

# 1

THE SMALL BODY WRAPPED in an outsize white T-shirt with a very grubby white 'babygro' underneath, the whole swathed in a green sterile cloth, was cradled gently in his arms. Just so had Detective Inspector Bob McInnis cradled another baby not two hours before. He sighed deeply. He was dressed in his best suit, as befitted a man who'd been hauled out of Easter Mass; the best suit jacket was now bedaubed in foetal blood and birth fluids. However this young girl was limp, no breath stirred the small lungs, and no smile creased the battered face.

"How long since death, Jonesy?"

"I should say about twelve hours since birth. But whether we're talking still-birth I can't say yet, Bob. The birth must have been pretty traumatic. There's no sign of a placenta either. We need to find the mother quick, because not all that blood in there belongs to the baby." Dr Ryan Jones nodded towards the building behind them.

Both men looked at the grey stone of the church porch. The heavy wooden door, with its thick metal bands and sturdy keyhole, presented a formidable barrier, but now it stood ajar; a faint whiff of musty hymn books, greenery, and hothouse lilies, wafted out to the two men on a gust of warm air, along with the coppery tang of fresh blood.

"OK, I'll get on to it. How's the young boy who found her?"

"Almost as traumatised. He's in shock; and you won't get much of a statement today, Bob."

"How old is he?"

"Nine. He'd come to set out the sheets for the re-dedication and baptism service. Saw the bundle lying on the floor next to the font, and went to shift it."

"Oh! Dear God!" Bob sighed again, and walked with his small burden to the waiting ambulance. He laid the small scrap of humanity carefully down on the centre of the stretcher, as if handling Dresden china. It seemed even smaller now, dwarfed as it was by the vast expanse of sheet around it.

Doctor Ryan Jones watched as Bob quietly made the sign of the cross with his thumb on the small forehead and turned away. "I'll give you a preliminary as soon as possible, Bob."

"Yeah. Alright. Do you think...?"

Ryan Jones looked at him, compassion lurking like a shy woodland creature in the back of the grey eyes. "You know I can't give you anything more, Bob."

"It's the poor mite's face, Ryan."

Ryan Jones nodded, "I know, but at this stage it's difficult to tell if that's birth trauma or deliberate, Bob. I'm sorry, but she was wrapped, not just cast aside, and she was left where the mother obviously expected someone to find her." Jones offered what comfort he could.

Bob had been greeted less than ten minutes before by the Medical Examiner, Ryan Jones, at the imposing porch, and had taken the small body from him, holding it carefully. Neither man could bear the thought of the tiny body being set down again, even though both were aware that the child was dead, and the chain of evidence getting longer by the minute.

Both had been attending a christening at the Presbyterian Church. Bob McInnis' partner, Sandy Bell, was the proud father, and Bob and his wife, Jenny, the equally proud godparents of Sarah Elizabeth Bell. The contrast between the healthy chuckling child and the poor mite both men had just handled was stark.

Ryan Jones pulled off vinyl gloves and shoved them into a brown evidence bag in his metal case. He looked over the quiet scene. His sturdy body, as he stripped away the white all-in-one worn by investigating officers, was revealed clad in a charcoal grey suit. The white Martindale followed the vinyl gloves into

another evidence bag. His topcoat was lying on the ground next to his bag; he snapped this shut, before gathering the coat up and dropping it over his arm. Straightening, he brushed a thick, blunt fingered hand through his grey hair before speaking.

"Give my apologies to Sarah and Sandy will you, Bob. I am, very regretfully, going to be busy." He put his hand in his trouser pocket and pulled out a thick creamy envelope. "This is for Bethy, from Emand myself; perhaps you could pass it on."

Bob McInnis nodded his agreement and thanks as he took the envelope, and stepped away from the ambulance which was parked outside the church door and blue and white incident tape. Doctor Ryan Jones walked briskly away from the church and through the lych gate. The ambulance, with a slamming of doors, started up, preparing to leave in the opposite direction. Both parties would be reunited in the sterile conditions of the autopsy room.

The forensics team were already busy, both outside and in. Their white suits and face masks gave a science fiction aura to the scene. There wasn't the usual banter at a crime scene. Men went about their tasks quietly, casting the odd look at Bob, but not approaching as he stood outside the church door.

Bob went over to the senior uniform who was standing talking to two tough looking constables. As he spotted Bob's approach he jerked his head at them and they headed off in a purposeful manner, back out of the churchyard.

"We're searching for the mother and canvassing for witnesses, sir. Nothing so far."

"No, I don't suppose there is. Got enough men?"

"I'll need more."

"I'll get on to it, Sergeant. This isn't exactly a busy spot is it?" He looked at the small dumpy Saxon church of St Mark, with Norman add-ons of small transepts north and south to make a cruciform shape. The straggly churchyard, in which it sat like an untidy terrier in a back yard, was surrounded on three sides by a

four foot high stone wall. This separated the sacred interior from the secular exterior streets on three sides. The fourth side, with barely four foot between wall and church, was overlooked by a town house standing on its own piece of real estate dedicated to the growing of cricket-pitch standard sward.

The churchyard wall itself was intersected by the tall wooden lych gate to the west and, in a line with the east window, a small metal gate, better suited to a farm field. This opened onto a suburban street.

The ambulance was now busy backing through this with some care. There was barely room to get a credit card between the sides of the van and the fence posts. The churchyard gate and area of burials a mere interruption in the line of semi-detacheds. Cars lined the street in front of small pocket-handkerchief lawns bordered by daffodils and grape hyacinths.

Bob McInnis and the sergeant watched the manoeuvring ambulance with admiration as Bob spoke, "What has the Father done about his services?" Bob had already noted the black-cassock clad figure standing outside the circle of the blue and white crime tape which was excluding him from his rightful domain.

"There was only the one scheduled here for this morning, at nine o'clock. They only expected a handful of elderly people. Most go to the big church about a mile away for special services. 'St John the Evangelist' that's called. Rev Barrington has rung round and contacted all those he thought might be coming, and diverted them to other places. His wife dealt with the others that turned up. I understand he's cancelled his attendance at other services, and arranged a stand-in for his other parishes."

"Does that mean we'll have half the town here soon?"

Even as Bob was speaking the sergeant was shaking his head. "No, sir. He seemed a very competent man. It will break soon enough, but I reckon we have a couple of hours yet."

