

MANDA SCOTT
HEN'S
TEETH



About the Book

Shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction

Dr Kellen Stewart knows medicine can be used for good, but it can also be used to do great harm, that's why she left the profession.

When her ex-lover dies of a heart attack and shortly after she finds out that her brother, also a medic, died a few weeks before in exactly the same way, Kellen is convinced that they have both been murdered - after all heart attacks don't come in pairs.

As Kellen tries to find out who could have killed them she is drawn into a morass of vanishing corpses, drug barons and biomedical secrets - and danger. She desperately needs some answers - but they appear to be as scarce as hen's teeth.

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About the Author

Also by Manda Scott

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MANDA SCOTT

HEN'S TEETH

For my Family, with Love

Acknowledgements

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One

It was shortly after midnight when the phone rang.

I was lying in bed at the time, counting Artex ridges on the ceiling as a creative alternative to sheep and trying not to think too hard about life, the universe or anything.

Janine, who never lets the vagaries of our relationship interfere with her sleeping patterns, reached across me without waking and ripped the phone cord from the wall. The bedroom sank back into silence and the answering machine in the living room was left to take the call.

It's only ever Janine who gets calls in the wee small hours: a random array of journalistic crises that, invariably, will wait until morning. I lay back and listened with a kind of vacant curiosity. At that time of night a human voice, however strange, is better company than an Artex sheep.

'Kellen, are you there? It's Caroline.'

What?

I rolled out of bed, wide awake, jammed the line back into the socket and grabbed the receiver all in one go.

'Hi, Caroline. It's me. What's up?'

'Bridget's dead.'

Bridget? Mentor, teacher, friend and, a long, long time ago, my lover. The only one who ever counted.

She can't be dead.

Not Bridget.

'Kellen, are you still there?'

'More or less.'

'Could you come over? Please? The police are on their way. I need someone here.'

Don't we all?

'Will you come? Please.'
'I'm on my way.'

It's not far out of Glasgow along the Great Western Road over the switchback through Bearsden to Milngavie and out to the Campsies beyond. The last mile or two from the village to the small farmhouse at the foot of the Ben are slow; no street lights and a single-track road make for tentative night driving unless you happen to own a four-wheel-drive Land Rover, which I don't.

The police did. Two, and both of them in a great hurry to be at the farmhouse ahead of me. I pulled into a passing place after the second one tried to push me off the road and waited for a moment, listening to the late-night news on the radio.

A black 7-series BMW nosed along a few minutes behind the others. The green emergency light sat askew on the roof just above the driver's-side window, flashing dysrhythmically. The local GP.

I opened my door and stopped him as he tried to squeeze past. Not a popular move. A mid-thirties golfing executive with a sharp suit and an expensive tan glared at me from behind the wheel. Stravinsky conducted *The Rite of Spring* on the car CD. The window beside me slid open just far enough for me to catch the closing bars. His voice followed, carrying easily in the sudden silence.

'Move.'

It's a long time since anyone spoke to me like that.

I leant down and peered through the gap in the window.
'I'm sorry?'

'Get out of the way. I'm a doctor. I need to get past.' He enunciated each word with unnecessary care and then, when I didn't jump into action, he shoved the car into gear and let it grate forwards until the bumper touched my door.

I listened to the faint tap of the impact, estimated the size of his insurance compared to the value of my car and did

nothing.

He stopped, cursing. He jabbed one foot on the clutch and gunned the engine with the other.

'I'm a friend of Caroline's,' I said carefully. 'She called me.'

Wrong password.

I watched him while he categorized me: designer dyke, opportunist lover, 'friend' with sewn-on inverted commas. I could have told him that I was a therapist, but I wasn't sure it would cut much ice.

Try again. 'I was Bridget's partner in the business,' I said. 'I own half the farm.'

'I see.' Categories dropped. 'You better come down then. There's been an accident. Apparently Ms Donnelly's had a heart attack.'

'You've examined the body?'

He toyed with the clutch again and the car shuddered under my hand. Members of the lay public do not question the given truth.

I kept my face at the window and smiled my best professional smile. He humoured me.

'Not yet,' he said, 'but the police were quite specific.'

Jolly good. Diagnosis by constable.

'Thanks.' I kicked my car door shut to let him move on. 'I'll follow you down.'

I gave myself five minutes to cool off before I pulled out and eased my tired Escort down the last half-mile to the farm. Time to lose the aftertaste of bile that went with the BMW and to wonder how in heaven's name a man like that gets to enter the caring profession.

