreen, sticking his head out the driver's window until he could pull over and punch the crazed glass out.

Cowan kept his eyes on the road, the narrow stretches where he had to slow, the wider stretches where he could put his foot down and the nasty bends where he needed to hug the rock wall in case he met an HGV over the white line.

The clock on the dash was saying it was half eight. He wasn't in a hurry per se; he was a little concerned about time. As long as it was dark.

The job needed to be done, sorted and over with.

He drove confidently now, one hand on the steering wheel and the other steadying the rucksack that rolled and yawed in the passenger seat. The camera had been borrowed from the university. He had signed it out on Friday night to be returned Monday morning. It was an expensive bit of kit, a Macro Scub 4 underwater video camera. It was fully charged and ready to go, safely tucked in the rucksack along with his flask of tomato

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soup and some sandwiches. He had no idea how long he was going to be here. As someone with a gift for stating the obvious once said, 'It will take as long as it will take.'

Cowan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel in time with the music as he waited for a short procession of traffic to pass, and when the road was clear he put his foot down. Ludwig's air-cooled engine whirred in protest. He turned onto the road that hugged the north-west side of the loch and accelerated, cruising along, singing tunelessly with Glen or Don, as he checked the clock again. He was probably a little early. He could have stayed at his laptop and got a bit more of his essay done but he wanted to be there first and check out the lie of the land, get a good spot where he could stay hidden.

Covert breeds covert.

He pulled into the car park of the Inveruglas visitor centre, putting his lights off first so as not to disturb anybody already there. The car park was not entirely empty, there was a Mini parked at the front, looking out over the water. Cowan gave it more than a passing glance, his heart thumping, in case this was who he was looking for. But the windows of the other car were steamed up. He judged it had been there for some time and it looked as though there was still somebody in it. Or it might be two heads in the driver's seat, a lovers' tryst, a quiet night out on the loch side.

But he was mindful there was somebody there and he wished that Ludwig did not have such a distinctive engine.

Tonight could be the night.

He drove Ludwig into the far corner of the second car park, beyond the café that led to the other exit road. Nobody driving

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into the main car park would see Ludwig; he would be safely obscured by the dark and by the screen afforded by the single line of trees. He switched the engine off, letting the camper roll forward, closer to the pathway that went up the hill to the viewing point. That was where he needed to be. He lifted his rucksack and climbed out into the driving rain, glancing over his shoulder to see if he could memorise the registration of the other car. But at this time of night, at this distance, he couldn't even make out the plate, but the car was one of those new fancy Minis with the doors at the back, like his granddad's old Morris Traveller. They had tried to recreate a classic. A car that had been built as cheap transport for the masses had been reinvented as a lifestyle choice of the upwardly mobile professional with deep pockets, no soul and even less imagination.

As Cowan closed the door, he patted Ludwig as if parting with a faithful old horse. He tugged his hood up, pulled the rucksack onto his back and set off through the dark, rainy night up to the viewpoint to find a place to hide.

VALERIE LAY ON THE bed in the hotel. The banality of her surroundings leeches every bit of vitality from her.

She had felt the pressure since visiting Abigail's house.

It had left her unsettled, more depressed, but there was some comfort in knowing that this was the last day of her life. The knowledge many of us think we would like to have, but very few are brave enough.

Imagine Abigail not realising that was the last time she would stack the dishwasher, Malcolm not thinking that was the last

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time he would do his teeth, pull on his Star Wars pyjamas and argue about staying up for another half hour. If they had realised that, they might have spent their final moments doing something less mundane.

Like saying goodbye.

Valerie had spent most of the morning rolling on the floor, lying on the tiles in the bathroom, or being sick down the toilet. Then out to the house before a sneaky foray to the off licence for cheap vodka, the quick consumption of which totally erased any memory of the walk round the house. But tomorrow the empty bottles would be lying in the corner. Silent, but ever present in their condemnation of her.

Well, she wouldn't be here to be condemned.

She lay for a few minutes on top of the bed staring at the ceiling, gradually pulling together the information she needed to place herself in time and space. Judging from the lunatic screeching of revved-up enthusiasm she could hear from the room next door, it was Saturday evening. *X Factor*. Or *Strictly*. Something awful. Anything.

