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**Opening Extract from...**

# **A Song for the Dying**

Written by Stuart MacBride

Published by HarperCollins

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**Stuart  
MacBride**

**A SONG  
FOR THE DYING**



HarperCollins *Publishers*

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HarperCollinsPublishers  
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,  
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

[www.harpercollins.co.uk](http://www.harpercollins.co.uk)

Published by HarperCollinsPublishers 2014

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A catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-734430-7

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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# I

‘Now I’m no’ saying he’s *gay* – I’m no’ saying he’s ho-mo-sexual – I’m saying he’s a big Jessie. No’ the same thing.’

‘Not this *again...*’ A crescent moon makes a scar in the clouds, glowering down at them as Kevin picks his way through the frost-crisped grass, breath streaming out behind him. Nipples like little points of fire. Fingers aching where they stick out past the end of his sleeve, wrapped around the torch. The legs of his glasses cold against his temples.

Behind him, the ambulance’s blue and white lights make lazy search beams, sending shadows creeping through the trees at the side of the road. The headlights glint back from a bus shelter, the Perspex blistered and blackened where someone’s tried to set fire to it.

Nick clunks the ambulance door shut. ‘I mean, seriously, look at him: could he be any more of a Jessie?’

‘Will you shut up and help me?’

‘Don’t know what you’re so worked up about.’ Nick has a scratch at his beard, really going at it, like a dog with fleas. Tiny flakes of white fall from the face-fungus, caught in the glow of his torch like dying fireflies. ‘Just going to be another sodding crank call, like all the rest of them. Tell you: ever since they found that woman with her innards all ripped up

in Kingsmeath, every time-wasting tosser in the city's been on the phone reporting gutted women. Listen to them, the bloody place should be knee-deep in dead tarts.'

'What if she's lying out there, in the dark, dying? Don't you want—'

'And do you know *why* Spider-Man's a big girl's blouse?'

Kevin doesn't look at him, keeps his eyes on the grass. It's thicker here, the broken-glass stems dotted with rusty spears of docken and dead thistles. Something out there smells musty, fusty, mouldering. 'What if it's real? Might be still alive.'

'Aye, you keep telling yourself that. Fiver says she doesn't even exist.' His fingertips scrabble through the beard again as he kicks through a pile of crackling leaves. 'So, Spider-Man: action is his reward, right? Total Jessie.'

Two more hours till the shift's over. Two more hours of inane drivel and bollocks...

Is something sticking out from underneath that whin bush?

The long dark seedpods clatter like a rattlesnake as Kevin pokes at the branches.

Just a plastic bag, the blue-and-red logo glittering with frost.

'See me? See if *I* save some hot bird from a burning building? I'm expecting cash, or a blowjob at the very least. When did you last see someone going down on Spider-Man? Never, that's when.'

'Nick, I swear to God...'

'Come on, if it was you or me running about in our jammies, squirting random strangers with our sticky emissions, we'd end up on the sex-offenders' register, wouldn't we?'

'Can you not shut up for, like, five seconds?' The tips of Kevin's ears burn, like someone's stubbing a cigarette out on them. Cheeks are going the same way. He sweeps the torch beam back and forth. Maybe Nick's right? This is a waste of time. They're out here, sodding about in the freezing cold, on a Thursday night in November just because some rancid wee

sod thought it'd be funny to report a woman's body dumped at the side of the road.

'He's not a superhero: he's a pervert. And a Jessie. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*'

A hundred and fifty thousand people have a stroke every year, why can't Nick be one of them? Right now. Is that really too much to ask?

The hairy git stops rummaging in his beard and points. 'Aye, aye, looks like someone's been getting lucky. Found a right nest of condoms here...' He pokes the toe of his boot into it, rummages. 'French ticklers from the look of it.'

'Shut up.' Kevin chews at the skin on the side of his index finger, breath fogging up his glasses. 'What did they say?'

Nick sniffs. 'Woman, mid-twenties, possible internal bleeding, A-Rhesus negative.'

The tarmac scrunches beneath Kevin's feet as he picks his way around the bus shelter. 'How did they know?'

'That she was here? Suppose—'

'No, you moron, how did they know what her blood type was...?' Kevin stops dead. There's something behind the shelter, something person-sized.