The guard lights flicked on as I drew in and lit up a yard empty of cars except for Bridget's old maroon Rover. There were a lot of skid marks though; someone had been playing handbrake turns in the gravel. Outside the gates, two

police Land Rovers and a black BMW sat in a tight phalanx, grouped ready for mass escape.

The back door to the farmhouse hung open. Inside, the kitchen smelled of wet dog and peat smoke. It always did. The rusty knife of nostalgia twisted in the old reminders of home and I stopped for a moment just inside the door, to take stock and to check for the changes inevitable after four years' absence.

The newspapers on the breakfast counter were new. And the walking boots stashed under the bench by the fire. Surprisingly little else.

Half a dozen empty mugs cluttered the Rayburn. The cats, displaced from their rightful space between the hot plates, lay in a furry pile on the flagged floor. Black limbs mixed with tabby-white and a single four-set of smoke grey. I crouched down and spoke to the king head on top.

'Ashwood, where's your mother?'

One amber eye opened briefly and the brow whiskers twitched.

Not here.

There were voices somewhere, separated by two or three sets of lath-and-plaster but not difficult to trace. Caroline: low and musical as ever, but with an edge of controlled hysteria audible even through the walls. Two others: one male, one female, both unknown, possibly the law.

I followed the sound upstairs, negotiating the creaking floorboards with the instinct born of long practice, and paused outside the half-open door to the bedroom.

Caroline was there, standing stiffly by the bed. A fragile marionette waiting for a new pull on the strings. Odd shadows patched the delicate bones of her face, hiding whatever was there. Her fine, blonde hair turned to mouse in the soft light of the bedside lamp, except at the ends, where it caught in her mouth and she chewed it into dark rats'-tails. A slim gold chain at her throat, half-hidden

beneath the open collar of her shirt, rippled to the rate of her pulse. A fast pulse. Too fast for comfort.

Opposite her, on the other side of the bed, four uniformed police officers performed perfect examples of the elevated ostrich manoeuvre – if you don't look, then what you can't see doesn't exist. Their eyes travelled blind circuits of the room, avoiding the dead woman on the bed, the live one opposite them and, above all, the series of prints and pencil life drawings on the walls. Too many likenesses. Too many boundaries broken.

The WPC was coping better. She sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes on Caroline's face and a hand on her arm, forming a bridge from living to dead.

The dead. Bridget. She lay on the bed, fully dressed. Ready to go and feed the chickens or clean out a loose box. Peaceful. Still. Untouched by the ridiculous tableau around her. I could see her face clearly from the door, the strong cheekbones enhanced by the light and by the odd falling of flesh that happens with death. Her short, dark hair was stuck to one cheek as if she had just turned over in her sleep.

At her side, his nose on her shoulder, lay Tan, the tricolour border collie we exhumed together from the living death of the RSPCA pound a lifetime or two ago. All he had to do was swipe his tongue across her cheek and wake her up. We could have got rid of the rest then, and sat on the bed and sorted things out. Except he didn't, so she didn't and we didn't. But I was waiting for it all the same.

Reality returned abruptly in the form of the adenoidal executive sneer of the BMW-driving GP speaking from the other side of the door.

'Ms Leader, a preliminary examination would certainly suggest a cardiac arrest. Your . . . ah . . . "friend" . . .'

You have to be joking. This is the 1990s, for gods' sake.

I stepped in sideways through the doorway.

““Partner”, doctor,’ I said. ‘She was her partner.’

Brilliant. I should have been in the theatre. People wait lifetimes to make an entrance like that. Tan was ecstatic. He left the bed at shoulder height, a black and white and gold heat-seeking missile, intent on coating me in dog drool. I crouched down to absorb the onslaught and watched while the six people around the room recovered from the sudden intrusion.

Caroline, predictably, was first. ‘Kellen!’ Her voice was raw. ‘My God, Kellen! What the hell are you playing at? Tan, *leave!*’

The dog let me go and returned to his post.

I joined his mistress by the side of the bed for a quick hug. ‘Sorry, C. The man’s an idiot. I couldn’t resist.’

The four representatives of the law developed goldfish eyes and looked hard at spots on the far wall. The doctor stared daggers and his jaw muscles worked overtime, gritting his teeth. The artificial light reduced his tan to an interesting shade of terminal jaundice and the suave flick of dark brown hair flopped less suavely over one brow.

I produced my best professional smile. ‘Everyone dies of cardiac arrest in the end, doctor. It doesn’t often happen spontaneously. Any ideas what triggered this one?’