On the ceiling was the familiar smoke alarm, the water sprinkler.

The last day of her life. She had done her duty, she had gone round the house. The feeling was one of overwhelming relief, all was as it should be.

She had a gun.

And a bullet in the chamber.

She turned on her side, pulling the pillow over her head and stared at the bland beige hotel room wall, thinking about the cleaner who was going to open the door to her mess, walking

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in to the room pulling her Henry Hoover behind her then looking up to see a woman with her skull blown apart.

The bullet would do a lot of damage. Valerie knew it wasn't like in the films where the head lay intact, a neat trickle of blood delicately running down a sculptured cheekbone to leave a crimson teardrop on the pristine white sheets. The eyes, each lash point perfect with the mascara, the pupils open and staring into the sunset. Ready for their close-up.

No, it wasn't like that at all.

Her head would open up like a flower, blood and brains would spatter all over the room, behind the headboard, behind the curtains. Over the fire alarm. Not pretty.

The crime scene pictures of Balcarres Avenue had been burned onto her retinas. Her sister and her nephew, bloodied and torn flesh entangled. And Abigail, her arms round Malcolm, a final, desperate attempt to protect him.

She would have been fascinated by it if it hadn't been so personal. The whole room was a gaudy abstract of cream and crimson, matching the stained-glass rose on the door.

That was another memory that wasn't going to go away.

She felt the weight of the gun in her hand.

No. She had to time this right, so it wasn't the cleaner who discovered her body.

Archie Walker? Yes, she'd time it so Uncle Archie would find her.

He could explain it to red-lipped Fascist and Bearded dogs-body. She sat back up, looking at herself as her face passed in the mirror. A haggard young woman stared back out at her, seeming to move slower than she herself moved. A pale face

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haunted by the loss of her family, the loss of her career. Her loss of self.

Getting up and walking across the floor, she noticed she still had her boots on.

She should pick up the empty bottles of vodka from the carpet.

Why bother? She'd be dead. Oblivion was better than another meeting where they looked down at her, because she had lived a dream life. She had had it all. Yet they would stare at her as if she was some stupid addict, like she was one of them.

She pulled the curtains over the window, blocking out the night sky as she tried to remember. Glimpses of being wet, walking down the street, her hand had been sore. She had stumbled against the wall at some point, remembering the stinging pain as she grazed the skin on her palm. She looked at it now, seeing the bloodied scrape, a dark scab starting to form. Was that yesterday? Or this morning? This afternoon?

She had no bloody idea. This was the way of her life. Flashes of this. Glimpses of that. Nothing that ever made any sense. It was like listening to a foreign language, recognising words here and there but never enough to pull together a sentence, never made enough sense for it to form a story.

Memory lapse.

And she had no memory of what she was doing the day her sister was murdered.

But she had visited the house. It was over, closed. She could end it all now.

Sitting down on the side of the bed she took her boots off. Nobody committed suicide with their boots on. She wanted to be comfortable, lie down and not leave the duvet dirty.

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Dirtier.

She lay down again. Relaxing. Life owed her nothing except this one thing – this little bit of peace and quiet, save the whipped-up hysteria being broadcast from next door. Picking up the gun, feeling the weight of it in her hand. It was far heavier than she had expected. It smelled of oil, it covered the skin of her hands in something foul.

She wanted her last thoughts to be of Abigail. Of Mary Jane. And of Malcolm. She wanted to remember them as they had been in life. Abigail with her prim, controlled smile. Mary Jane pouting for the camera as every teenager had done for the last twenty years. And Malcolm laughing, both hands holding onto his most prized possession: his Lego Millennium Falcon.

All gone.

Had they all gone to heaven in their little rowing boat?

And what had happened to the Lego Millennium Falcon? It hadn't been at the house; well, she hadn't seen it. She had bought it for Malcolm last Christmas. Good times.

She felt the tears fighting to escape her eyes, but she refused to cry. There was nothing to cry about, not now. She looked back at the water sprinkler and the smoke alarm. Then heard footfall, somebody walking along the hotel corridor passing her door. They walked quickly with the quiet jangle of a key. A car key most likely, as all the rooms in the hotel were card operated, so he, she presumed, was going out to the car park.