Bob nodded. "Thank God for that! Let's get some more barriers and screens in place then." He pointed at the constable standing sentry at the main entrance, and then swung around. "There and at the other gate, please. Reinforce as necessary to keep people out for as long as possible, Sergeant. I'm going to go and talk to the Father."

The sergeant gave a slight cough. "Reverend, sir, not Father."

Bob nodded, "Yeah. Thanks." He ducked under the tape and away from the crime scene, and towards the Reverend Barrington, whose long cassock was blowing about his ankles in the light breeze, the only real movement Bob could see about the man.

Barrington was standing bareheaded, the sunshine bouncing back off a thick thatch of dark-brown curly hair. Johan Barrington was in his mid thirties, a man of medium height, solid looking, who watched the police activity from eyes as deep a brown as Bob's. Here the resemblance ended. The Rev Barrington might hail from England, but if Bob was any judge of the matter, his roots were in the deserts of North West Africa.

Bob came over, noting the absolute stillness of the man as he stood opposite the porch entrance, resting his body lightly against a lichen clad angel perusing some words carved in stone. "Reverend Barrington?"

The brown eyes focused on Bob.

"I'm Detective Inspector McInnis."

"Barrington, Johan." The Reverend offered a warm firm handshake. "How can I help, Inspector?" Bob noted he'd been wrong; the accent was Caribbean; it was deep and mellow.

"The sergeant tells me you've already been more than helpful." Bob offered a brief smile. "How's your young choir boy?"

"Warrick. How would you expect him to be, Inspector? He's questioning his God today. The last day one would expect to question God. He can't understand how God can allow a baby to

die, and how a mother can let it. I have no answers for him yet. He needs to grieve. But I suppose you need to talk to him."

Bob shook his head. "We will have to talk to him very soon, but not just yet. What can you tell me, Fa...Reverend? I understand he came to you."

"Not one of us? Ah well." Johan Barrington offered a faint smile as he shook his head gently, and then continued, "Warrick was asked to come in ten minutes early, to set out the papers for the re-dedications, and light the candles. It was a privilege he's just earned for one hundred percent attendance since Christmas. He came across to the house."

Johan nodded at a large building across the road and set opposite the lych gate, then fixed his eyes on the church door, not watching the activity but in the manner of a man not quite knowing where to look. "I gave the key to him and, for my sins, allowed him the pleasure of opening up without my presence, just to show I trusted him. You could see the pleasure and excitement shining in his eyes." He sighed, a soft exhalation of breath. "I'm going to have to forgive myself for doing that."

Bob waited for him to continue, feeling the sun beating down on his own head; he was developing a slight headache but didn't know if it was the sun's rays or buried emotion. His wife was always telling him he had to allow those emotions to surface a little, or he'd end up with a coronary.

"I followed him across within a minute. I watched him cross the road, and set off up the path here, and then came after him. I thought he would be safe. He was only going to be out of my sight for a few seconds.

"I was just inside the door as he went to pick up the bundle at the foot of the font, and I thought how extraordinary it was of the lady that does the cloths, to have left the dirty ones. And then of course he yelled for me."

Bob nodded. He thought the man's voice would sound rather beautiful singing the versicles and responses; it was as rich a

chocolate brown as his skin. He allowed Johan to tell it his way. Bob had spotted not just the remorse, but the horror. There was something else too, but he couldn't pin the emotion down yet.

"Warrick had pulled back the T-shirt when he'd begun to lift it and seen the little face. I ran to him and picked her up, but I could see she was dead straight away." He paused, looking at Bob for the first time in his recital.

"I held her in my left arm while I phoned for an ambulance and the police, and then for Warrick's mother to come and get him. I didn't tell him the baby was dead, but he knew anyway, Inspector. He sat on the floor at my feet and cried for both of us, while we waited for the police to arrive. Then I gave the baby to the doctor you've just been talking to." It was said simply and, Bob could tell, sincerely.

"Thank you. Can you tell me what time you arrived? I understand the service started at nine."

"Nine, and we arrived about ten to. There wasn't much to do. Light the lamp, set out the sheets, Warrick was going to put on his alb."

"Did others enter the church before the police arrived?"

"No, Charity, my wife, had followed me over from home. She came just inside the porch and I explained what was happening. She went out and closed the main door, taking Warrick with her. She spoke to the others who'd arrived, told them there'd been an accident in church and the service was cancelled. That they should go home and go down to St John's for the ten-thirty service. I'd rung a retired minister who agreed to hold the service for me, which was very good of him at such short notice."

"When were you last in the church?"

"Evensong." Barrington offered a rather sad smile. "Just me. We don't get a lot of people for evensong. I said the night's lessons and spent a little time in prayer. But I hadn't expected anyone; there was a vigil at the main church at eleven last night. I

didn't intend to lock up this church until after that. I left the church open for those who wanted private prayer."

"Did you go into the church?"

"No. To my, and the child's, cost. I just came over and checked the door, it was already locked. The light had been switched off and the door was locked, so I went home to bed. It had been a long day and I was tired. I didn't even come in with the host; I just put it in my study at home."

"So the babe could have been there then?"

"Yes. Yes, it could, Inspector."

Bob nodded. "You couldn't have known, Mr Barrington."

"That's what I tell myself. But I should have gone in. I could have left a perfectly innocent parishioner in there overnight."

Bob nodded again. "I'm probably going to have to talk to you again, sir, but for now, thank you again." He turned and had taken a step away when Johan Barrington spoke softly.

"Inspector?"

Bob turned and looked at him.

"Have you children?"

Bob looked at him curiously. "Yes, I have a daughter, why?"

"I'll pray for you, Inspector."

Bob nodded, accepting the comment. Before this was done they were all going to need a few prayers. Child deaths affected everyone who came into contact with them. He again turned and went into the porch. He emptied his jacket pockets and shoved the contents into his trousers before stripping off the jacket and dropping it into an evidence bag and sealing and signing it. He handed it over to the constable quietly watching him.

He offered the faintest of smiles as he stood in the pristine white shirt and silk lined waistcoat. "Shouldn't have handled her, Constable. But she'd already been moved. So chain of evidence

was compromised." He shrugged into grey-blue thin coveralls and zipped them up.

He pushed open the church door as he pushed his thoughts away behind the door marked private, and opened the door marked police business. For his sanity's sake he compartmentalised his mind, but it wasn't always easy. Now he took his first look at the interior of the church. It smelt old, the stone dust of centuries floated in the atmosphere, along with the millions of pleas, prayers and praises.