He slicked back his hair and pasted on a lopsided smile of virtuous but nevertheless waning patience. ‘A very large number of things may cause the heart to fail, Ms . . .?’

‘Stewart, Kellen Stewart,’ I said and offered him my hand.

‘Dr Kellen Stewart,’ added Caroline helpfully, waving a hand to include the group in the general introduction.

The medic stopped in mid-shake, rearranging his preconceptions again. His eyes narrowed as he tried to work out where the ‘Dr’ came from.

‘PhD. Ancient Mongolian architecture,’ I lied. He knew it. ‘Edinburgh?’

'Glasgow.'

'The Royal?'

'The Western.'

It's a social ritual. Like dogs sniffing under tails. Three things matter when medics meet. Where did you qualify? Where did you do your house job? He was two up on me, but I knew his answer to question three: What do you do now? My ace in the sleeve. He was a GP or he wouldn't be there. I had no intention at all of letting him know what I did for a living.

I released his hand and turned to the policewoman on the bed. Somewhere along the line she had taken off her hat and let her hair fall, straight and dark, below her ears. It turned her back into a human being, young but dependable. When I walked in, she was focused on Caroline, sheltering her from the invasion, providing good, basic, unconditional support. By the time I finished bickering with the doctor, she was staring at me with the kind of frozen frown that is either utter distaste or a desperate attempt not to laugh. Impossible to tell which.

I nodded at her and raised a smile. 'Is there an obvious cause of death?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'There is no evidence so far to suggest that Dr Kemp's initial assessment isn't accurate—'

'That's ridiculous. She was forty-one, for God's sake! Nobody dies that young for no reason . . .'

It's a long time since I heard Caroline that close to the edge. Or with that much sheer frustration running under the surface. The WPC heard it too. At least, she frowned again and reached out a hand. Then she looked at me and took it back again. 'We'll get a post-mortem in the morning, ladies. That'll tell us what we need to know.'

We jumped, all three of us. It was the eldest and the most senior of the three police officers behind the bed. A wrinkled, sun-beaten man with peppered grey hair and a gorgeous West Highland accent. He would have looked a

great deal more at home hauling in creels in a lobster boat than he did in a uniform in a dead woman's bedroom.

He looked at Caroline. 'Are you the next of kin?' There was sudden compassion then, as if we'd crossed the line into real life, part of his patch after all.

'Aye. I mean, yes. There's a will somewhere . . .' She pushed a hand through her hair and her eyes flicked around the room. 'Downstairs, I think . . .'

He shook his head. 'No need now. It's a bit late in the day for that.' He looked at me. 'You can take care of the lass tonight?'

I nodded. 'That's why I'm here.'

'Good. There's an ambulance on its way. It'll be here any minute now, so you won't have to stay in the house with—' He broke off and stared distractedly towards the door, stroking the side of his nose. 'In the meantime,' he said, his gaze focusing back on me, 'perhaps we'd all be better downstairs, where there's a fire and a kettle.'

And no bodies littering the furniture. What an amazingly good idea.

He shepherded us in an orderly flock out of the bedroom and downstairs, to where the kitchen was filled with the warmth of the Rayburn and the sleepy opportunism of the cats.

The three young constables crowded round the fireplace and played inexpertly with the peat bricks and kindling. Lazy puffs of peat smoke filtered out into the room, thickening the atmosphere and adding to the late-night sense of dreamy unreality.

The young WPC joined Caroline at the Rayburn. Between them they made enough coffee to keep us all awake for the rest of the week and then began arranging a year's supply of biscuits neatly on the breakfast tray.

The doctor removed himself to the far end of the room and hovered by the door, staring at me poisonously through

the haze, as if I reminded him of someone he'd rather forget.

'D'you no think the lad needs company?' The voice at my shoulder glowed with rounded vowels. The weather-worn police inspector stood beside me, a full mug of coffee clasped in either hand.

I shook my head. 'If he does,' I said, 'it isn't ours. I think you'll find he's leaving.'

'No, no. He'll not be gone before the ambulance is here. We may as well make ourselves popular.' He held out his hand. 'The name's MacDonald, Stewart MacDonald,' he said, 'and our friend over there is David Kemp. *Dr* David Kemp.' A pair of hairy brows rose above a set of very balanced, very thoughtful sea-grey eyes. 'Since he's a colleague of yours,' he said, 'I think we owe it to him to share a drink. How do you suppose he takes his coffee?'

'Neat,' I said. 'By intravenous drip. With the serpent blood.'

'You reckon?' He tilted his head, giving the idea due consideration. 'I'd have said black, no sugar. Stimulation without the calories.' He gestured towards the door with one of the mugs. 'Shall we see who's right?'