He lurches over, feet slipping on the icy tarmac. But it's only a hunk of carpet, the faded green-and-yellow swirly pattern, spotted with darker stains. Dumped by some dirty scumbag who couldn't be arsed going to the council tip. What the hell was wrong with people these days?

It wasn't like...

There's drag-marks in the grass, leading away from the carpet.

Oh God.

'And don't get me started on Superman!'

Kevin's voice cracks. So he tries again. 'Nick...?'

'I mean, what kind of pervert goes to work wearing blue tights—'

'Nick, get the crash kit.'

‘—bright red pants over the top? Could he be any more, “look at my crotch, for I am the Man of Steel!” And he’s faster—’

‘Get the crash kit.’

‘—speeding bullet. What woman wants—’

‘GET THE BLOODY CRASH KIT!’ And Kevin’s running, slithering through the grass at the side of the bus shelter. Crashing through the whip-fronds of dying nettles, following the drag-marks.

She’s lying on her back, one leg curled under her, the other pale foot smeared with dirt. Her white nightdress has ridden up around her thighs, a yellow cross staining the fabric across her swollen abdomen – distorted by what’s been stitched inside. Scarlet blooms through the nightdress: poppies, dark and spreading.

Her face is bone-china pale, freckles standing out like dried bloodstains, coppery hair spread out across frost-sharpened grass. A golden chain glints around her throat.

Her fingers tremble.

She’s *alive*...

Six Years Later



## 2

The wall hit me between the shoulder blades, then did the same to the back of my head. An explosion of yellow light. A dull *thunk* deep inside my skull. A grunt broke from my throat. Then again as ex-Detective Sergeant O'Neil slammed his fist into my stomach.

Glass rippled inside me, tearing, shredding.

Another fist cracked my ringing head to the side, sending fire burning across my cheek. Not O'Neil this time, but his equally huge mate: ex-Constable Taylor. The pair of them must've spent most of their sentences in the prison gym. Certainly would explain how they managed to hit so bloody hard.

Another fist to the guts. Jerking me against the corridor wall.

I lashed out with a right, the knuckles screaming as they tore into O'Neil's nose. Flattened it. Snapped his ugly, wedge-shaped head back. Painted an arc of scarlet in the air as the big bastard staggered away.

Right. One not so much *down* as on hold. A couple of seconds would be enough...

I threw an elbow at Taylor's big round face. But he was fast. A lot faster than someone that size should have been.

My elbow cracked into the wall.

Then his fist smashed into my cheek again.

*THUNK* – my head battered off the wall. Again.

This time my elbow caught him right in the mouth, an electric shock charging up my funny bone where it mashed through his top lip and teeth. More scarlet in the drab corridor. It dribbled down the front of his prison-issue sweatshirt, spreading out like tiny red flowers on the grey fabric.

He backed off a pace. Spat out a couple of white lumps. Wiped a hand across his mouth, smearing the blood. The words came out all wet and lispy through the gaps where those teeth used to be. ‘Oh, you are tho *dead*.’

‘You really think two against one is enough?’ I flexed my right fist. The joints stabbed and screamed, every movement like someone was digging burning needles through the cartilage and into the bone.

Then O’Neil bellowed. Charged. Face a streaked mess of crimson and black.

*CRACK* I hit the wall again, all the breath abandoning my body in one tearing groan. A fist in the face. Vision blurred.

I swung, but it went wide.

Again.

O’Neil landed another one, and a choir of vultures screeched in my head.

Blink.

Stay upright. Don’t let them get you on the ground.

I wrapped my hand over his face and dug my thumb into what was left of his nose. Gouging into the warm slippery mess.

He *screamed*.

Then it was my turn as Taylor stamped his size elevens down on the bridge of my right foot. Something inside *tore*. Scar tissue and bone parted. Stitches ripped free, wrenching open the bullet hole. And all plans to stay upright disappeared in a wave of raw throat-tearing agony.

Like being shot all over again.

My right leg gave way. The granite-coloured floor rushed up to greet me.

Curl up. Make a ball of arms and legs, protect the vital organs, cover the head...

