

MANDA SCOTT
NO GOOD
DEED



About the Book

For Detective Inspector Orla McLeod, violence is a way of life. As a child, her own world was ripped apart by a brutal, unforgettable moment of terror. So when the undercover operation she is spearheading goes disastrously wrong, she will do everything she can to protect the nine-year-old boy caught in the crossfire. For Jamie Buchanan was the sole witness to a cold-blooded act of savagery by a terrifying killer. And the only person to have seen his face . . .

To protect Jamie, Orla will abandon her world to find safety. But she and the boy are being hunted by a man who knows exactly what he needs to do to survive - kill them...

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Read an extract from *Into the Fire*

About the Author

Also by Manda Scott

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For my mother and for Naziema, with love

A great many people provided invaluable help and moral support during the process of writing this book. Most will go unmentioned but I am nonetheless grateful. A few of the key ones were: Robin, who helped with the geology, provided a place of peace to escape to and made it possible to climb; Nick, from Janes' online who made astute comments on firearms; Steve, who rescued my hard drive from imminent disaster and Jane Judd, my agent, who acted far beyond the call of duty to make completion possible. To all of these my heartfelt thanks with the usual proviso that any defects, misinterpretations or factual inaccuracies are mine alone. Continued thanks to Chloë and Debs for intelligent, constructive criticism of the various drafts and to Chaz for sanity by email.

One

Summer

In the long list of early prisoner releases, his was one of the least remarked; ostensibly a gift to both sides, in practice, welcomed by neither. He walked out of the gates at nine o'clock on the morning of the thirteenth of June, twenty-one years and three months to the day since they had first locked him up. The world lay in the grip of a heat wave so that the air shimmered above the tarmac and it was cooler by far inside than out. He hung around for a while, as if testing the heat and humidity of the air, an act that did nothing to endear him to those watching. In time, he stooped at the driver's door of the car waiting at the kerbside and then the one inside got out and he took over the wheel. There was a moment when it seemed he might have left his companion standing on the pavement outside the gates but he relented and the younger man, whose face was already on file and who was hardly an easy touch, was invited into the passenger side.

He counted three of them following, in varying rotations, in front or behind, as the car passed east towards the ferry at Larne. Two passengers and a very striking red-headed cabin assistant kept their eyes on him on the crossing to Stranraer. At the terminal, they handed him over to their Scottish counterparts and a different three watched him wave goodbye to his escort and rent a car. They followed in two cars on the road up to Glasgow. He took the tunnel and then the switchback and led them out to the pine forests at the southern tip of Loch Lomond where he let himself into

a self-catering cabin on the shores of the loch. The school holidays not yet being underway, half of the remaining six cabins in the group were conveniently empty and the watchers, with some gratitude, took up position in those on either side of the mark.

An hour after the man's arrival, he had a visitor. One of the city's more expensive whores, a woman with known connections in Ulster, drove up to the door, knocked twice and was granted admission. The watchers, all of whom were young and male, rigged up a microphone and directed it at the bedroom window, recording the results for later posterity. It was thus added to the file that the mark was not fluent in gutter Glaswegian but that his appetites were as diverse as might be expected in any man who has spent his third and fourth decades locked in a cell. The woman left in the early evening and the watchers had no more entertainment than the sound of a man breathing heavily in his sleep.

It was a newer, less seasoned watcher who recognized, around five o'clock the following morning, that she had heard the same pattern of breathing repeated three times in the space of two hours. No one likes to be woken before dawn for the sake of it and so she took the time to play the tape into a portable computer and compare the exact shape of the wave forms before she rang through to her superiors and asked for back-up and permission to break in. At six thirty, the combat team found a dead woman lying on the single bed beside a tape recorder that played a continuous loop of a man's breathing. The received wisdom from those on the scene was that the dead woman had been strangled. The pathologist's report later in the day suggested instead that the ring of purpled bruises on the neck occurred at least twenty-four hours ante-mortem and that the cause of death was, in fact, a simple fracture of the vertebral column between the third and fourth cervical vertebrae. Bruising on the left lower chin and the upper right parietal

region showed where the heels of both hands had been applied to achieve the twist. Later examination of the records found this to be the cause of death in at least one previous recorded killing by the same target.

A watch was put on all known associates but was called off on the grounds of wasted expense after a month with no result. A full case report was lodged with Interpol to the effect that the suspect was loose, whereabouts and intentions unknown. It is an unfortunate testament to the technological age that all those involved felt a computer flag to be a sufficient warning to the local police forces and no one deemed it necessary, or even useful, to pick up the phone and tell the one person who might really have needed to know that Colm Connaught O'Neil was out and looking for trouble.

Spring

Friday, 14 March

'Jamie?'

The child opened his eyes. It was dark in the room, darker than it had been, and there was snow feathering down the outside of the window. They had promised it for Christmas and it came instead for Easter, a gift from the god to make the world a cleaner, purer place. Large flakes flared orange in the sodium glare of the streetlight and piled in drifts against the lower sill, tinged to yellow by the years of filth and tobacco smoke staining the glass.