He cast a glance at some of the Scene of Crime team busy up in the chancel area. One man was using a very sophisticated hoover to gather all possible traces from the carpet. Another was wielding a small paint brush on the strange bowl resting on a wooden stand at the side of the fenced-off area of chancel, while a third was kneeling on the floor with a square of plastic pressed firmly to the small uncarpeted area, between the two chancel steps and the body of the nave.

The bulk of the team, however, were concentrated around the small font next to the door, where the child had been found, examining the area minutely for any traces of the mother.

Bob ignored them and began to walk slowly around the perimeter. The church was barely thirty feet long; there was a chair's width between ancient oak pews screwed firmly into the concrete floor, and walls thick enough to repel Vikings and Picts. No doubt it had done both in its time. The windows were small, high, and narrow, emitting little darts of light across the seating.

He crossed at the top of the chancel, resisting early training which called for at least a quick genuflection to the cross in the sanctuary. He looked at the section of flagstone exposed, where the carpet ended and the small narrow transepts began. The font stood at one side and the pulpit at the other, before the church narrowed into the small choir area and then the apse where a plain stone altar stood.

He stooped and looked more closely and then, looking first at the font and then down the central aisle, began to walk swiftly

down the side of the runner of carpet to the back of the church. A closed door was placed centrally, flanked by tall, glass covered, bookcases full of service and hymn books on one side, and on the area of the narthex, the rather nice marble font with a strange copper lid, next to where the baby had been found. This was the centre of attention for the SOCO team.

The corner opposite the main door and narthex had a small carpeted area with a box of plastic toys and children's books. A child sized table and two chairs, in bright red plastic, were set squarely on the carpet, but they didn't look as if they'd had a lot of use lately.

Bob walked towards the solid and heavy looking door between the bookcases, and tried the door. It resisted his efforts. He looked around but everyone was busy, so he went outside again. Johan Barrington was still standing where he'd left him, but his eyes were closed and his lips moving.

Bob frowned, and then shrugged. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but have you a key for the inner door? The one at this end of the church?"

Johan Barrington opened his eyes and looked at Bob. "It should be in the lock." He took a step and then stopped, frowning. "I have a spare at the vicarage. Shall I fetch it?"

Bob nodded and watched as the man strode away, his skirts flapping slightly as he covered the ground in long strides. Yes, Bob could imagine Barrington on the plains of Africa. He stood waiting in the Easter sunshine, thinking about this death. He couldn't rule out suspicious death, but it was much more likely to be a desperate teenager.

The Reverend returned, holding out the key. "Here you are, Inspector, two keys. The larger leads to the bell tower; we only have the one bell. The tower is very secure; the smaller key opens the padlock to the roof. It's the only key for that."

"Thank you." Bob took the keys and went back inside. The man with the plastic squares had now moved further down the

nave and was methodically checking the first row of pews. The forensics team were expanding, like the ever widening ripples in a pool, as they broadened their search for clues and took photographs of the scene.

Bob turned his back on them and tried the key in the door. It resisted briefly, and then opened a few inches. He saw a white hand lying in the gap.

He turned, shouting to be heard above the Hoover. "I've got a second body."

Men descended on him with the swiftness of an avalanche. He stepped back hastily, allowing those with masks to approach. He'd already broken the rules once. He didn't want any more contamination on his conscience.

"Gently, I don't know if she's still alive."

The men pushed against the door, and one slithered through the resultant gap and lifted the girl out of the way so that they could open the door fully and get her out. Bob was phoning for an ambulance, even while he watched his men handling the girl they'd just found.

"Alive?"

"Barely, sir."

She was carried out and laid on the carpet, formerly the domain of small children. A policeman returned from outside with a silver space blanket and wrapped her body inside it. Bob, looking at her, thought she looked little more than a child herself. One of the men knelt and felt for a pulse. He looked up at Bob. "It's there, but it's hellish faint, sir."

"The mother?"

"Yeah. I would say so." The constable cast an eloquent look at the blood bespattering her legs and sandals below a button through denim dress. He heard one of the others say, "What the hell happened to her face?"

Bob shook his head, and went outside. Johan Barrington was still standing, still apparently praying. "Father, there's a young girl. Could you see if you know her?"

The man could move fast. He was under the tape and through the door almost before Bob had finished speaking. He made for the small group of policemen, who parted for him as he fell to his knees next to the silent figure.

He reached out a hand and took the small cold one in his, looking at the maltreated face before turning to Bob, "No, I don't know her. Oh God! Did we lock her in? Oh the poor kid, she must have been terrified."

Bob kept his face impassive. There was nothing he could say to help the man; he had his own conscience to deal with. She had been dying behind that locked door while he dealt with her baby.

The men stood around in silence, not offering to go back to their tasks as they waited for the ambulance. Bob didn't chivvy them. Seven long minutes passed. The young girl remained unconscious, her face almost blue, the veins showing through the translucent skin of her temples. A large contusion was marring the delicate beauty of one cheek. The skin had split and gaped over the high bone. Johan Barrington still held the cold hand, chaffing it occasionally as he knelt at the side of her.

A diesel engine outside, and the tramp of feet, heralded the advent of two ambulance men and a woman. White clad police stood back as the men laid the stretcher on the ground and the woman paramedic began to examine the youngster. A quick, quiet, consultation and she tried to insert a needle, pulling a band taut around the skinny arm, and tapping the hand and arm. "Get some O<sub>2</sub> going; she's too flat for a cannula. I'll have another go en-route. Let's get her loaded."

Bob stood back as several police assisted the ambulance men to lift and settle their frail burden. He turned as Johan Barrington spoke softly to him. He hadn't seen the man move.

"I would like to go with her, Inspector?"

Bob nodded at the vicar. "Yes." He turned to the paramedic, "Names to the constable and keep me informed please." He waited for them to finish wrapping the girl and strapping her down before they left the building with the vicar. Then he turned to the forensic team. His brown eyes, normally as soft as warm honey, now had the hardness of agate as he looked them over. "Now, I want to know why no one thought of checking this door before processing began. You?" He pointed an elegant finger at the senior man.

The man looked squarely at Bob. "It was my fault. The vicar said he'd found the main door locked at midnight. That door was locked when we came in. I made a false assumption, sir."

"I hope it won't have cost her her life, Detective Sergeant Henderson." Bob looked at each man in turn, his eyes raking and harrowing their consciences, "I shall want a written report about this. At best it's sloppy, at worse criminal." He turned and walked out of the church. It wasn't often he lost his temper, but today he'd come very close to it.