Feet and fists battered into my thighs, arms, and back. Kicking, punching, stomping.

And then, darkness.

...

'... in't de ... with...?'

'... bloody n ... se, f...'

...

'... n, he's coming roun...'

A sharp jolt to my cheek.

Blink.

Blink.

Cough... It was like someone had taken a sledgehammer to my ribs, and every jagged heave from my lungs just made it worse.

O'Neil stood over me, grinning down with his blood-smearred face, nose skewed off to the left. Voice all bunged up, like he was doing an advert for decongestant. 'Wakey-wakey, princess. Bet you thought you'd never see me again, eh?'

Taylor had a mobile phone to his ear, nodding while he explored the gaps in his teeth with his tongue. 'Yeah, I'll put you on thpeakerphone.'

He pressed something on the screen, then held the thing out towards me.

Fancy new phone. Definitely not allowed in prison.

The screen flickered, going from washed-out brightness to a close-up of someone's face, the features all blurry. Then whoever it was moved back and the whole thing slithered into focus.

Mrs Kerrigan. Her brown hair was piled up in a loose bun on top of her head, the roots showing streaks of grey. A

pinched face, with bright red lips and sharp little teeth. A crucifix floating in her cleavage. She pulled on a pair of glasses and smiled. *'Ah, Mr Henderson... Or should I be calling yez, Prisoner Henderson now?'*

I opened my mouth, but O'Neil placed his right foot on top of mine and pressed. Shards of burning glass dug into the skin, turning the words into a high-pitched hiss between clenched teeth.

*'Here's how this works. Mr Taylor and Mr O'Neil here will be payin' yez a little visit every now and then, and batterin' the livin' shite out of ye. And every time yez are coming up for review – ye know, when they're thinkin' of lettin' yer sorry arse back out on the streets? Every time that happens they're goin' to give ye another doing and tell everyone ye're the one who started it.'*

O'Neil's grin got wider, a dribble of bloody spittle snaking out from the corner of his ruined mouth. *'Every time.'*

*'This is what ye get for sticking a gun in my face, ye wee gobshite. Yez're now my pet project, I'm going to screw with ye till I get bored of it, and then I'm goin' to have ye killed.'* She leaned forward, out of focus again, till her red mouth filled the screen. *'But don't worry, I don't bore that easy. I plan on screwin' with ye for years.'*

Eighteen Months Later

### 3

‘Sadly, we continue to see a deplorable level of violence perpetrated by Mr Henderson.’ Dr Altringham rapped on the table with his knuckles, as if it was a coffin lid. He blew the floppy grey fringe out of his eyes. Adjusted his glasses. ‘I really can’t recommend release at this date. He represents a clear and continued danger to the general public.’

Twenty minutes of this and I still hadn’t climbed out of my seat, limped over to where he was sitting, and battered his brains out with my cane. Which was pretty good going, given how ‘dangerous’ I was. Perhaps it was Officer Barbara Crawford’s calming influence? She stood at my right shoulder, looming over me in my orange plastic chair, her thick knot of keys an inch from my ear.

Babs was built like a fridge freezer, tattoos sticking out from the sleeves of her shirt, wrapping around her wrists and onto the backs of her meaty hands. Barbed wire, flames. ‘FAITH’ on one set of knuckles, ‘HOPE’ on the other. Her short hair stood out from her head in tiny grey spikes, dyed blonde at the tips. Very trendy.

They’d done their usual and arranged the furniture so the big table faced a single chair in the middle of the room. Me and Babs on this side, everyone else on the other. Two

psychiatrists; one threadbare social worker with big square glasses; and the Deputy Governor, dressed as if she was on her way to a funeral. All talking about me as if I wasn't even there. Could've stayed in my cell and saved myself the aggro.

We all knew where this was going anyway: *release denied*.

I leaned forward in my chair, ribs creaking from yesterday's beating. Every time, regular as clockwork. The only thing that changed was the cast and crew. O'Neil got himself shanked in the showers four months ago. Taylor got released after serving half his term. Then it was two different Neanderthal bastards ambushing me in the corridors and delivering Mrs Kerrigan's 'messages'. And two more after them.

Didn't matter what I did, I always ended up back here, bruised and battered.