'Jamie? Can you hear me?' The child was entranced by the snow. He watched the patterns of it grow before his eyes and let the voice wash over him. 'Jamie? Please? I need your help.' The voice was smooth, like the glass, but warmer. It flowed around him, easing the pain. He curled tighter in his chair and turned his face to the dark. The snow had deadened all the other sounds as the evening

gave way to night; the noise of cars in the street, the kick-out from the pubs, the smash of a bottle dropping from the top of a neighbouring tenement down onto the street below, the lacerating give and take of a beating taking place somewhere far away but not quite out of earshot. That pain was not his. In these small things, life was kind.

Inside the room the quality of the quiet was different. His mother and her friend had been silent long since but there was no surprise in that. He had seen the needles and the small ritual of injection. He knew the pattern of this and the time it would last and he knew he was safe, from that quarter at least, for most of the darkness. The other sound, the voice, was new and uncomfortable. Usually nobody spoke and if they did, it was simplest often not to listen. He had a lot of practice in not listening. Watch the things that move beyond the window and don't listen. That way is safe.

'Jamie? Jamie, listen. The men will come back soon and when they do, they will hurt you again. You know that. If you help me, I can stop them.' The voice was soft and low, and the accent strange, like the ones on the news, entirely unlike the flat vowels and guttural glottal stops of his world. He couldn't place the voice and that worried him. He hunched his shoulders, pulling himself smaller, blocking out the noise. It came through all the same. 'Jamie? It's me, Sandra. Trust me. I can get us out of here. But you have to help me first.'

Sandra. He struggled to fit a face to the name. An image came of flashing amber eyes with black stripes flaring outwards, like a tiger. The thought made him smile. He turned into the dark of the room. 'Jamie?' She sounded more hopeful. 'Over here. Under the sofa.' Under the sofa? Now that really was strange. With regret, he watched one last layer of snow build on the sill and then he left the safety of his chair.

The sulphured glow of the streetlights pushed in a semi-circle as far as the television but beyond it the room was as

black as the night outside. The stench of stale cigarette smoke, cheap scent and congealing chow mein hung, waiting, in the darkness. By the window, the air was cold and clean and welcoming. He nearly turned back but the voice drew him on. 'Jamie? Not much further now.' So he went on, feeling his way forward, past the bottles and the needles, the remains of the takeaway and the debris of clothing, to the inert bulk of his mother's body. She lay across the sofa, locked in a sleeping embrace with one of the other two women. He searched among the tangle of limbs and heads for the flash of light from the eyes. 'Underneath,' said the voice. He crouched down on the floor. She was right. There was, indeed, a woman lying underneath the sofa. His eyes were adjusting slowly to the absence of light but even in the gloom he could see the pale skin on the undersides of her arms with the flat white planes of the old scars and the fresh patterns around them of handprints and bruises. Her hair was crushed and matted, a scarecrow's nest in bottle blonde with the streaks of scarlet through it that matched the fake suede of her skirt. A glimmer of gold pulsed at her navel, rising and falling with the steady rhythm of her breathing. With difficulty, because the space from the base of the sofa to the floor was not great and the weight of his mother made it less than it might have been, she turned her head to look at him. That wasn't good. Her face was a mess - more of a mess than usual and only partly because her make-up had gone. He had watched her in the mornings as she sat on the edge of the bath, using the only mirror in the house to help her paint her face, and he knew the care she took to hide the things she didn't want the world to see. Now the world could see what it liked, and more. A fresh bruise, bleeding at the centre, ran across one cheekbone and up to the inside corner of her eye. On the other side, the stark white snake-line of an old scar bisected one eyebrow and ran on down the side of her nose to make a notch on the

edge of her upper lip. On her temple, a palm's breadth of smooth white burn tissue pulled the skin tight angling up the edge of one eye, so that it seemed as if she were forever doubting what he said. Then she blinked and the eyes gathered him in and he was lost. He was entranced by her eyes. He knelt down and put his head level with hers and peered into them. She smiled for him then and it was a new smile, crooked and conspiratorial and really very warm. He chewed his lip for a moment, thinking, then he lay flat on his stomach and put his head on one side, looked into her eyes and smiled back. She laughed at that, soft and breathless and sliding into something not quite controlled that lasted longer than either of them expected. She caught herself, eventually, and breathed deep so that the navel stud rolled on the wave of it.

'Jamie, sunshine, you're gorgeous and I love you dearly but this is really, really not the right time. I need to get out of here, kiddo. I'm no good to either of us like this. Do you think you could try to untie me? Just one hand, I can do the rest.'