His partner found him leaning against a tombstone ten minutes later. Detective Inspector Sandy Bell was fifty; he presented a curious appearance to Bob's eyes. He was still wearing his best dark blue suit, a neat tie, correctly fastened, almost strangling him with its unaccustomed position, and shoes shiny enough to dazzle a sergeant major. His grey-brown hair had been tamed into submission, but it was a very specious submission, curling around his ears and flopping over his forehead.

He came across the small patch of grass towards Bob, looking him over carefully before he spoke. He had observed the rigidity and wondered at it. He knew that Bob McInnis was offended by murder, but the man looked more than that; he was clearly about to erupt on a scale of Plinian proportions.

"I'm sorry, Bob, I should have come with you. Jenny told me where you'd gone when the service finished."

Bob looked surprised. "You're not on call, Sandy. Why should you turn out? You're supposed to be attending the christening of your daughter."

"I have. And now I'm here."

Bob shook his head. "Go home. Sarah needs you."

"Sarah's got Jenny to help. I would say you need me more just at the moment, Bob."

Bob shook his head, but Sandy just stood there.

The next comment seemed totally irrelevant to Sandy, but he knew Bob was rarely irrelevant, he seldom spoke without thinking.

"I didn't know there'd been an outbreak of plague in Carlisle, Sandy. 1597, it was."

Sandy glanced at the stone Bob was leaning against. A bunch of daffs sat in a brass can on top of the stone; they moved slightly in the soft breeze. The stone listed a whole family, starting with a child of seven weeks, and going through to a girl of sixteen, with ten other names in between. A James Steele was at the bottom of the list. They'd all died within the space of a month.

"There was plague in the 1300s, but I suppose there would be other epidemics, Bob."

"Yeah. It took whole families. We shouldn't be surprised at the death of children, Sandy, but it always leaves me wondering why? Worrying and trying to understand the reason behind it."

"Aye, lad, but what can't be cured must be endured." Sandy waited patiently for Bob to get to the point. He enjoyed the fragile peace and the sound of a blackbird, and watched the younger man's face. Bob was becoming more and more like his father, Sandy thought.

Sandy's former partner, James McInnis, had been a handsome man too, but he had smiled more easily than Bob, and Sandy had known what James had been thinking, at least some of

the time. Bob McInnis was still a closed book most of the time, even after six years of partnership.

Finally Bob stood upright, looking at the door of the church in an absent manner as he brought his partner up to date. "The first victim was a baby; Ryan Jones thinks it was born about ten to twelve hours ago. The second will probably be the mother. She looked as though she was about fourteen or fifteen. I don't know if she'll live. But I doubt it, judging by the amount of blood where we found her, and elsewhere in the church."

The anger had just gone away for a tea break. It came back refreshed and renewed. Sandy watched it spew out like a *nuée ardente* along with the words.

"I arrived about forty-five minutes ago. The baby was found by a young choir boy, Warrick Moor, at about nine this morning. He found the baby at the side of the font, near the front door, wrapped in a T-shirt. The vicar, who was right behind the boy, picked it up, but it was dead then, Sandy. He passed it to Ryan, as the attending, Ryan pronounced. I met him coming out of the church there," Bob nodded towards the building, "and took what little information he could give me.

"I didn't go into the church straight away; the SOC team was already in there, and out here. I spent time organising the men, and talking to the Father. When I did get around to going in, I spotted a bloody shoeprint on the floor and followed it back to the bell tower. The girl was behind the locked door."

Sandy said nothing. He could see that most of the anger was self-directed; he didn't think it should be, but knew it would be useless to say anything just yet.

"They never checked that bloody door."

"Aye, well, and they'll learn to check – when I've done with the internal enquiry. You did what you're trained to do, Bob. You very properly got your brain round the salient facts and organised your men. You interviewed the main witness..." Sandy held up a hand as Bob would have spoken. "You are not to blame, lad. I

doubt you could have saved her if you'd found the girl straight away, from what you tell me. Now," Sandy turned, "let's have a look while you tell me what ideas you've got in that head of yours."

He crossed the small patch of grass, and Bob followed. Sandy spoke quietly as they approached the church door. "This vicar, do you think he's implicated?"

"Can't rule anyone out, but I don't think so, Sandy, not on first impressions. For a number of reasons. I'll fill you in, in a bit." He waited for Sandy to don a protective suit before pushing open the door. Entering, they went from heat to cool, light to dark. Bob had always thought of churches as places of enlightenment, but this one seemed to hold secrets. He shook himself, trying to shake off the odd shiver crawling down his spine with hobnail boots on its feet.

The men were still busy; they glanced up at the entry of the two detective inspectors and then looked hurriedly away again. One detective inspector in a towering rage was bad enough; two had the detective sergeant thinking about storm shelters. They looked to his jaundiced eyes like a couple of tornadoes circling around and gathering fury as they advanced.

"Show me this shoeprint, Bob." Sandy moderated his voice as one in a church, but not sufficiently that the men working between chancel and nave didn't hear him.

Bob moved up the side of the aisle, being careful about where he put his feet, and pointed out the trail leading away from the font. "You men must be blind if you can't spot a trail a half dead Indian could see." Sandy addressed his remarks to the general populace. No-one answered him.

It was perhaps a slightly unfair comment; the partial prints, outlined in blood, weren't that obvious on the dark brown carpet. Only the one print on the concrete was really visible, and it was only a smudged heel. Bob had done well to work out the evidence on such a flimsy bit of sign, thought Sandy.

Sandy followed Bob, looking at the layout of the church. The position of the font in relation to the nave and altar seemed to hold his attention. "I thought these things were usually at the back of the church, Bob."

"I don't know; certainly in the Catholic Church that's where you find them. There's one down there too." Bob nodded down the church in the direction of the entrance way. "We have it next to the door and that bit called the narthex, Sandy. It's placed there to baptise the catechumens before they enter the church proper, and remind us of our baptism as we come inside. This church has two fonts it would seem." He offered a shrug, but his eye noted the position of each and he was frowning slightly.

Sandy raised an eyebrow but kept his thoughts to himself. Bob didn't talk about religion or his faith, if he thought it might offend anyone. So these comments must be relevant, somehow, even if Bob didn't realise it yet.

Bob looked at the font in the narthex again. "It doesn't fit in does it? Got a funny lid too. That was where the baby was found, at the foot of that font, Sandy." He swung around on the policemen nearest to him. "Did one of you remove that for printing and dusting?" He pointed at the small brass cover, somewhat like a saucepan lid, lying slightly off centre above the marble font.