Release denied.

Even managed to track down the guy who replaced O'Neil. Caught him on his own in the prison laundry. Broke both his arms, left leg, dislocated every finger he had, *and* his jaw. Mrs Kerrigan just got someone else to take his place. And I got an extra, unscheduled, arse kicking.

The Deputy Governor and the psychologists could hold all the review meetings they liked, the only way I was getting out of this place was in a body-bag.

I closed my eyes. Let it burn.

Never getting out of here.

The walking cane was cold between my fingers.

Should've killed Mrs Kerrigan when I had the chance. Wrapped my hands around her throat and throttled the life right out of her. Eyes popping from the sockets, tongue swollen and black, hands scrabbling against mine while I squeezed and squeezed. Chest heaving on air that wasn't there...

But no. Couldn't do that, could I? Had to play the good guy. The bloody idiot.

And what did *that* get me? Stuck in here till she got bored and had someone slit my throat. Or stab me in the kidneys

with a home-made chib, sharpened on a cell wall and smeared with shit for a nice infected wound. Assuming I survived the blood loss.

No more stupid review meetings, just a trip to the infirmary, then on to the mortuary.

At least I wouldn't have to sit here, listening to Altringham's lies. Telling everyone how violent and dangerous I was...

I ran my fingers up the cane till they got to the handle. Tightened my grip. Pulled my shoulders back.

Might as well live down to his expectations and remodel his smug lying face a bit. Could do some serious damage before they dragged me off. Had nothing to lose anyway. And at least I'd get the satisfaction of—

Babs's hand landed on my shoulder, her voice barely loud enough to count as a whisper. 'Don't even think about it.'

Fair enough.

I let my shoulders slump again.

Dr Alice McDonald – psychiatrist number two – held up her hand. 'Now hold on a minute: the murder charge was *dismissed*.' Her curly brown hair made a loose ponytail at the back of her head, a few stray wisps breaking free to glow in the overhead lights. Pale-lilac shirt cuffs poked out of the sleeves of her pinstripe suit. 'Mr Henderson didn't kill his brother, the evidence against him was fabricated. It's a matter of record. The appeal judge—'

'I'm not talking about his brother's murder. I'm talking about this.' Altringham plucked a sheet of paper from the table in front of him and waved it. 'In the last eighteen months, he's assaulted and seriously injured *seventeen* other inmates. Every time he gets anywhere near being released, he attacks someone.'

'We've been over this, it's—'

'Yesterday, he broke a man's nose, and left another with a fractured cheek!' Altringham knocked on the coffin again. 'Does that sound like the actions of someone we should be unleashing on an unsuspecting public?'



Yeah, I got in a couple of good punches, till they forced me into a corner. Grinning and laughing. Letting me swing at them, so it'd look better when they made their formal complaints. But what was I supposed to do, stand there and take it?

Even after all this time...

Alice shook her head. 'It's hardly Mr Henderson's fault that he keeps being attacked. If the prison did a better job of managing inmate interactions, maybe he wouldn't have to defend himself the whole time.'

The Deputy Governor narrowed her eyes. 'I resent *any* implication that this institution isn't doing its duty where custodial safety is concerned.'

Altringham blew out a breath. 'No one's safe where Mr Henderson's concerned. He's pathologically incapable of—'

'That's not the case at all, there's a clear pattern to the attacks *against* Mr Henderson that—'

'Yes, and that pattern is his self-destructive personality! This is nothing more profound than a simple need to punish himself due to survivor's guilt. It's not a conspiracy, it's simple psychology and if you were able to see past your personal bias on this case you'd know that.'

Alice poked Altringham in the shoulder. 'I *beg* your pardon! Are you suggesting that I'm incapable of—'

The Deputy Governor slammed her folder down on the tabletop. 'All right, that's enough!' She glared at Alice, then turned and did the same to Altringham. 'We're here to discuss Mr Henderson's release, or continued incarceration, like professionals. *Not* bicker and quarrel like small children. So, moving on.' The Deputy Governor held out a hand. 'Dr McDonald, you have your report?'

Alice pulled the top sheet from the leather folio in front of her and passed it over.