We both were, oddly enough. The coffee went down like sewage down a sump, but the doctor wasn't staying to make polite conversation. Or even to say thank you. The dialogue was minimal, monosyllabic and uninspiring, and the BMW was gone in a violent spurt of gravel before anyone else's coffee was drinkably cool. Not quite the kind of man to inspire confidence in the open-hearted tendencies of the medical profession.

The ambulance arrived a good ten minutes after he left. They parked it in front of the gates and Inspector MacDonald borrowed the keys so that they could carry the body out the long way: through the hallway to the living room and out of the front door, thereby avoiding the

kitchen. The policemen carried her, all three of them, clattering downstairs in their duty boots, making not quite enough noise to wake the dead.

We followed them out on to the drive. Not for any more concrete reason than to see her go. A last goodbye. Something to fix the fact of death when all of it felt like a passing nightmare. I drifted out in Caroline's wake, aware that the young WPC was beside me. For support, perhaps. Or to see that I didn't do anything untoward.

Both of us watched as Caroline, the most obviously bereaved, stood on the tailgate of the ambulance and slid her hand under the blanket to ruffle the tangled hank of oak-dark hair that hung over the edge of the stretcher.

It wasn't, on the face of it, a particularly emotional gesture, but the blue flare of the emergency lights spun round as she did it and so my last memory of Bridget, whether I like it or not, is an upside-down ghoul-white grimace framed by a regulation NHS blanket. The kind of thing to haunt dreams for eternity.

I left Caroline with the policewoman and withdrew to the warmth of the kitchen. The other two followed me in a minute or so later and we shared yet another silent cup of coffee, each of us lost in a world of remembered death.

Inspector MacDonald came back in as the ambulance left. He stood in the kitchen doorway, where the dithering firelight pushed age and the time of night into the crags beneath his eyes. His voice was brisk all the same.

'Right then, ladies. That's it for tonight. I'd appreciate it if you didn't move anything from the bedroom. We'll be back for a wee look round first thing in the morning.' He bent down to pat the dog, his eyes on me. 'I take it you can see that the lady here gets some sleep, Dr Stewart?'

Maybe.

'I'll do what I can.'

'Good.' He nodded. 'I'll be off then. Don't worry, I can see myself out.'

He did just that and a moment or two later we heard the two Land Rovers grumble to life and grind their way up the drive towards the village.

We waited, riveted by the noise, until the last exhaust crackle had faded into the distance. I reached out then, giving her contact, trying to make the real unreal, to make the world all right. Caroline stood stiffly in my arms, her face set, holding tight to the edges of self-control.

‘The ponies,’ she said, ‘they need feeding.’

And so, at somewhere around 2 a.m., kitted out in boots and old jackets, we went out to the barn to feed the ponies.

Nothing had changed. Nothing ever did. Eight years on and it still smelled of creosote after the crazy summer when the four of us took the cow byre and turned it into the best set of loose boxes this side of the Clyde. There were still centuries-old cobwebs in the corner where the power hose didn’t quite reach. The streaks of bird shit and patches of dried beet pulp on the walls were possibly a touch thicker than they had been, but not so that you’d really notice.

The ponies were still in the same places, still with the same smell and the same feel. Perhaps a little more grizzled. Midnight had turned into a pale grey dawn. Tarquin had acquired a few more saddle marks and a couple more over-reach scars on the backs of his legs, and there was a new Connemara filly where Rain had been. I took time to make friends, feeding her a scrap of Polo Mint from the lining of the jacket pocket.

We worked together, a full displacement routine, filling overfull water buckets, retying bulging hay nets and feeding a barn full of ponies already somnolent after at least one late feed. They nuzzled warm half-questions into my hair or my pockets or the small of my back and I patted back a non-answer or rubbed it in under the base of the mane as each one wanted. ‘Nothing for you. Keep peace. Be kind later.’

And please don't get colic. Just this once, take a change in routine and don't throw a gut ache. Please.

I had just reached the end of my line when I realized that Caroline had gone.

I looked round for her, wishing desperately for the charade to be over so that we could go inside and talk. And cry. And find out what really happened. And begin to put the world back together.

'Caroline?' I called into the shadows outside the box. 'Are you there?'

'The bantams have gone.' Her voice was tight, like a cheese wire.

She was there, somewhere in the dim light of the forty-watt bulb at the end of the barn, oddly ethereal in the shifting shadows. Her body never quite followed her mind in the transition from town girl to farming woman.

Chickens came very low on my list of priorities.