Then the footsteps paused. The jangling stopped. Valerie's eyes fixed on the corner of the room, at the door, willing it to open, or not open. It seemed a long time before the feet moved

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away, going back the way they came. He had forgotten something. She wondered what.

Valerie tightened her grip on the gun, allowed herself a weak smile. Was that going to be her last thought on this earth? What had that man forgotten that was so important he went back for it?

She'd wait until he went away.

She made herself comfortable on the pillow, thinking about pulling it round and using it as a silencer. But it would be better if they all heard. Then they might be careful about who opened the door, especially if her forgetful friend outside happened to recognise a gunshot when he heard one.

She lay back and closed her eyes. The muzzle was cold against her temple, it jiggled around a little, the tremor of her finger round the trigger, the weight of the gun itself was heavy and unstable, holding it made her wrist ache.

She ignored a guffaw of laughter from next door. She said goodbye to the water sprinkler and the smoke alarm.

Valerie Abernethy closed her eyes and pulled the trigger.

Valerie Abernethy heard a click.

DONNIE MCCAFFREY SAT IN his Mini Clubman on the north-west bank of Loch Lomond, at Inveruglas, alone in his car, slowly steaming up the windows. He was parked right at the waterside, the most obvious place. During the day, even on a cold winter's day, this place was alive and buzzing, but now, on a dark evening, it took on the mystical aura of shape shifters and moving shadows; the subtle movement of the water deceiving the eye into seeing things it had not seen.

CARO RAMSAY

Or had it?

There could be anything up here, hiding away from lights and prying eyes. He looked around again, cursing himself for having a good imagination.

Inveruglas car park was hidden by high trees, shrubs, a small signpost on the main shore road pointing to a concealed entrance that led to the observation viewpoint. He had been here a few times with Isla and the boys. A family day out at the waterside, time for a paddle and an ice cream. But now, waiting, he looked around the car park with different eyes. An easy drive to Glasgow. And easy drive up north. An easy place to find. But why here? Once through the thick bank of trees, the narrow entrance opened up to allow access to the small vehicle car park, the café and the lower viewpoint that looked over the metal pontoons and the plinth with its brass map of the water and every one of the fifty-four islands.

He looked at it now through the eyes of a criminal, an obvious entrance and exit, with the smaller secondary route at the rear, accessed through the narrow line of trees, well hidden in this dense dark night.

When he was here before, he had climbed to the upper level of the viewing point with his eldest on his shoulders, sweating his way up to the large wooden sculpture, An Ceann Mor, with its seats and standing areas. He remembered the sign, hanging at an angle, from a single nail, that said barbecues not permitted. The wood underneath was charred to ebony cracks you could see the grass through.

That day the car park had been bustling: tourist coaches stopping for comfort breaks and photo opportunities, boat tours

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dropping off passengers on the pontoon, bikers meeting for coffee, kids eating ice cream, little old ladies resting their swollen ankles and drivers stretching their legs, but everybody stopped to take in the breathtakingly beautiful sight of the long view of the loch. His middle boy had eaten so much ice cream he had been sick on the way home. Twice. The new car had been three weeks old. He pressed the button to drop the window a little at the memory of the smell.

But this evening, Inveruglas was as cold and deserted as a Soviet winter. At 9 p.m. on the 25th of November there were no tourists enjoying the view, no lights casting a shadow over the dark and still water. There were no coaches sitting with idling engines, no caravans tucked away behind the trees. The hills were silent against the dark tumbling sky, and the rain was pissing down as usual, battering on the roof of the Mini where Donnie was trying to listen to 'Stay' by David Bowie, with the melodic shapes of Earl Slick on guitar, sideman par excellence.

He was enjoying himself in an exciting kind of way. He knew he had been early, leaving more time than necessary for his journey up from Glasgow, and he was appreciating the solitude and the music. He had been happy to leave Isla muttering about starting her Christmas shopping, sitting there in her PJs with the Argos catalogue open and a worryingly long spreadsheet printed off at the ready. She had got as far as her brother-in-law's yearly subscription for *What Camera* magazine when Donnie's mobile had bleeped. He had read the text and had been intrigued, and a little frisson of excitement had brightened up his Saturday night in front of the TV. Isla hadn't questioned it; she had merely looked up from the spreadsheet and asked, 'Are you going out

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to work?’ then a quick glance at the clock. ‘You had better wrap up. It’s chucking it down out there.’