The Deputy Governor frowned at it for a bit, then turned it over and did the same with the back. Then placed it on the table. 'And Dr Altringham?'

He slid his along to her and she frowned at that for a while too.

Officer Babs leaned in, her voice still an almost-whisper. 'How's the arthritis?'

I flexed my right hand, the knuckles all swollen and bruised from breaking ex-DI Graham Lumley's cheek. 'Worth it.'

'I keep telling you: lead with your elbows, or only punch the soft bits.'

'Yeah, well...'

The Deputy Governor put Altringham's report down on top of Alice's, then sat up straight. 'Mr Henderson, after careful consideration—'

'Don't bother.' I slouched further down in my plastic seat. 'We all know where this is going, so why don't we just cut to the bit where you send me back to my cell?'

'After careful consideration, Mr Henderson, and having reviewed all the evidence and expert analysis, it is my belief that your continuing use of violence necessitates your retention in this facility until a full investigation can be carried out into the events of yesterday.'

So, same as usual then.

Stuck in here until Mrs Kerrigan finally got bored and had me killed.

Now  
(Six Months Later)  
Sunday

## 4

*'... more from the scene as we get it. Edinburgh now, and the family of missing six-year-old Stacey Gourdon have issued an appeal, asking her abductors to return her remains...'* The TV in the rec room was mounted in its own tiny cage, high up on the wall, as if the prison thought it was as likely to do a runner as all the other inmates.

Ex-Detective Superintendent Len Murray picked up a plastic chair and stuck it down next to mine. Settled into it, a smile distorting his Robin-Hood-style grey goatee. The strip-lights glinted off his bald head and little round glasses. A big man with a big rumbling voice. 'You're going to have to kill her. You know that, don't you?'

In her private cell, the woman on the television gave a grim nod. *'Stacey Gourdon's bloodstained dress and trainers were found by officers searching woodland in Corstorphine...'*

I stared at him. 'Don't you have something better to do?'

'Ash, the bog-hopping bitch is going to keep you in here till you top yourself, or she sends someone in to do it for her. Time to be proactive.'

'I mean, you've got what, four more years to serve? You should take up a hobby. Woodwork. Or learning Spanish.'

The picture changed to a run-down two-up two-down in a manky council estate, a scrum of reporters jostling for position as the front doors opened and a hollow woman stared out with dead eyes and trembling fingers. A fat bloke just visible over her shoulder: bloodshot and sniffing, biting his bottom lip.

The woman cleared her throat. Looked down at her shaking hands. 'We...' Another go. *'We just want her back. We want to bury her. We want the chance to say goodbye...'*

Len leaned back in his seat and slapped a hand down on my shoulder. Squeezed. 'I know a couple of lads who'll do the job for two grand.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'They'll go up against Andy Inglis for a measly two thousand pounds? Are they mad?'

'They're not local. And they need to get out of the country anyway. Besides: who'd know?'

*'... please, she's our little girl ... Stacey was everything to her dad and me...'*

'I'd know.'

Palm it off to some pair of idiots? No chance. When Mrs Kerrigan died, it would be with my hands around her throat. Squeezing...

Assuming I ever got out of here.

I turned back to the screen, where Stacey's mother was collapsing, every sob caught in the strobe of camera flashes.

Back to the studio. *'... with any information can call the number at the bottom of the screen.'* The newsreader shuffled her papers. *'Oldcastle Police have confirmed that the woman's body, discovered on waste ground behind the city's Blackwall Hill area in the early hours of yesterday morning, belonged to Claire Young, a paediatric nurse at Castle Hill Infirmary...'*

Len shook his head. 'The trouble with you is you think revenge has to be up-close to be personal. You never did learn to delegate properly.'

'I'm not delegating that bitch's—'

‘What does it matter who does it, as long as she’s dead?’ He shook his head. Sighed. ‘You can’t kill her yourself if you’re still stuck in here. And you can’t get out of here till she’s dead. Catch twenty-two. And for two grand, you can make it all go away.’ Len cocked an imaginary pump-action shotgun and shot the newsreader in the face. ‘Think about it.’

‘Yeah, because I’ve got two thousand pounds burning a hole in my pocket.’

*‘... appeal to the media’s conscience to respect her family’s wish for privacy...’*

Good luck with *that*.