He sat up on his heels for a better look and saw what the dark had hidden before; that each wrist, each ankle, was fixed tight to one leg of the sofa. The hand nearest him twitched, palm out, the fingers wagging like the legs of a dying spider. The voice wove out around it. 'Jamie? Can you see the knots?' He could. He nodded. 'I can't see you any more, sunshine. You'll have to speak to me.' He thought about that for a while and decided safer not. Instead, he put his hand down to touch the palm then moved to the rope. 'All right, good lad.' There was a new warmth to the voice. 'Now, can you untie it? Please?' Another novelty. 'Please' was not part of his everyday vocabulary by any stretch of the imagination. He felt around the square-sharp edges of the wood to the opposite side where the knots gathered. 'You might need to use your teeth to loosen them.'

He tried. He tried for the novelty of being asked, for her smile and for the memory of the tiger's eyes. He tried until the rope was wet with his spit and his fingers slid across it as he tugged. All the while he listened to her breathing, slow and even, and the steady words of encouragement. And the promises. He listened most to the promises.

'Jamie, if you can get me out of here before they come back, I promise you, I'll take you away from here. There's a cottage in the country, with a mountain at the back of it and you can see the sea from the front door and there's a bedroom you can have all your own. Would you like that, Jamie? But we need to get free, both of us, or none of it will happen and what happens instead will be . . . don't think about that. Think about the cottage. And the snow. Think about the snow, Jamie. With the weather we've been having, the snow will be six feet thick outside. We can take sledges up the mountain and race them down to the back door. We can make snowmen as tall as the house. I can make you an igloo outside the back door and you can sleep in it overnight and still be warm. Would you like that kind of snow, Jamie?'

He did like the idea of such snow and although he had no idea what an igloo was he thought he might like that too. But liking it didn't get the rope untied, in fact, if anything, the wet of his spit was swelling the fibre and making it tighter. He sat back on his heels and bit a nail in frustration and without really thinking about it, he said, 'Can't.'

There was a brief silence and then, 'Can't you? Bugger it. Well, never mind, you can talk. That's something.' The voice was still calm. If he'd said 'can't' to his mother, the screaming would have gone on till his head rang. 'OK. Don't panic. They're not finished downstairs yet.' They weren't, although if you stopped to listen to it, the sounds of pain were different. There was a sense of things accelerating towards a close. He shut his ears and turned back to the snow. It was piling deeper on the sill and the

swirls of filth on the glass made new and interesting patterns. He moved back towards his chair.

'Jamie, no! Don't crap out on me now. We're still in with a chance. We need a knife. Can you find a knife for me, Jamie?' There was a grating edge in the voice now. Threads of panic wove through it, dangerously seductive. He knew panic well. It was not a place he wanted to be. The snow drew him closer. It was falling faster so that the world outside the window was more white than black and the flakes were smaller, almost like dust. He reached the chair and curled himself into it.

'Jamie. Listen to me. The snow will melt soon. The rain will come back. What will you have then? Do you really want to go on living like this? Jamie? Are you listening to me? Jamie?'

He wasn't listening. He curled tighter and shut the voice out.

'Shit.'

And then there was nothing. The snow fell dizzyingly fast. He could have slept, hypnotized by the swirling speed of it, but the final word echoed round the inside of his head.

Shit. Just that. A single sound, more of a breath than a word, full of defeat and fear and the promise of pain and all the things he was used to. But there was a kind of dry, twisting humour with it that he wasn't used to at all. It was a voice to go with the smile and the eyes. He listened to it stir round in his head for a while, feeling the newness of it and then he slid down from the chair and padded out across the hallway to the dark pit of the kitchen. The bread knife was in the washing-up bowl. He found it eventually, fished it out and dried it and took it back to the sofa and knelt down so that she could see it in his hands. He thought she might cry at the sight of him but she didn't. She smiled instead, which was good.

'Jamie, I love you. Can you cut the rope, sweetheart? See if you can slide the knife down behind my hand and the

wood . . .’ He heard the suck of an indrawn breath, bitten off, and then, ‘Yes. Good lad. Now, move it up and down. Good. Push it outwards, it needs to bite on the rope. Like that. More. Good. Don’t stop now, kiddo, for God’s sake, don’t stop now . . . yes.’ That last, whispered exultation as the final strand parted and then, ‘*Thank you.*’

She worked her fingers for a moment, gripping and re-gripping the hilt of the knife until the life came back to them. She swore with the heat of that but not for long. When she could trust herself to move, she eased across and freed her other hand on her own. He had to help her with her feet because there wasn’t room for her to reach down but they came quicker because he knew what he was doing and he didn’t make her bleed. He cut the last piece of rope binding her left ankle and then knelt out of the way as she slithered sideways towards him. ‘Jamie, I love you for ever.’ She hugged him tight, running her fingers in the tangled straw of his hair. The amber eyes flashed for him, pulling in the orange light from the window, spinning it round and throwing it out like a beacon. She kissed him, just lightly, on his forehead and smiled so that, for one long moment, his world filled with colour.