"No, sir. It was like that when we arrived. They haven't finished photographs and sketches there yet."

"Hmm! I shall need to speak to the Reverend Barrington about that."

"What you thinking, Bob?"

"Don't know yet, Sandy. It's just odd."

Sandy nodded, and then he looked from the top of the step towards the door in the centre of the tower, and then walked carefully along the side of the central runner towards it. A white clad man was dusting the door with all the finicky care of a maiden aunt attending to her mantelpiece.

"Any fingerprints?"

"Several, sir, all layered over each other." The forensics man stood back and picked up a small digital camera, and began to take photos of his work, speaking as he did so, "I shall need a list of those who have access to this door, sir. We are going to have to have the choir boys' prints as well. Some of these fingerprints have obviously been made by children, sir."

Sandy sniffed. "That'll go down well with the parents, and slow things down too."

Bob shook his head. "Find out which school they go to, and get the permission of the head teacher. Several of the junior schools in the town use fingerprints for lockers and library cards. Let's not distress any more children, Constable. And, Constable, make sure you destroy the prints as soon as you've eliminated them."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you printed inside the tower?"

"Nearly finished, sir." The detective constable moved out of the way, setting down a camel-hair brush that he'd just picked up and loaded with dusting powder. He stepped back as the two senior men entered the small room.

It was barely six by six square. A small door, inset into the grey stone, and only suitable for medieval serfs of diminished stature, was set into the left hand side. Both men noted the padlock securely fastened and already covered with powder.

This area was obviously used for storage. Several equally grubby canvases seemed to be partially showing, so that Sandy and Bob got glimpses of the Ark, complete with complement of animals, a battle scene, possibly David and Goliath, for two plywood models, one small, one tall, also leaned, with spear and catapult dangling from wooden hands. A sea scene with a loaded fishing net being hauled in, the fishing net was genuine. The net was draped across the top of the picture.

A large piece of plywood with a picture of a stable executed upon it, and really the artist deserved to be, given his Picasso like tendencies, leaned against the blank wall. A small crib was nestling in the corner with, presumably, the 'baby Jesus', unclothed and lolling half out of the cot, plastic arm trailing towards the floor. And finally, a huge picture of a rainbow dominating the rest, the primary colours bright, compared to the other paintings.

A red, blue and white bell rope sally dangled from the low ceiling, disappearing into a small hole like the very colourful tail of a ferret. Next to it a forty watt bulb, naked and unashamed, dangled forlornly, casting a very dim light on the proceedings. A small wooden bench which might seat two very thin people was placed opposite the padlocked door to the tower.

The floor was uncarpeted grey brick which had needed sweeping long before forensics had got to work in there. A dark, black/brown stain ran from the stool to the floor and filled the room with a faint metallic-fruity smell. Further bloodspots led to a congealing pool, as if the young girl had sat down behind the door. Anyone opening it, or glancing in wouldn't have noticed her there.

"What do you think, Bob, came in here to give birth and when she heard someone, locked herself in?"

Bob had been looking around. Now he stuck his head outside and addressed the constable again. "Was there a key in the inside lock, on the floor, or anywhere else in here? Among these canvases or equipment."

"No, sir."

Bob withdrew his head and looked at Sandy. "No. She hadn't got a key on her. No pockets on the dress she was wearing, and there isn't a key in here. I opened it from the outside, Sandy; there wasn't a key in the lock then." He glanced at the miscellany of articles on view. They'd been dusted. Forensics would probably remove them for further analysis later. "She was locked in, Sandy,

and that might make it manslaughter, if not murder, if the poor soul doesn't survive."

Sandy nodded. Bob might have been distressed and angry, but he still noticed things. Sandy stepped outside the tower, disturbing the forensics man yet again. The man kept his mouth shut. Another time he might have passed a comment, today wasn't the time for it.

The two detectives, after a quick look to see that all was being processed correctly, went outside and stood under a cloudless blue sky, both strangely glad to be outside, away from the grim atmosphere. Their thoughts so dark both were mildly surprised to find the sun still shining, the birds still singing, and the scene still peaceful. If you discounted the blue uniforms that were playing some macabre game of hunt the thimble among the gravestones, and searching the pathways and grassy strips.

"I could take the case, Bob."

Bob shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"It's two years since Beth died, Sandy, and I've come to terms with it."

Sandy looked over the younger man. They worked well together. Bob had been called out of the christening to this crime scene. But two years ago, his first wife had died in childbirth. Sandy wasn't sure dealing with another such death would be good for the man.

## 2

THE TRAFFIC WAS LIGHT for midday on Easter Sunday. Most had already started their holidays. Only the chronically restless, or those needing to finish deliveries, were to be found on this stretch of the M6. Four young men were travelling along it. Terry Pullman was concentrating on his driving; he was driving at a steady sixty in the centre lane, doing it with the care of a man who didn't wish to attract attention towards himself. This was because he'd already received one warning from the police and also because he had a nasty habit of sniffing tubes of *Airfix* glue. Last night had been a marathon session.

He had a headache, he felt sick, and his nose had the rawness normally associated with the end of a filthy cold. He'd tried curing the sickness with alcohol. It hadn't worked; it only succeeded in making his stomach feel that an ulcer was a very real possibility in his future.

He had listened to the escalating argument between back and front seat for the past five miles. "Shut up, will ya. I can't think here."

Nobody took any notice of him. Steve Greenside, the next biggest in size and age, was arguing with Jesse Cox, the smallest. Jesse's drug of choice was cannabis, mixed with a little snorted coke. He was sitting in the front seat with his seat belt undone, like everyone else in the car, his body twisted around to face the two in the back. Geoff Greenside, his body on a par with Steve's, sat with his arms folded and his mind just as closed. He was high on a mixture of 'meths' and alcohol.

"Well I think we should give it a try. I was watching this film; they could do it in under ten minutes."

"I think it's sick. I'm not doing that, not for you, or anyone else."

"It's easy money. Those places are deserted. Nobody goes there."

Suddenly Geoff spoke, "I gotta throw up." He stretched over and opened the door, regardless of the speed and the passing motorway traffic. He leaned out.

Terry swerved at the sudden change in air pressure and drag as the door swung on its hinges. Geoff lost his precarious grip on reality and door, and hit the tarmac with a sickening thud. By the time the three in the car had registered the accident, Terry was two miles down the road and the door had slammed shut due to the force of the wind.