'Forget it. We can find them in the morning. It's time you came inside.'

I bolted the last door in a hurry and got to her just as the control broke, the hard lines on her face folding finally, turning her back into the woman I used to know.

I took her back to the kitchen, made her coffee, then sat with her on the floor by the fire, holding her, keeping her boundaries solid while the first real waves of grief pulled her world apart.

It was a pattern set in a childhood long past, when my house was the one at the top of the hill and hers was one of the huddle in the valley. It snowed one Sunday morning, the first real white-out I remember. Everyone under the age of fifteen and a fair few over forty were out on the slope, making the most of the glass-packed snow. Caroline Leader was an iced-blonde waif, another anonymous kid in the mass of sliding figures. Our plastic-bag sledges rammed head-on halfway down the slope and she rolled the rest of

the way to the bottom in a slither of mushed grey snow. She grazed her knee and cried on my shoulder. Her mother was out, because her mother was always out, and so it was me that washed the knee clean, wrapped it with a torn-up tea-towel and then took a new friend home for tea. I was five years old at the time, her senior by eighteen months.

Later, at school, she cried over the passing boyfriends and consoled herself with the problem pages of the *Jackie* filched from my school-bag. Later still, when it wasn't boyfriends any more, she followed me through the identity crisis and out the other side, dry-eyed and peaceful, trusting me to lead the way safely. And then afterwards, when the first new experience crumbled to nothing, I still provided the shoulder and she still cried on it. Lovers may come and go, but your friends are with you for ever. Something like that.

So it was easier than it might have been, to sit there with my back against the big chair, rocking her gently back and forth, listening to her grieve over the woman who was my lover first.

Now and again, I fed another peat brick on to the fire so that I could keep my eyes on the flames and not have to think.

We slept there, in the kitchen, in the end. There seemed no need to wake her when the place was warm and lacked any immediate ghosts. I found spare bedding in the airing cupboard, banked up the fire and held her curled up tight in my arms as she cried herself out and then slept.

The cats slid down from the Rayburn and came to form a cordon, keeping the ghosts at bay until the dawn came and the siren call of the local rodent population drew them back out to the fields. Quite a long time after they left, I let go of the crowding memories and fell into a cramped and uneasy sleep. A cold nose behind my ear and a blast of dog breath on my face brought me back to time and space.

I reached out and found fur. The nose shoved again, more urgently, and a mass of dog hair draped across my eyes. Tan. He has a way with words.

'Time to go out, huh?' I spat out a mouthful of collie hair and was half-way through inching myself out of the tangled mass of bedclothes when I realized that I was alone.

'Caroline?' I looked blearily around the room.

'Here.' She sat on the tall stool by the Rayburn, dressed in clean jeans and a fresh white shirt with a towel slung round her neck and her hair still damp from the shower. The gold necklace lay quietly along her clavicles, no longer a useful index of a pulse.

The dog began to wash behind my ears. Very sweet, but not quite what I needed just at that moment. I slid back under the covers.

Caroline watched, faintly amused. 'Ignore him. That's his alarm clock routine.' She snapped her fingers. 'Tan, get lost.'

The collie gave me one last wet smacker and then retreated sedately to the foot of the stool.

I writhed out of the clutches of the duvet, feeling each of the joints in my spine as they uncreaked, and then wandered over to stand with my back against the Rayburn, warming out the knots while Caroline produced a mug of coffee.

'How are you?' I asked after the caffeine had filtered through to my brain.

'Better. Better than last night anyway. I've been up to the bedroom and had a look round.'

Gods. Could I have done that? 'And?'

'And . . . all sorts of things.' She stared at me hard, the fine blue patches under her eyes tightening up. 'I need your help, Kells,' she said eventually.

Good. Very good. Too many think they can cope on their own for too long.

I waited, trying to decide if I was too close to offer useful, objective therapy.

‘She didn’t just die, Kellen.’

Oh dear.

Some things are obvious beyond words. And sometimes curiosity overrides common sense – in answering late-night telephone calls, for instance. There is the odd occasion, however, when common sense wins hands down and this is one of them.

If the rest of the world wants to know how Bridget Donnelly died, then the rest of the world can do the finding out. I know my limits. In this case, I am a therapist and nothing else.

I reached out, finding her hand, and squeezed her fingers. ‘Caroline. Love. Denial’s a first line of defence, but —’

She jerked her hand away. ‘Don’t give me that therapy shit, Kellen Stewart. I am not one of your fucked-up clients. She’s dead and it wasn’t an accident. I called you last night because I thought you might still care enough to help. If you don’t, that’s fine, you can get the hell out of here . . .’