And then, because it was magic, and magic never lasts, the colours faded. The woman was shaking. He realized that when he realized she wasn’t smiling any more. It could have been the cold. He would have liked it to be the cold but her skin was grey, the way his mother’s went grey when she was up on the smack and the shakes had that extra tremor that said it was more than the perennial problem of too few clothes in an unheated room. He searched her arms for the signs of the needle and found it – a single exploded vein spreading out on the ghosted flesh of her inner arm. She saw him looking and shook her head. ‘It wasn’t me, kiddo.’ But his mother said that often enough and his mother’s teeth chattered in much the same way as she said it. He looked into her eyes and the colours were

already less bright. The smile was forced as perhaps it had been forced before. The arms that held him let him go. 'Jamie, trust me. We can talk about it later. Just now we have to get you out of here.' He said nothing. Outside, a man cried out, a desperate, long-drawn sound, rising up the scales to fracture in agony at the top. The silence rang loud in its wake. Her head snapped up at the noise of it. 'Oh, Jesus Christ, *Luke*,' and then, in a voice from which all colour and all tremor had gone, she said, 'Stay here. I won't be long.'

She was taller than his mother and lithe and she moved with a feral, fluid grace and a sense of purpose that his mother lacked. He heard the scuff of her bare feet as she ran up the stairs. The light tread moved across the ceiling above him towards the bedroom and something happened in a cupboard and then she was back, standing beside him, fastening a pack round her waist and staring out of the window with an intensity that all but stopped the shaking. She had changed, he could feel it. Sandra-before was all scarlet plastic and east Glasgow vowels and a laugh that could cut through glass. If she spoke to him, it was to get him to bed, out of the way, and she did it as if he was invisible, which meant that he was. Sandra-under-the-sofa was a friend in the darkness, wide amber eyes and a smile that broke through the silence. Sandra-now was different and not necessarily pleasant. He was setting off down the road to nowhere but she shook her head and nodded forwards and so he stopped and in time he realized that she was listening, not looking, and then, when he let go of the snow and listened with her, he could hear what she could hear, which was nothing. Under all the small, wilderness cries of the night, the sounds of the beating had ended.

In the enclosed space of his world, where all women wear cheap plastic miniskirts and all men mete out violence, the end of it somewhere else means only that it is coming closer. He shrugged deep in the chair and bit his lip and

started in earnest back down the track to the other world where he would be invisible in this one.

‘No. Not now.’ A hand fell light on his shoulder. ‘We need to get you out of here while there’s still time. Get your shoes and we’ll . . . oh, shit, no we won’t . . .’

Down at street level, a door slammed shut. Hard boots and harder voices filled the stairwell. ‘*Fuck.*’ The fingers tightened in frustration, digging hard through his T-shirt to the collarbone below. It hurt. He turned round to protest but she had already let go and there was a gun in her hand that had, perhaps, been there all along and a shine in her eyes that was quite the opposite of the magic he had seen before. He might have tried to run from her then but the hand came back to his arm and the voice that went with the eyes said, ‘Don’t move, Jamie. Just sit here and look out of the window and whatever else happens, don’t move a muscle. Stay invisible, kid. You can do it. I won’t be far.’

And then she was gone, feather-footed, out across the hallway to the dank pit of the kitchen, and there was time enough for a single oversized flake to spiral down the full length of the window before the front door smashed open and the world caved in.

Three. The redhead with halitosis, the blond with the beard who gave the orders and the obese grunt with the gun and the novel uses for living-room furniture. She stood behind the kitchen door with her eye to the crack at the hinge and she had the silencer tight on the barrel as the first of them reached the top of the stairs. The doing of it helped with the shaking but not as much as she needed. Luke, grinning, spoke in her head. *Keep it still, kiddo. You won’t hit a barn door if you wiggle the end of it round like that.* Luke. I don’t need to hit a barn door. I need to hit three men, and I need not to hit a boy. Then I can come and find you. Just stay alive for me now. He shook his head, still grinning, and the echo of his last cry looped round and back in her skull.

They crashed in through the front door, all three of them together, loud and drunk with the power of another man's pain. The smell of fresh blood washed past her in giddy waves, a rising tide that pushed ahead of the beer and the sweat and the reek of his fear. She breathed in the mess of it and breathed out his name. In: hell. Out: Luke. *They will pay for this, I promise you.* The first one passed the crack in the hinge and she counted each of them through to the living room opposite; redhead, blondie, fatso. Three . . . two . . . one . . .

Now!

The fat one died first.

Her arms moved with a will of their own and the mouth of her gun hung in the air an inch behind his ear. The round mass of his head was bigger than a barn door. A different voice - Strang's - took over inside her head. *Head shots are best. Hit them once if you have to, twice if you can.* The silencer breathed twice and the man's own momentum carried him two more strides to the far end of the sofa before his knees gave way and he fell face down on the floor.

'Get up, you fat bastard.' The redhead was slow; deaf to the sound of a weapon simply because it was not possible for there to be one there. The bearded blond was faster. He was moving even before the second shot; spinning sideways, going for the shadows, thinking on his feet. 'It's the bitch. Get the kid.' And so he had to go next. *If the target is moving or obscured, go for the upper torso.* He was down in the angle between the wall and the floor, rolling fast towards the fat one. Four rounds hit the mass of his body. It bucked, as Ciaran had bucked, as her father had bucked, once for each shot. At the end, it lay still, the arm outstretched, still reaching out for the gun. He sighed like a slashed tyre, the final exhalation from lungs punctured more than once. She stepped over him into the room.