The silence could be felt as a physical presence. Momentarily everyone was sober, and then the drugs snuck back into their brains and crowded out all rational thoughts. Terry was still swerving about, and Jesse grabbed the wheel to try and straighten the car up. Terry took this as a direct insult to his driving, and silently began to fight for possession, putting his foot down on the accelerator to emphasise the point. Steve in the back was busy throwing up.

The car continued to weave about, to the horror of truckers trying to earn a decent day's wage, and holidaymakers trying to relax. Eventually Terry gained possession of the wheel again by planting a few knuckles attached to a heavy fist familiar with performing this service. Jesse let go, slumping back as he was momentarily dazed by the blow.

Steve, having used the back foot well as a bucket for the contents of his stomach, wiped a hand over his mouth and spoke to the back of Terry's head. "Terry, we have to stop."

"Nah! Ain't gonna."

"But, Geoff...Man, he's back there on the road."

"So call an ambulance! I ain't stopping you."

Jesse, recovering and shaking his head, grabbed for the wheel again, Steve threw up a bit more, and Terry spotted the

turnoff for the A69 into Carlisle and swung the car across three lanes of traffic, gunning the engine as he headed up the slope.

In the distance an ambulance siren and a motorway patrol car screamed a warning to get out of the way. The oblivious trio took no notice. Terry settled down to his careful driving again as he wove his way through the top end of town. He passed Prince David's Castle, and then took a short cut through a trading estate with the peace of a non-working day hanging over it like a benediction. He swung across to a B road, and thence onto a council estate. The noise in the car had risen again. Steve and Jesse were arguing volubly about what was the best way to get some money. Every few minutes Terry told them to shut up, only to be ignored.

Eventually Terry pulled to a stop in a quiet back street. He let his hands flop down and sat breathing deeply as the engine pinged quietly as it cooled. "We're home. Everyone out!" He looked around when no-one answered, surprised to find that the car was empty and the doors wide open and in danger of being taken off by other cars. "Huh! Where'd everyone go? Fat lot of thanks I get for taxiing you lot!" He crawled unsteadily out of the car and slammed his door and locked it, then staggered around the bonnet and into the house, failing to shut either passenger doors as he abandoned the vehicle.

Steve meanwhile had got out and looked around, in a vague way, for his brother, Geoff. Steve had drunk a couple of bottles of vodka and it was well into his system before his stomach had rejected the final quart. He staggered up the footpath and around the corner, going into the open front door of his parents' house, and grunting at them as he headed by them and up the stairs.

Mr Greenside had a long suffering expression on his face, the kind seen on the faces of men who'd been married long enough to know better than chivvy their spouses, the kind that knew 'five minutes' meant they had time to read the front page of the paper and drink their coffee.

He stood, waiting for his wife to finish fussing with her hair in front of the mirror in the hall, the open front-door handle in his hand. He looked at his spouse and shrugged; they had given up trying to understand their sons. They had even ceased to wonder what they'd done wrong. "Are you ready, Tess?"

"Yes, Cliff. Just let me get my bag." Mrs Greenside suited action to word. They left the house, locking their elder son in and going to visit Cliff's parents and eat Easter lunch with them. They were unaware of the tragedy stalking their lives and about to bring their safe world tumbling about their ears like a house of cards.

MEANWHILE JESSE COX HAD slouched off in another direction. He wove his way down the street, bouncing like a squash ball as he hit first the wall of the houses, and then cars parked along the roadway. Eventually he found a small cul-de-sac and wandered down. The end of it boasted a patch of grass and a sad looking plane tree with a corporation bench under it. The name of the street was on a free standing sign at the side of the tree. Jesse squinted at it and then sat down, fumbled out his mobile, and sent a confused text to his brother. After which he folded his arms and fell asleep, uncaring that he was not a sight for children and those of a nervous disposition.

His big brother found him there an hour later. Taylor Cox had a wholly merited look of disgust on his face for the reek of vomit which clung like an evil aura around his sibling. He had been bailing his younger brother out of trouble for six years, and he was becoming rather fed up of it. But blood was thicker than water, wasn't it?

"I've got work, can't you stay sober?" All he got in reply was a grunt.

Jesse was hoisted unceremoniously up and shoved into Taylor's car, and then the windows lowered to the maximum to try to keep the stench from making Taylor gag. "God, look at you. What's the point in spending a fortune on decent clothes if you puke all over them?"

His brother snored at him and Taylor sighed deeply, before starting the engine and driving to the other side of town. At least he hadn't been seen by anyone. It was important in his line of work not to give anyone a possible handhold to get to him. And his brother, he thought, was becoming a liability.

TERRY PULLMAN HAVING, FOR want of a better word, parked the car in front of the street door, walked into his mother's house, ignored her questions about where he'd been all night, and pulled open the fridge door. He upended a carton of juice, drinking messily from the plastic spout.

"I said where have you been? You know I said you couldn't take the car; I need it for work." His mother attempted to pull the carton away; Terry looked at her, a look compounded of contempt and disgust.

"I bin out, having a good time. I ain't old and wrinkled like you. I was having a good time. Now I'm going to bed."

He slammed the carton down so that the orange juice splashed up and pooled on the draining board, and walked out of the room. She heard him slam open the toilet door, and sighed. At least he was home safe. She went into the hall and put her jacket on before taking her keys from the hook beside the door and going out to start the car, glancing at her watch on the way.

The stench of vomit hit her as she approached the open back doors; she gagged and looked over the seat. Steve's offering decorated the upholstery and floor. She started to storm back in, but before she'd taken more than two steps across the pavement a police car was pulling up and a tough looking policeman was approaching her.

"Are you the driver of this car?"

SARAH BELL WAS EMPTYING the back of her 4x4 people carrier preparatory to fetching Sandy's father from his nursing

home for Sunday lunch. At the moment the poor man would have had to fight for an inch of space due to the presence of a baby seat and several soft toys.

"I can go, Sarah. It will be easier in my car."

"You've still got a baby seat to contend with."

"Yes, but I haven't got the rest of it." Jenny McInnis grinned at the rounded hips and butt, in a nice shade of pink chiffon, which was all she could see of Sarah Bell at the moment. She adjusted her step-daughter on her hip and stepped back, narrowly missing her little dog Jack as he sat watching from the sidelines. Both of them were in danger of being knocked over by the vigorous actions of Sarah as she removed things from the back seat and dropped them on the driveway.

"Drat the man, why does he have to go sticking his nose in?"