He had nodded, kissed her on the cheek and left the warmth of the family home, shouting goodbye to the three kids playing quietly upstairs, then closed the door of his three-bedroomed semi and climbed into the Mini. A man with a mission.

McCaffrey looked around him. It was a lovely, lonely site at the north of the loch, deeply inhospitable in this bloody weather. Why here?

Costello would have her reasons.

He checked his phone again, then the clock on the Mini’s dashboard. Ten minutes to go. He gave some thought to Christmas; all that cooking, all that potato peeling, Isla’s dad.

With a bit of luck, he’d be working.

He was turning that around in his mind when he heard another vehicle, bigger than the small Fiat he was expecting. The air-cooled whirr of an old VW? The oblong shape of a camper was highlighted for a moment as it swung into the car park. Its headlights illuminated the trees and the shrubs that surrounded the café, the arc of brightness shone on the empty shelves and the seats upturned on the tables before being switched off. The vehicle drove behind the line of trees, moving from his sight. McCaffrey looked in the rear-view mirror with professional interest. Was this what he had been summoned to witness? He slid down in the driver’s seat, watching as a figure emerged from the bushes, thin and swift, moved quickly, driven by the weather, but not furtive. He walked like a young man, an impression added to by long slender legs and bulky jacket. He was holding something in front of him as he walked in plain

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sight round the windows of the café, into the darkness, then reappeared as an outline on the secluded path up to An Ceann Mor. Then he disappeared.

McCaffrey stayed in the Mini, watching out the rear-view mirror, then twisting in the seat to look through the rear-passenger and then the front-passenger window, but the figure had gone, swallowed by the trees and the darkness of the sky. It was bitter cold and as dark as the devil's armpit, as his mum used to say.

At least the rain was easing. The windows of the car steamed up again. He wished he hadn't had that last cup of coffee. He'd need to brace himself, get out and have a pee in the bushes. And he'd be better doing that before she appeared. He'd need to be quick before his willy froze.

He switched the CD off, wondering about the owner of the campervan. The driver had looked young so McCaffrey's mind turned to drugs and God knew they had enough problems with substance abuse around here and in Balloch and Alexandria. And there had been a spate of killings of the wallabies that inhabited some of the islands on the loch. A couple of weeks ago, the carcass of one poor beast had been spotted by a tour boat. It had been skinned and pegged out on a small patch of sandy beach, a bloodied pink mass for the entire world to see.

That had made the front page of the papers, and the drug issue was right in the public eye, now that it was affecting the middle classes and the tourists. And that guy from the campervan had been carrying something. If he was one of the gang killing the wildlife then there would be a small boat ready for him somewhere. The waters of the loch were very dark now.

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McCaffrey made a decision, his nagging bladder forgotten. No wallabies were going to be harmed on his watch. He got out the car, pulling up the zip of his jacket before winding the scarf round his neck. He dug his hands deep into his gloves and walked round the back of the Mini, ignoring the bite of the cold wind that scurried in across the water and the reminders from his bladder. It had stopped raining but the chill ate at his muscles. He felt as if he was wearing no clothes at all. He shivered, jogging across the path on to the soft grass and stared into the car park, seeing the distinctive outline of the two-tone Volkswagen camper. When he was a boy, these were the transport of vegetarian peace-loving hippies not animal-torturing psychopaths. He turned, cutting across the other car park to follow the path of the younger man, walking up to An Ceann Mor. The big wooden structure, with its bench seats and central walkway, was easily visible against the skyline.

Maybe if the wind had been quieter, he might have heard the small van pull into the car park, its headlights out and the engine off so the vehicle rolled with the lie of the land. If McCaffrey had looked back to check his car, he might have seen the man get out the vehicle, dressed in black, black gloves, black hat pulled low. He might have seen the long slim blade as he too followed the path up to An Ceann Mor.

VALERIE HAD NO IDEA where she was.