The redhead may not have been overly smart but he was intimately acquainted with death and its precursors. He turned very slowly towards her, keeping his hands well away from his sides. 'Whit're you after?' he asked. He smiled, brokenly, and the decay of his breath added to the pollution of the room. She said nothing. Possibly she smiled back. The colour drained from his face. 'It wisnae me. It was Tord. Tord did him.'

He whined it, as a child whines for a broken window. 'It wasn't me. It just broke.' Who cares? I do. *Luke*. The shaking was back. The end of the gun wavered in her outstretched hands.

The target was moving, easing himself back, a step at a time, towards the window. *At all costs, keep the angle of fire away from the public*. She stepped out sideways, moving to put herself between the standing man and the boy. The man moved opposite her, a well-drilled partner in the dance. The orange glow of the streetlight marked an arc on the floor that kept them apart. *Take extra care in the dark. Your vision will be compromised. Keep away from the light source*. She was outlined against the window. She felt the light stripping her bare, leaving her naked before hostile eyes. She stepped sideways again so that the boy's chair was behind her. The man was keeping to the shadows, moving with her, still whining. The words had no meaning. 'Tord knows all about yous two. He'll be back in the morning. Better to get out while you can. I'll no' get in your way now. Take the kid and go. He'll be needing someone to take care of him. You go now before he comes back . . .' And then she lost him. He dropped down out of sight somewhere between the bodies and the sofa. The fat one had carried a revolver in his shoulder sling. She heard the slick of metal on leather and then the ratchet of the hammer clicking back before it fell. Her body moved once again of its own volition, spinning her sideways into shadows. White light erupted from the black space near the

door. The sound of the shot shattered her hearing. She heard herself scream with the shock of it and then heard an echoing cry from the chair. But she was rolling, still, into the darkness and her arms were outstretched and she was firing and firing and firing into the place where the flash had come from and the spit of the silencer gave way to the solid thud of rounds slamming through flesh and bone and then the louder, more solid sound of metal falling on wood and still she fired until the only sound was the faintest of clicks as she pulled the trigger and there was nothing at all coming out of her gun.

Luke.

The body of the redhead blocked the doorway. She stepped over it into the hall, swapping clips unconsciously, filling up the gun with hands that could barely hold the rounds. The first waves of nausea caught her as she passed the kitchen. She fumbled for the light, gagging against a closed glottis. The kitchen was foul. A bowl of foetid water stood in the sink, a rancid dishcloth hung on the edge, growing life of its own. Unwashed tea towels hung from the door handle. A carton of old milk congealed on top of the fridge because nobody could be bothered to open the door and put it away. In all the hell of the months just gone, she had wanted very badly to set fire to that kitchen. Now it was simply a staging post in purgatory. She threw up into the washing bowl, retching and choking on the stench, on the shock of what she had done and the fear of what she was going to find downstairs. *Luke.* She spat a final time, ran a tap and drank the water straight from the spout then wiped her mouth dry on her sleeve. *Wait for me. Live.*

She was at the front door before she remembered the boy. He was sitting where she had left him, curled tight in the chair, staring out at the whirling white-on-black of the night. She crouched down in front of him, not quite blocking the view to the window. 'Jamie? Are you all right?' He was shaking as much as she was shaking. His lips were

blue in the snow-lit white of his face. His teeth made a dented line along his lower lip, holding it in. There was a single tear track running down from the inner corner of each wide-open eye. She saw all of this before she saw the blood. It ran in a wash of sticky black from the lower sleeve of his T-shirt down his arm and onto his thigh. The fingers of his other hand gripped tight to the wound, so that it leaked from between his fingers, and they, too, had gone black in the odd sodium glare of the night. 'Jamie, let me look.' He shook his head, still biting his lip. The tears, such as they were, had stopped. 'Luke,' he said. He whispered it, the way she had whispered it before the shooting started. He barely knew him. He just knew that he mattered to her. It was the second word she had ever heard him say.

'In a minute. When you're safe.' She looked around for something to bind the wound, something not worn by the dead. 'Wait here, I'll be back in a second.' She ran for the kitchen, jumping the body of the redhead as if it wasn't there. A pair of clean tea towels lay in a drawer. She tore one in half as she ran back. 'Here. Let me wrap it up.' His hand was limp and cold to the touch as she moved his fingers away. Fresh blood ran freely from the wound in his upper arm. He was only nine and he was small for his age and he had no spare flesh on him anywhere. A .38 bullet has the power to take off the arm of an adult. God alone knows what it can do to a child. She held his hand in her own.

'Jamie. I have to get help. I'll wrap you up and then we'll call people who can do something to make you better. Is that OK?'