"Who, your father-in-law?" Jenny gazed with some astonishment at the normally easy going Sarah.

"No." Sarah backed out of the car and stood up. "That man of mine."

She turned around and exchanged a smile with Jenny. "He just didn't want to play 'meet the relatives'. I know him." She wagged a finger under Caitlin's nose and said, "And your Dad's no better, petal."

Then she shook her head at the small mountain on the driveway. "I'll go, Jenny. If you'll keep an eye on the bairns for me?"

"Of course I will. Take care on that road." She stepped back as Sarah climbed into the driver's seat and backed out, watched her straighten the car up, and then looked at Caitlin. "Right young lady, let's shut the gate, and then you can get down while I clear up this lot." She made the garden child and dog friendly, and began to cart things indoors.

"Half these toys are yours, Caitlin McInnis. No, don't take them outside again. Leave teddy in the toy box and help Mum fetch the rest of the stuff in before everyone arrives."

Caitlin obliged by taking the dolls pram from the kitchen to the front room and loading it with dolls. Jenny grinned. "OK, ignore me. I don't care."

She picked up a slightly grizzly Sarah Elizabeth and gave her a kiss. "Are you tired, poppet? That dress is a dream on you, but I think we need to change you into something more comfortable so that you can crawl about a bit."

Nine month old Sarah Elizabeth, known to everyone as Beth, stopped grizzling and leaned back in Jenny's arms so that she could see what was happening. Jenny grinned at the beaming smile and single tooth now offered for her inspection. "Yeah, and there's another tooth coming too, isn't there?" She took both babies upstairs and, hindered by two-year-old Caitlin, changed Beth into dungarees before taking both back down again.

Jenny continued to keep a sharp eye on both babies as she put the kettle on to boil and checked the front room table which was groaning under the weight of enough food to feed a famine. She sat Caitlin down at her own little table in the corner of the kitchen, and had her eating an eclectic mix of food. At the kitchen table Beth, seated in a high chair, banged a two handled mug vigorously. Jack sat at Caitlin's side, his tongue lolling out and an expectant look on his face.

Others began to arrive and the house to fill. Sarah, on her way upstairs with Beth at three o'clock, exchanged a word with Jenny. "He should have been back by now, Jen."

"Have you tried phoning him?"

"I don't like to, but his Dad will be going home in another hour, and he's that peeved that Sandy's not here."

Jenny wrinkled her nose. "I'll phone Bob, find out what they've got, and tell him to give Sandy a nudge." She smiled at Sarah. "OK."

Sarah nodded, "I don't like to nag, and I've got to feed Beth, so if you wouldn't mind, love?"

"OK, leave it to me." Jenny continued downstairs and retreated into the kitchen, away from the buzz of talk in the sitting room, pulling out her mobile and speed-dialling her husband.

"Bob, sorry, love, but Sarah's in a fret, where's Sandy?"

Bob scowled at the phone. "He isn't here, Jen. He left me about two hours ago. Went back to the office to organise more men. I've got a probable homicide."

Jenny nodded at the phone. "OK. Any idea when you'll be back, love?" She knew Bob was committed to his work. She could put up with any number of missed outings and parties, so long as he came home to her at night.

She heard him sigh as he said, "I don't know, darling. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. I'll see you later."

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR SANDY BELL was sitting in his Ford Focus in something of a daze. He'd been driving peacefully along, when a car had sideswiped him and swept him into his current position. The other car had continued on its way, apparently without noticing what it had done. He was gazing out of the window, his body at a strange angle against the door, and watching a pied wagtail exchanging courting rituals with its mate on a branch just in front of his windscreen.

Sandy cocked his head on one side, trying to make some sense of the angle of the tree. He became aware in a slow and dreamy way of the vibration of his mobile and reached into his pocket for it. Still on automatic pilot, he pulled it out while continuing to watch the mating activities.

"Sandy, where are you, man?"

Sandy looked at the phone, then he looked at his surroundings, then he looked back at the phone. "I haven't a clue, Jim. I appear to be in a ditch." Sandy transferred his attention back to the birds. He thought they were very pretty, and they reminded him of Sarah when she was flitting about trying to get things done. The phone squawked some more.

"What do you mean you're in a ditch? Sandy, are you hurt?" Bob was hanging on to his patience, but fear was threatening to chase it away with a raised fist to his guts. "Sandy, talk to me. You were going back to the police station for more men."

"Oh, I did that," Sandy paused, frowning, "or I think I did that. I radioed through. I'm sure I did, then I thought I'd just have a look at the old case." Sandy shifted in his seat and became aware of various areas that ached a bit.

"The men arrived, Sandy. What old case? Where?"

"The old case, you know, we looked at it together, seven years ago, a rash of abortions, they used a church, you remember, Jim. We worked it for nearly three months, but we never got the bastards."

Bob, on the other end of the phone, raised astonished eyebrows. He would have been twenty-nine seven years ago, and he certainly wasn't working any cases with Sandy Bell back then. He'd only just gone into 'Plain Clothes'. He looked at the phone and spoke gently, "Oh yeah, I forgot, where was the main focus again?"

Sandy still watching the birds, smiled dreamily. "You're getting old, Jim. It was down near the old canal port, wasn't it?"

"So you're down there are you?"

Sandy looked around. "Yes, or maybe no; I'm still in a ditch."

Bob was walking rapidly towards his car, leaving a crime scene to fend for itself, as he spoke into the phone. "Describe this ditch to me, Sandy."

"It's just a ditch, Jim. Nice green banks on one side, some daffodils, got a pretty conker tree just coming into bud. The other side is concrete."

Bob got into his car and turned the key, before flicking the mobile to hands free. "Do you think you can get out of the car, Sandy, and have a look around? See where this ditch is."

"Oh, I don't want to do that, I might disturb the wagtails."

Bob bit back the frantic, and very impolite, response he longed to give. He thought briefly of ringing Sarah and asking her if she knew where the case had centred, and then thought better of it. He didn't want to break contact with Sandy Bell. "I'll come and have a look at them with you, Sandy, and we can look at the site of this old case at the same time, yes? But you need to tell me where you are first." Bob put his well shod foot down and headed in the general direction of the Port Road, uttering prayers under his breath.

Sandy nodded, yeah that made sense. He stretched out an arm and pushed the car door. It remained stubbornly in place. He looked at the small bog willow pushing against the driver's side window, the golden smears of pollen leaving yellow trails against the glass. "I can't get out to look, Jim, there's a tree in the way." Sandy, having answered the question went back to ornithology.