‘Could always borrow it?’

‘That’s how I got into this mess in the first place.’

The door to the rec room thumped open and a hard voice cut across the TV. ‘Henderson!’

I turned, and there was Officer Babs. She jerked a thumb. ‘You got a visitor.’

A man in a brown leather jacket sauntered into the room, hands in his pockets. He was at least a head shorter than Babs, hairy, with thick sideburns.

He wandered over till he was standing between me and the television.

*‘Here’s the sport now, with Bobby Thompson...’*

Hairy Boy smiled. ‘Well, well, well, so you’re the ex-DC Henderson I’ve heard so much about?’ His accent was obviously Scottish, but indistinct, as if he didn’t really come from anywhere. ‘So ... tell me about Graham Lumley and Jamie Smith.’

‘No comment.’

Officer Babs appeared at his shoulder, dwarfing him. ‘Detective Superintendent Jacobson is having a squint into what happened outside the laundry a fortnight ago. So don’t be a dick: cooperate.’

Yeah, right. ‘A full Detective Superintendent? Investigating a fight in a prison corridor? Are you not a bit overqualified?’

Jacobson tilted his head to one side, staring at me. Eyeing me up and down like he was about to ask me to dance. 'Official report says you attacked the pair of them. Shouting and swearing and crying, like a... Hold on, let me get this right.' He pulled out a small black police-issue notebook. Flipped it open. "Like a big-Jessie escaped mental patient." That Graham Lumley's got a way with words, doesn't he?'

Len crossed his arms across his big barrel chest. 'Lumley and Smith are lying wankers.'

Jacobson turned a bright, shining smile in Len's direction. 'Lennox Murray, isn't it? Ex head of Oldcastle CID. Eighteen years for the abduction, torture, and murder of one Philip Skinner. Thanks for playing along, but I'd like hear what Mr Henderson has to say. OK? Great.'

I copied Len, arms folded, legs crossed. 'They're lying wankers.'

Jacobson dragged a chair over, then sank into it. Scuffed it forwards a couple of feet till his knees were nearly touching mine. A chemical waft of Old Spice drifted out from him. 'Ash... I can call you Ash, can't I? Ash, the head psychologist here tells me you've got a self-destructive personality. That you sabotage yourself by picking a fight every time you come up for review.'

Give him nothing back but silence.

Jacobson shrugged. 'Of course Dr Altringham strikes me as a bit of a tit, but there you go.' He raised a finger, then pointed it over his shoulder in the general direction of the television. 'Did you see the story about the nurse they found dead behind Blackwall Hill?'

'What about her?'

'Dead nurse. Dumped in the middle of nowhere. Ring any bells?'

I frowned at him. 'You have any idea how many nurses go missing in Oldcastle every year? Poor sods should get danger pay.'

'Smith and Lumley really did a number on you, didn't they?'

Yeah, there's the bruised cheek and the squint nose, but I'm guessing all the real bruising's confined to the thighs and torso, right? Where it won't show?' Another shrug. 'Unless you strip off, of course.'

'I'm flattered, but you're not my type.'

'Claire Young: twenty-four, brunette, five seven and a half, about eleven stone three. Pretty, in a big-boned kind of way.' He held his hands out, either side of his lap. 'You know, childbearing hips?'

I looked over at Babs. 'Ever fancy a career as a healthcare professional? Bet no one would dare jump you.'

She smiled back at me. 'Might have to – cutbacks. They're talking about voluntary redundancies.'

Jacobson stood. 'I think I'd like to see Mr Henderson's cell now.'

It wasn't exactly a huge room – the set of bunk beds just fit and no more. You could reach out and touch the institution-grey walls on either side with a bit of a stretch. Small desk at the far end, a chair, a sink, and a sectioned off bit for the toilet. Officially large enough for two fully grown men to share for four years to life.

Or one fully grown man who *really* didn't like having a cellmate. Funny how they all turned out to be so accident prone. Falling down and breaking things. Arms, legs, noses, testicles...

Officer Babs filled the doorway, arms folded, legs apart, face like a slab of granite as Jacobson stepped into the middle of the cell, hands out as if he was about to bless it.