He nodded. Fatigue and pain warred with the fear of strangers. She wrapped one of the tea towels round his arm and made a sling of the other. The simple act of movement dragged a strangled half-cry from his throat. 'You can cry, Jamie, it's all right. There's no one to hear you but me.'

He shook his head and bit deeper so that his lip, too, turned dark. She tied the last knot on the sling. He was wearing nothing but his mother's T-shirt in a room where the last flicker of gas ran out of the meter just after the nine o'clock news. It was as cold inside as out, possibly colder. His feet were as blue as his lips, drawn up underneath him for warmth. His hands were like ice. She tried to smile into his eyes and got nothing back. 'Wait here,' she said again.

She took the stairs at a run, slamming on lights until she reached his bedroom. He had no furniture beyond a bed and not much in the way of clothes but there was a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans and thick socks for playing football. Back downstairs, the sweatshirt slid down over the injured arm and he let her manoeuvre him into the jeans. The socks took longest because she wasn't used to putting socks on someone else. The steady voice of Strang inside her head was counting seconds, explaining to her that Luke was dying and the boy would live. When he was wrapped against the cold and not bleeding, she listened to it. 'Right, I'll go and find him. Are you OK to stay here?'

He nodded. He was shaking less. She reached into the belt pouch that had held her gun and pulled out a black box the size of a small cigarette packet with two buttons on one side. 'This will call the people we need. They'll be faster than an ambulance and they'll know what to do with your arm.' They will know, also, what to do with the mess of bodies in the room but this is not his problem. She held out the box in front of him. 'I want you to hold this, do you think you can?'

His uninjured hand reached out to take it. His eyes stayed on hers. 'Good. Take a look. There are two buttons on top here, one red, one green. OK?' He nodded. 'Good lad. You can press the red button any time now. Then count, very slowly, to a hundred and press the green button. The guys aren't far. That's the signal to come as fast as they can

and be ready to deal with the wounded. If they get here before I get back, make sure they sort out your arm before they do anything else.'

Fear shadowed his eyes. She laid a hand on his leg. 'Jamie, please trust me. None of them will hurt you. You have to believe that.' He nodded. There was no way to know if he believed her. Seconds passed. She crouched back by the chair. 'OK, listen. There are three of them. Alec Strang's in charge. He's solid, like the blond one, but he's clean shaven and he's got wee round glasses, like this.' She made two circles of her fingers and held them in front of her eyes. 'He's fine, but he'll not know how to talk to you. Andy Bennett's lank, like he's been on smack and not eaten for a week. He's going bald, with his hair pushed out over his head, you know?'

He nodded. Bald men, he knew. 'Good lad. Andy's the doctor. He'll sort out your arm. The third one's Murdo Cameron. He's our kind of guy. He's not so broad as Strang but he's taller, about this height,' she held the flat of her palm a hand's length over the top of her head, 'and his hair's black like treacle and wild. If we're lucky, he'll have it bunched back, like this,' she swept her hair back and held it. The action changed the planes on her face. When she let it go, it sprung up round her head. 'If we're not lucky, it'll be hanging down round his shoulders getting in the way. Either way, you'll know him when you see him. Tell Murdo Cameron, when he asks, that I've gone to find Luke. OK? Jamie?' She did her best to smile for him the way she had done under the sofa. 'Jamie? I know it's difficult but they'll not be hard on you for speaking. Just tell them that, you don't have to say anything else. Do you think you can do it?'

He was nine years old and he had a bullet wound in his arm. It was three o'clock in the morning and he was about to sit alone in a house with the bodies of three men, any one of whom, when alive, would have killed him without a

second thought. He had more stamina, more courage, than any man she had ever worked with. A smile lit up his face like a candle in the darkness. He blinked once over eyes the colour of night-time snow. 'Tell Murdo Cameron I've gone to find Luke,' he said. If you taped him saying it, you would think it was her.

She took hold of his head, very gently, and pressed her lips to his forehead. 'Jamie, I love you.' He pushed her away. His eyes moved to the door and back.

'OK. I'm going. I won't be long.'

He heard the sound of her feet on the stairs and in the close below. He heard the front door opened and slammed shut against the wind. He waited until he saw the shape of her move round the side of the building and then he put both thumbs on the red button and pushed.

'It's OK, son, you can let go of it now.' The boy sat curled in the chair, his whole body curved round the transmitter, both hands stabbing tight on the buttons. She said to press them. She didn't say to let go. And so he had held tight for twelve and a half minutes, first to the red button, then to the red and the green together and the transmitter sent out its continuous silent scream to the three men waiting on the other side of the city so that they, believing the woman to be dying, if not already dead, had broken all the limits to get there.

Alec Strang was relieved, more than he could have said, not to find her body in the carnage on the floor, but that didn't mean that she was safe. He sent Murdo Cameron upstairs with his gun out, checking for bodies, alive or dead. 'Use your torch. I don't want any more lights on till we know where everyone is.'

'Right.'