I didn’t say a word but she stopped anyway, a thin line chiselled across her brow.

Perhaps I wasn’t the best person to call.

‘Oh, shit, Kells. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be.’

I turned and looked out of the small leaded window over the sink. A waddling mallard led a late brood of ducklings in single file to the pond under the hawthorn hedge. Even the ducks hadn’t changed.

I took a deep breath and turned back. ‘I’d better go.’

She let me hunt down my jacket and dig my shoes out from under the bench and sat there without moving. It wasn’t until I reached the kitchen door that she turned and slid off the stool.

‘Kellen?’

'Yes?'

'Please don't go.'

I could have opened the door then and gone out. Out into the sunshine and the early morning frost. Away from the ghosts of the night and the past. Free.

Only 'I need you' said my long-lost childhood friend.

And what woman was ever born who did not need to be needed?

And so, finally, we talked. Caroline made another pot of coffee, built up the fire and took me through the events of the previous day. It was an average mid-September day: three treks of varying lengths in the foothills of the Campsies - mostly late-season tourists and the odd local schoolkid with 'time off' from school. None of them had been out of her sight for long enough to go to the house and back.

The farrier had turned up late in the afternoon to shoe one of the ponies and so it was dark by the time she had realized that the rest of the herd had not been fed and that her lover was not around. That was about six o'clock. It took her less than five minutes after that to find the body. She called me after midnight. In between, she lost six hours sitting with her fingers on a pulse, trying to make it go. Time does odd things sometimes.

The police had been overwhelmingly courteous and were obviously well acquainted with the domestic arrangements before they arrived, which says a lot for the value of village gossip. The GP with the fake tan and the designer haircut was not someone she recognized - an extra hand on loan from one of the big Bearsden practices, filling in while the local doctor was off on maternity leave. He had performed a cursory examination and confirmed the fact that Bridget was dead, but that was about as far as he got before I walked in and brought the show to a close.

'What do you want from me?' I asked when Caroline had ground to a halt.

I thought she hadn't heard, but then she disappeared into Bridget's office at the back of the house and came back with a cardboard folder. She hunted through it, pulled out a scrap of paper and tossed it across to me. 'Read that.'

It was a page roughly torn from a pocket diary dated the first week in August. An untidy hand had scrawled across it in black biro: 'Bride: Look after these for me. Please. Back soon. Thanks. M.'

Even had I not recognized the handwriting, there was only ever one other person in the world besides me who called her Bride.

I looked up at Caroline. 'Malcolm?' I asked.

'Mmm.' She sat down carefully in the chair by the fire and busied herself teasing knots out of the dog's coat. 'He turned up out of the blue on a Saturday afternoon a month or so ago. I was out with a ride and Bridget had gone into the village to get some batteries for the radio. He passed me on the lane as I was coming back. He couldn't drive past the whole ride and pretend not to see us, but I don't think he wanted to stop. He looked . . . strained . . . preoccupied. A lot worse than I've ever seen him. All he would say was that he'd brought us some hens for the farm and he'd come back later to explain what was happening. When I got home, there were six bantams in a basket in the porch and the note was on top.'

I tried to imagine Malcolm deliberately dumping half a dozen chickens on his sister. The mind boggled. 'I bet Bridget was thrilled about that.'

'She was all right. She doesn't . . . didn't . . . hate chickens as much as she used to.'

'And has Malcolm been back to explain yet?'

'No. And he won't be coming now.' She gave up on the collie's coat and stood up, shoving her hands in the pockets of her jeans. Her voice, when she spoke, had a new edge.

'He's dead, Kellen. Malcolm's dead. They found him in his office the morning after he was here.'

'*What?* Caroline, no!' I found myself back at the window, counting mallard chicks and breathing too fast. When I turned back to the fireplace, all I could see was the back of her head.

Bridget's brother was the driving force behind most of my professional life. From the night when he chaperoned me through my first full twenty-four hours as Junior House Officer on duty in his medicine ward, he had been there: a steady baseline, a friend in the camp, an icon of sanity in the insane world of hospital medicine. He made me coffee and taught me medicine. He brought me sandwiches late at night in the wards and taught me politics. He opened the magical doors into research so that I could walk away from the clinics and still be a doctor if I wanted. And, in the end, he was one of the few people who had really understood when I pulled out of medicine for good. To have him dead and for me not to know was, quite simply, unthinkable.