'Home sweet home.' Then he turned and squeezed up close to the desk, leaning forward, peering at the single photograph Blu-Tacked to the wall above it: Rebecca and Katie on Aberdeen beach, grinning for the camera, the North Sea glowering in the background behind them. School jumpers on over orange swimsuits. Buckets and spades. Katie four, Rebecca nine.



Eleven years and two lifetimes ago.

His head dipped an inch. 'I was sorry to hear about your daughters.'

Yeah, everyone always is.

'Can't have been easy – having to grieve for her while you're stuck in here. Fitted up for your brother's shooting. Getting the crap pounded out of you on a regular basis...'

'There a point to this?'

He reached into his leather jacket and pulled out a copy of the *Castle News and Post*. Dumped it on the bottom bunk. 'From last week.'

A photo filled most of the front page: a close-up of a chunky woman's face, framed with ginger curls, a thick band of freckles across her nose and cheeks like Scottish war paint. A couple of photographers were reflected in her sunglasses, their flashes going. She had one hand up, as if she was trying to shield her face from the cameras, but hadn't quite made it in time.

The headline stretched above the picture in big block capitals: "CHRISTMAS MIRACLE!" BABY JOY ON THE WAY FOR INSIDE MAN VICTIM'.

Dear God, now *there* was a blast from the past.

I hooked my cane onto the bunk bed's frame and sat on the mattress. Picked up the paper.

## EXCLUSIVE

The Inside Man's fifth victim, Laura Strachan (37), has some wonderful news. Eight years after she became the first woman ever to survive being attacked by the twisted sicko who killed four women and mutilated three more, plucky Laura is expecting her first baby.

Doctors thought there was no chance she'd be able to conceive after the injuries she

received when the Inside Man cut her open and stitched a toy doll inside her stomach. A source at Castle Hill Infirmary said, 'It is a miracle. There is no way she should have been able to carry a child to term. I am so pleased for her.'

Even better, it looks like the bundle of joy will be an early Christmas present for Laura and her husband Christopher Irvine (32).

Turn to Page 4 for full story →

I turned to page four. 'Thought she was all broken inside.'

'You were on the original investigation.'

I skimmed the rest of the article. It was light on fact, padded out with lots of quotes from Laura Strachan's friends and a competition to guess what the baby's name would be. Nothing from Laura or the father-to-be. 'They didn't bother talking to the family?'

Jacobson settled back against the desk. 'Her husband lamped the photographer, then threatened to shove the camera up the reporter's backside.'

I folded the paper and placed it beside me. 'Good for him.'

'It took two years of corrective surgery and a monster lump of fertility treatment, but she's seven and a bit months gone. Should be due last week of December. Some fine upstanding member of the press got hold of her medical records.'

'Other than being a heart-warming story of triumph over adversity, I don't see what this has to do with me.'

'You let him go: the Inside Man.'

My back stiffened, hands curled into fists, knuckles aching. Spat the words out between gritted teeth. 'Say that again.'

Officer Babs shook her head, voice low and warning. 'Easy now...'

'You were the last one to see him. You chased him, and you lost him.'

'I didn't exactly have any choice.'

The corners of Jacobson's mouth twitched up. 'It still eats you, doesn't it?'

Laura Strachan grimaced at me from the front page of the paper.

I looked away. 'No more than anyone else we couldn't catch.'

'He killed four women. Then Laura Strachan survives. Then Marie Jordan. And if you'd caught him when you had the chance... Well, you're lucky he only mutilated one more woman before disappearing.'

Yeah, Lucky was my middle name.

Jacobson dug his hands into his armpits, rocked on his heels. 'Ever wonder what the bastard's been up to? Eight years and no one's heard a peep. Where's he been?'

'Abroad, prison, or dead.' I uncurled my fists, held them loose in my lap. The joints burned. 'Look, are we finished? Only I've got things to do.'

'Oh, you have no idea.' Jacobson turned to Officer Babs. 'I'll take him. Get him tagged and his stuff packed up. We've got a car waiting outside.'

'What?'

'We've not made it official yet, but the paediatric nurse found dead yesterday had a My First Baby doll stitched into her innards. He's back.'

My fists curled again.