Andrew Bennett, the medic, was already in the living room, playing his own torch over the two women on the sofa although there was nothing about either of them to

suggest that they were within reach of anything short of a miracle. That left Strang with the child. The file said nine but he could as easily have been six; small and lean, with pale skin and paler hair and the dark shadows of sleeplessness hammered in beneath his eyes. He looked blank, in the way of all children who have seen too much of the things they should never see, but there was a sense of stone in the stare that said if he broke, it would not be here or now. Still, as he picked his way forward over the debris and the dead, Strang caught the pungent smell of fresh urine hanging over the chair and he saw, and chose to ignore, the darker stain blending with all the other dark stains on the bare wood beneath the chair. His experience of children stemmed solely from a childhood too far gone to contemplate but he knew enough of basic human pride not to pass comment. He moved round the chair and leant back against the window frame, putting himself between the eyes and their target.

‘Jamie? It is Jamie, isn’t it? It’s OK, you’re safe now.’ His accent was English and educated. It rang oddly in the cold of the room, an intruder in a foreign land.

Over by the sofa, Bennett gave the thumbs down on the two women and knelt down to examine the hulking body of the man lying on the floor beside them. Strang nodded acknowledgement and then, looking back to the chair, saw that the exchange had been noted and understood. He smiled. ‘No problem, son. Your mum’ll be fine. We’ll get someone here to take care of her.’ He lied, always, with fluent ease and was surprised to see that, too, noted and understood. He ran a tongue round teeth still thick with sleep and redefined the problem. Nine going on ninety, or at least a reasonable average between the two. He swept a hand through his hair. A pair of snow-pale eyes stared up into his. ‘OK, forget it,’ he said. ‘You know what the score is.’ The eyes gave nothing away but there was a faint

inclination of the head which showed, at least, that the kid could hear.

Murdo Cameron returned from the upper rooms. He shook his head once and joined Bennett in his examination of the bodies. The man had no medical training but he was very good indeed at assessing the patterns of fire. If you know who fired what and when, you can create a reasonable picture of who was left standing at the end. In the absence of witnesses, these things matter. Except that they did have a witness, of sorts. The boy sat, transfixed by the snow, the transmitter still gripped in both hands, the buttons locked in their silent alarm. Strang moved out to take it and changed his mind. He tapped it instead. 'Did Orla give you that?' he asked. The eyes gazed through him to the window beyond. He might have been talking to snow.

'She's in cover. She's not calling herself Orla.' Murdo was standing behind the chair. There was fresh blood on the tips of his fingers and, now, streaks of it down the front of his T-shirt as he wiped them clean. 'If the lad's any sense,' he said, 'he'll have learnt long ago not to talk to strange men who don't know the name of his friends.'

'Very funny.' Strang pushed the heels of both hands into the pits of his eyes. Twenty minutes ago, he was sound asleep. Now, with the first adrenaline rush receding, the pall of unfinished dreams dulled his thinking. Murdo, who had been the one sitting up and was by far the most awake, was still smiling at him when he moved his hands away. Strang sighed and wished for sleep. 'Did you find anything useful?' he asked.

'Maybe.' The tall man folded his arms on the back of the chair. 'The damage in all three came from one gun.'

'Whose?'

'Pass. I don't know. It was a small calibre automatic which would fit with it being McLeod's but there's no saying she was the one firing it. Whoever it was, they started in here with the big one by the sofa,' he nodded

back towards the dead man, 'went through the blond one for a short cut and then got into a shooting match with the redhead. The revolver's been fired once. We need to trace the angle of shot and find out if anyone's been hit.' He was doing it as he spoke, swivelling round on one heel, his eyes measuring an arc from the fallen gun to the wall, seeking out the point of impact and tracing the route in between. He reached the end of the arc, paused and did it again. 'Oh, shit.' He said it quietly, sliding it into the conversation between one sentence and the next. His eyes narrowed and he slid round into the space between the chair and the wall, taking care to keep out of the way of the window. He was tall, as she had said, and he did have his hair tied back. With unusual presence of mind he had removed his holster and left it out of sight in the hallway, leaving only his radio hanging from his belt. He signalled to Bennett to join him, found a clean space on the floor then crossed his ankles and sank down in one smooth movement.

'Hey, Jamie. I'm Murdo. This is Andy, he's a doctor. Will you let him look at your arm?' The boy shook his head, pushing himself deeper into the chair.

Bennett slid up beside him. 'He's hit?'

'I think so. Entry site in the back of the chair. Round's in the wall up here. Looks like it's grazed along his back and maybe clipped the side of his arm.' The tall man nodded upwards, his eyes still on the chair.

The medic glanced up and then back to the boy then he, too, crouched at the side of the chair. He slid out a hand and laid his fingers on one narrow wrist. A pulse threaded through beneath his fingers, like feeling along knots in a piece of string. The key to medicine in children, in anyone, is to find a common link with the patient. He tried to remember the name the woman had used. Scots. Glaswegian. The kind of thing half the girls use when you pick them up and they don't want to be known. Suzi? Sally? Sandra? 'Sandra?' he asked. 'Did Sandra give you that box

you're holding?' A nod. 'Did she tell you we'd come if you pressed the buttons?' Another nod. 'So did she say where she was going?' Nothing. The grey eyes wavered and slid off his face.