I stayed by the window watching the wind play across the surface of the pond. Caroline had retreated into the depths of the armchair, hugging her knees to her chest and chewing a rag-end of hair. She looked about fifteen years old and very scared. I caught her eye this time and held it.

'When did he die?'

'The twelfth of August.'

I don't believe this.

'That was six weeks ago, Caroline. Why in heaven's name didn't you tell me before this?'

'You were out of the country, Kellen. There was no way we could get hold of you.'

'Did you try?'

'Of course we did.' Her voice was a fingernail on glass. 'Bridget spent hours on the bloody phone trying to track you down. We had the consul all ready to put out a radio

message for you, but we'd run out of time by then. You wouldn't have been able to get back in time for the service. She cancelled it just before the broadcast.'

I kept my eyes on the pond and counted the leaves floating on the water.

'It wouldn't have taken much to leave a message at home,' I said eventually. 'The machine was always on, even when we were both away.'

'And would you have wanted to come home to a voice on a machine telling you that Malcolm was dead and you'd missed his service and all that was left was a stone? Would you? Really?' She shoved herself out of the chair and across to the window, making herself a silhouette against the morning sun.

'You've got to believe me, Kellen. We spent more time talking about that than anything else. Bridget was going to offer to stay away from the service so you could go without having to meet her if that's what you wanted.' She spun round to face me, her features animated more by pain than by anger. 'Have you any idea what that would have cost her?'

I don't want to think about that.

'Well?' Her voice was like a cat's, sharp and full of accusation. 'Have you?'

'I can guess.'

'Right. So back off.' Her lips were a thin-drawn line. 'Where the hell were you anyway?'

'In Oregon. I needed space.'

'So you got your space. Maybe it was better like that. The service was at the Tron. There's a stone at the family ground in Blairgowrie. You can visit any time you like.' She ran out of steam suddenly and leant back against the window sill, tired and drained again.

'This is your kind of thing. We were going to call you as soon as we heard you got home . . . but Bridget . . .' She looked up at the ceiling and through it to the empty bed in

the room above. 'She didn't want to disturb you until we were sure.'

'Sure about what?'

'Sure about what happened to Malcolm. She didn't believe that he died by accident. She wanted to get you to find out what happened, but she didn't want to call you until she'd got as much information as she could.' Caroline spun the folder towards me. It skidded across the floor and came to rest against my foot. 'Everything she found is in here.'

I let the stuff lie where it was.

'What did the medics tell you?' I asked. 'About Malcolm?'

'That he died at work. He'd been in working over the weekend and they found him at his desk when they went in on Monday morning.'

'Was there a post-mortem?'

'Of course. The report said that he'd had a heart attack. Stress. Overwork. All the usual medical bullshit. He was working an eighteen-hour day and a seven-day week in a job that he hated without enough money to finish the project. It didn't seem completely unreasonable at the time.'

It never does with medics. Overwork goes with the job. If you don't hit the bottle, something else will crack in the end. Except that Malcolm didn't seem the type to crack.

I looked across at Caroline. She was chewing a tail-end of hair, looking at me as if I was the only hope left.

Some hope.

'So why didn't Bridget believe it?' I asked.

'I don't know.' She shook her head. 'She did at first. She would have believed anything, I think. We were so stressed out with organizing the service and then trying to find you . . .' She bit her lip, stopped and changed direction. 'It wasn't until afterwards that we had the time to think. Then she started asking questions . . .'

Quite.

It is, after all, what lawyers are trained to do. It's just that most of them don't die as a result.

I took my mug and went to sit on the back step, looking out towards the pond and the fields beyond.

A young kestrel fought a thermal, trying to keep position over the muck heap, then closed its wings and dropped twenty feet in fewer seconds. It missed the mouse and flicked upwards again for a second try.

If I had a camera here, I could do something useful.

The dog pushed past me and came to sit at my feet. Caroline followed and stood leaning on the doorpost at my side, the folder hanging loosely from her fingers. All three of us watched the bird make another fruitless stoop. Two-nil to the rodents.

I took the folder from her hand and held it on my lap. 'So what did she find?' I asked.

'Nothing.' Caroline shook her head, her eyes still on the bird. 'That's why we didn't call you.'

I opened the file and flicked through the contents. There was a long, printed letter from Malcolm from a year or so before. When I knew him, he used to write once a fortnight, but Bridget, as a matter of general policy, never kept the letters. Something about not acquiring unnecessary clutter in her life. This one must have escaped the weekly clear-out. I ran my eye down the page and my name jumped out. I didn't stop to read it in detail.