Something rough against her lips, her shoulder numb and her feet very cold, sticking out of her warm cocoon. It seemed she was bound in a cloud of cotton wool; soft and warm, but it

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bound her all the same. She tried, but couldn't move any of her limbs, or straighten up, or stretch out. She had no hope of getting up on her feet. Her head hurt. Her legs were burning, her thighs sticky with her own urine. And the room was reeking with the dull smell of faecal matter.

That was obvious at least. She had shat herself.

Opening her eyes, she looked across a green field that stretched forever, until it reached a piece of wooden fence, a flat solid white fence. As she allowed her eyes to focus, in the dark that wasn't really dark, she began to make sense of it all.

She had fallen on the floor, rolled off the bed taking her duvet with her. From the feel of it she had hit her head on the way down, probably off the small white bedside table, and as she had lain there drunk, her bladder and bowel had voided.

That wasn't a first.

And then the full horror of it. This was a hotel room, not her home.

Slowly she tried to unwind herself from the duvet, trying not to throw up and add to the mess of the bodily fluids. Another thought struck her through the maze that passed for her intellect nowadays. If this was in a hotel room then house-keeping would be coming in sooner or later. They couldn't find her like this, in this awful state. Alcoholism is the most private of diseases. It hides in plain sight.

In the end, after about ten minutes of writhing and slow acrobatics, she freed herself and crawled across the carpet on all fours, leaving the duvet, soiled and wet, in a pile near the bottom of the bed.

She got to the door and, holding onto the handle, she pulled

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herself up on her knees and listened. There was a flash of a memory. Could she recall, vaguely, being here the night before, between the first and second bottle? Doing something like this at some time? She flicked over the plastic sign hanging from the doorknob. On the inside.

Do not disturb.

Not even sober enough to put the sign out.

Still not sober enough to have an accurate memory of it. From last night or this morning? Or this evening? She opened the door as quickly as possible, peering down the corridor, to the right and to the left before she slid the sign out, the scab on the palm of her hand nipping as she slid it up against the wood to the handle.

She retreated inside the room and tucked herself in the corner of the carpet and the door. She closed her eyes and slid down a little more, her body folding onto the floor.

Her eyes were crusty and jaggy. She picked at her eyelashes with inaccurate fingers, missing the islands of scabs, poking herself in the eye a few times, making her blink. She could sense the solidity of the darkness outside the room now. It was very quiet, much later at night. Maybe midnight. Maybe not. Time was very elastic these days.

Closing her eyes again, she tried to stand, levering herself up between the door and the wall, and then she saw the bed, minus the duvet, with the expanse of rumpled white sheet with dark islands of staining, and in the middle, framed by wrinkles in the Egyptian cotton, lay a small black gun.

A gun.

And then, as she held onto the wall, she remembered.

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She couldn't even kill herself properly.

She was a high-functioning alcoholic and had been for years. Her drinking never bothered her, it was life she couldn't really contend with. She had never suffered bad hangovers because she had barely ever sobered up. The constant top-ups gave her strength and kept that black dog from snapping at her too much, kept it from biting at her heels. She drank to be happy. Her drinking had brought her to this misery.

Why did she get a gun that didn't work? What was wrong with her that nothing, nothing ever went right?

She was too tired, and too sore to cry. What was the point? She picked up the gun and slid back down to the floor, her head thumping as she went. Crawling over the carpet, pushing the gun in front of her, she thought how bloody stupid it would be if the gun went off now and blew her leg off, or her arm off or half her face. Or if it went right through her brain, in the front and out the back, leaving her a dribbling incoherent vegetable, a bag on a drip in her arm putting nutrients in as the catheter took the metabolites out to fill another bag. She tapped it along a little more gently, slipped it into her suitcase using the zipped pocket at the side. Then she thought again, and stuck it into her handbag.

Her mobile phone was lying on the floor where she had flung it, so she slithered across the floor towards it. The black screen refused to swipe into life. She hadn't charged it up. Nobody had called her for weeks now, nobody except the police, and lawyers, and they weren't calling Valerie Abernethy the woman. They were calling Valerie Abernethy the victim. Or the suspect. No friends ever called her. No friends had called when Abigail had died. No friends had visited her in the hospital.

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Alcoholics do not have friends. They use people so much that friendships wear away, slip away, here with the roses and gone in the autumn.

It was winter now, the deep, deep winter.