Murdo Cameron looked up and found them drawing him in. He leant forward and put his hand on the chair. 'Are you sure? She's a smart lass. I think she would have left us a message. Did she not say where she was going?'

'Gone to find Luke.' The voice was husked and strained from lack of practice but the tone and the intonation were perfect. Like a parrot, trained in a single speech, he said it again. 'Tell Murdo Cameron, when he asks, that I've gone to find Luke.'

'Where? Where has she . . .?' Strang was back, behind Cameron, pushing for answers.

He got a hand across his mouth from Bennett. 'Shut up, man. Don't go hard on him now. Murdo, go on.'

'Never mind him, he's got no manners.' The man smiled. The skin round his eyes creased like tanned leather. 'Did she say where she'd gone? Did Sandra tell you where it was she'd gone to find Luke?' Nothing. He tried it again, asking in a different way, in case it was the order of words that triggered the answer. Still nothing. Strang turned round to face the window and pressed his forehead to the glass, cursing.

The boy looked as if he'd been struck. He shook his head. His mouth opened and shut again like a fish and then, 'Don't know,' he said. 'She never said.' It came out as a whisper, even less practised than the rest and the effort of it was painful to watch.

'OK, lad. You've done your best.' Bennett moved to sit on the arm of the chair. With great care he slid one hand down and over the black box. 'Maybe you'd like to let go of that now we're here? There's no one else waiting to hear it.' The thumbs came off the buttons. The red light on top of the

transmitter blinked off, extinguishing as it did so the matching light on Murdo Cameron's receiver.

'Thank you. Now, can we get this sweater up and have a look at what's underneath? Good. That's nice. Did Orla . . . did Sandra put this on for you? Fine. That's very good. She'd make a good nurse, eh? I'll just undo this knot here and have a wee look . . .'

It was a long time since Andrew Bennett had practised medicine on anyone who wasn't a colleague and even then it was first aid and nothing more. There were well-defined limitations to what he could do and they stopped far short of gunshot wounds in a child. He got as far as the bandage and made the same assessment as had been made before him. 'This is more than I can handle.' He turned back to Strang. 'He needs a hospital.'

'Then call the ambulance.' Strang stood with his hands on the window frame, staring out into the night. 'Where the fuck are they?' No one answered. He turned back to the room. 'Murdo, how long since the three in here died?'

'Not long. The blood's barely clotted on the head wounds so we're talking minutes, not hours. I'd say she was out of here around the time the red alarm went off.'

'Wherever she's gone, it's not that far.' Andrew Bennett had his mobile to his ear and was halfway through dialling for an ambulance.

Strang didn't bother to turn round. 'Because?' he asked, wearily.

'Because she's left her shoes.' He nodded over in the direction of the door and they all looked round, even the boy. A pair of red plastic stilettos stood side by side just inside the door of the living room. 'She needed to run,' said the medic, simply, 'she didn't need to run far.' His line connected. He spoke three words into the phone and hung up. 'The others went out on OD opiates,' he said. He kept his eyes away from the boy's. 'Fast and quick. It looks self-

injected but there's no saying they knew it was lethal when they put it in.'

'How long ago?'

'A while. They're down to ambient. Five hours, maybe six. Depends if it's been this cold all night.'

'Christ. This is getting out of control. If the shit hit the fan six hours ago, anything could have happened. Right,' Strang pushed himself clear of the window, 'Andy, you stay in here and wait for the ambulance. Don't let them go until we're back. They may have more than the boy to deal with. Murdo, you come with me.' He led them out to the hall, stepping neatly over the bodies, avoiding the loose shells on the floor.

'Where are you going?' Bennett, stepping where Strang stepped, followed him out.

'To find McLeod. We're wasting time. You're right, all we need to look for is bare footprints in the snow. She's looking for Tyler. If we find her, we've found him and then we can—'

'Don't bother, I've found him.'

She was there in the doorway, soft-footed, like a cat, and God, she was a mess. Her hair was wild; white-blonde with coloured highlights, back-combed away from her face like a mane. A bottled tan darkened her legs from ankles to groin, hiding the worst of the scars. Her fingernails were scarlet, matching the plastic of the crotch-ventilating skirt and the abandoned shoes. She had a cheap stud in her navel and if you strained hard to see through the thin lycra of her top, there might well have been one in her left nipple as well. Even so, it was her eyes that grabbed the attention. A pair of mirrored gold contact lenses with radial black lines caught the dim light of the overhead bulb and spun it back, sharper, brighter, more vicious than before. If you didn't know her well you'd never look beyond the eyes. Strang, absorbing this, gave her credit for ingenuity. Murdo Cameron wondered how in the name of God any sane man