Underneath the letter was a list of journal references written in Bridget's fine, angled script, detailing her brother's most recent publications and a list of the names, home addresses and academic positions of his close colleagues. None of the names was familiar, but then I had been out of medical academia for a good eight years, more than enough time for all the relevant personalities to change.

I read the reference list and tried to understand where Malcolm's work had taken him in the past few years. Somewhere into the stratosphere of high-tech molecular biology, a long way beyond my understanding.

Lastly, there was the scruffy note that had come with the basket of bantams. And the bantams had gone.

I looked up at Caroline. 'Have you found the hens yet?'

'No. They're gone. They were locked in the shed, Kellen. Someone had the key. The door's still locked and they're not there. Whoever murdered Bridget took the hens too.' Her voice frayed at the edges. She sat down carefully on the edge of the stone water-trough by the back door and kept her eyes fixed on the hawthorns beyond the pond.

I stood up and put my hand on her shoulder. 'What makes you sure it was murder?' I asked.

She didn't turn round. 'Instinct,' she said shortly. 'I wasn't sure about Malcolm, but I'm bloody certain about Bridget. Heart attacks don't happen in pairs. Not this pair anyway.' Her eyes flickered at me and then back to the pond. 'You don't have to stay if you don't believe me.'

'I know.'

I don't have to stay even if I do. I've kept away for the past four years. There's no real reason to change now.

I looked at the spider's webs, wet with dew, strung out between the reeds of the pond and remembered a promise I made a long, long time ago. 'But I have to say goodbye first.'

Once a long time ago, I stood in the kitchen doorway and promised that I would come back and say goodbye.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon of Saturday, 21 October. The rain hammered, unrelenting, on the window. Neither of us wept.

I carried out the final suitcase to the pile on the porch. Caroline was there, somewhere in the background, helping me pack. She helped me with everything then.

Bridget sat by the fire, watching me go, Tan at her feet and the cats ranged about her like a bodyguard.

‘Are you going to say goodbye?’

‘Not yet. I’ll come back later.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know. Later.’

‘You will say goodbye, Kellen?’

‘Of course. Just not yet. It’s too soon.’

Later. Not now. Later, I will come back and say goodbye. I promise.

And this is later and I still haven’t said goodbye and it is still too soon.

It felt strange going back in daylight. Upstairs, the house still echoed with the awkward silence that goes with death. Even the floorboards creaked more quietly.

I let myself into the bedroom and stood just inside the door, getting my bearings and trying to let go of the odd sense of unreality that had hit the night before. The room looked much as it ever did. The only difference was the bed. None of the men had thought to touch it after they’d lifted her body and so the duvet still held the shape of her, like a thumbprint on soft clay, and the dip in the pillow still showed where they’d lifted her head. The rest of the bed was as smooth as when it was made. Whatever happened to Bridget Donnelly, she hadn’t moved from the moment she lay down.

Nasty.

But I’m not here to start looking for answers. I’m here to ask questions.

I took my eyes off the place where she had been and let my gaze drift upwards until her eyes caught mine.

There’s a black and white print on the wall behind the bed, centred over her pillow. A high-contrast, grainy shot pushed hard to make the most of the late evening light and hand-printed on the big enlarger in the darkroom we set up in the attic.

It's the best shot I've ever taken of Bridget. She's sitting on top of the grave mound near the cairn in the beech wood. One knee is pulled up to her chin and her head is cocked to one side as she smiles down into the lens of the camera. Her smile is warm and relaxed. Her eyes are alive with the spirit of the time and the place. Her whole body radiates a vibrant, ethereal energy.

Nobody could possibly believe that this woman was ready to die.

Except that somebody did. And I don't know who or how or why. And if I want to find out, I am going to have to go through this kind of thing again and again and again. I am going to have to start searching the diaries and reading the letters and talking to the friends I haven't seen or spoken to since the day I left. I am, in fact, going to have to do all of the things I haven't got around to in the last four years and which I really, really quite definitely don't want to do.

Or I could just walk out, go home and let somebody else sort it all out.

I looked up at the print again.

It's her eyes that catch the soul and hold it. The sharp, ironic, intelligent eyes of a woman who loves. The eyes of a woman who doesn't give up.

She was never one to give up easily, Bridget.

Downstairs, Caroline was still sitting on the kitchen step with the dog.

I slid past her and walked across the yard, listening to the crunch of her feet on the gravel as she followed me across. We reached the barn together.

'Are you leaving?' she asked.

'No.' I hauled the door open. A warm wash of horse breath flowed out over the pair of us. 'I was going to help you feed the horses. I thought they might need it by now.'

'And then you'll leave after that?'