Bob, having worked his way, as rapidly as he dared, to the north of Denton Holme then Willow Holme, was now approaching the big roundabout on the A595. He looked at the various signs and opted for the route to the Infirmary, up the Port Road itself.

"Sandy?" The phone remained silent. "Sandy? Answer me." Silence was his reply. Bob pulled over setting his hazard lights, regardless of inconvenience to other car users, and phoned the station.

He could hear a siren in the distance and wondered at it. It wasn't getting any louder; even while he spoke on the phone he was speculating as to whether it might be anything to do with his

partner, but he was very near the Infirmary. He shrugged. "Switchboard, McInnis here, put me through to 'D' section. I need to speak to the super, urgently." There followed several fraught seconds while Bob waited for contact.

"Ma'am, we have a problem." In such words had Jim Lovell announced the disaster aboard Apollo 13. Bob was hoping it would turn out as successfully, as he explained why he'd contacted Sandy, and continued, "Sandy Bell has gone missing. He says he's 'in a ditch' but doesn't seem able to tell me where the ditch is. He was following up a case from seven years ago; a 'rash of abortions', says it was centred on the 'Old Port' area. Has he spoken to anyone there about it? Is there anyone in the station who might know what the case was? And can we get a search going to try and find him? I think DI Bell might have injured himself; he seemed to think he was talking to my father."

The superintendent raised neatly plucked eyebrows, and spoke soothing words. Bob was a bit of a favourite of hers, though nothing short of bamboo slivers under her well lacquered fingernails would have rung that information from her. "I'll get teams out, Bob. I think your best bet would be Ryan Jones; he worked the case too, if I remember rightly, but it wasn't seven years ago, it was in ninety-one. I'll get back to you." She put the phone down and stood up, smoothing out creases in her dark blue uniform skirt and walking smartly through to the day room.

Meanwhile, Bob was phoning Ryan Jones.

"Bob, I can't tell you anything yet." Ryan spoke into the handsfree speaker while he settled a clamp on the minute body of the baby he'd held that morning in the church. "The mother is due in about ten minutes." He sounded testy, but Bob hadn't got time to worry about other's feelings, even while he registered the fact that it was probably a double homicide now.

"I've not rung about that, Ryan. Sandy has disappeared. I managed to contact him. He said he was re-investigating, 'a rash of abortions' from twenty years ago. Then his mobile went dead. Where was it, Ryan?"

Ryan Jones carefully laid down the scalpel he'd just picked up. He stepped away from the metal table and looked at the swing doors of the autopsy room.

"Ryan? Jonesy?"

"Yeah, I'm here, Bob. Just let me think for a minute." He stood still, the soft hiss of the air-conditioning and fans a susurrant in his ears. "It was a long time ago. They left the bodies in a churchyard, I think. We found three babies around the old canal basin. What's now the Port Road Business Park." Jones looked across at the table where the infant was lying, almost obscenely espaliered, open before him, the small chest and exposed ribs, sad, and somehow rebuking. "I hadn't made that connection."

"No, well I didn't know there was a connection to make." Bob smiled grimly, "I'll get back to you, Ryan." He switched the phone off and did an illegal U turn, heading for the Business Park. It was the only clue he had; he just hoped it was a good one.

SARAH, HAVING SATISFIED THE needs of her youngest child, was dealing with the needs of her father-in-law. "I don't know where he is, Pa. You know Sandy. Bob had a murder and Sandy went to see if he could help."

"What did you say? Don't mumble, girl, I've got my aids in."

Sarah took a deep breath and raised her voice a decibel or two. "I said he was called out on a case, Pa. He had to work."

"Time he left that to the younger chaps. Needs to learn to delegate. When I was in the merchant navy..."

"Yes, Pa." Sarah sighed under her breath and headed the conversation off. "I'll have to take you back; I'll send Sandy to see you next week."

"Well, see you do! Give him a piece of your mind, Sary; make him toe the line a bit. Now let me give that baby a kiss and

then we'll be going. The nurses have enough to do without me coming back late and spoiling their routine."

"Yes, Pa." Sarah helped him up and took him over to the playpen where Sarah Elizabeth, newly christened daughter of DI Sandy Bell, stole a toy from under the nose of her foster-sister, Miss Caitlin McInnis.

Beth was hoisted up by her mother and soundly kissed by her grandfather and when Caitlin held out her arms, she was kissed too. "Pretty kid, ain't she, Sary." Sandy's father smiled at both children and, aided by a stick and his daughter-in-law, was assisted outside and thence back to his residential home.

Jenny, watching their exit, smiled. She wasn't sure she would have the patience and restraint that Sarah had shown that afternoon. She picked up her mobile and punched in Bob's number.

"Where is he, Bob? Sarah's going spare."

Bob, driving in ever widening circles towards the trading estate looking for a conker tree just coming into bud, and a ditch with a car in it, spoke with some caution. "Er! I appear to have mislaid him, Jen."

"Eh!"

"He went chasing a past case, and when I got through to him he said he was, and I quote, 'in a ditch'. He kept calling me 'Jim'. I think he might be in a bit of trouble, Jen. Jim was my father and he's been dead these twelve years."

"Oh! Lord. Do you want me to tell, Sarah, Bob?"

Bob, who had just spotted some interesting skid marks near the spreading branches of a chestnut tree, with pretty pink tips just unfurling, paused long enough to allow his wife to grit her teeth and say, "Bob?"

"Sorry. No, love. It might all be a mare's nest. I'll get back to you, Jen."

Jenny could hear the singsong of several police sirens, even over the static of Bob's mobile, and then the noise was abruptly cut off. She looked at the silent phone and then addressed the two children. "Let that be a lesson to you, girls. Don't marry a policeman."

BOB WAS RIGHT ABOUT the skid marks. They led to the edge of a narrow culvert cum railway bank, part of the old canal system, and resting there like a badly fitting ship in a bottle, was Sandy's black saloon car. It was almost on its side, a good half of it just above the watery bottom of the old canal, the rest seemingly sticking out of the pavement. The driver's side was leaning at a precarious angle.

Bob stood perfectly still, waiting for his heart to stop pounding, before he lifted his mobile and stabbed in the number for the police station, and informed Control that DI Bell had been found. He'd seen cars on the news at that angle, but generally it was following an earthquake.

He shuddered. They were going to need a tow truck, and an ambulance. He detailed his needs and followed this information up with directions as to where both he and Sandy were.

Only then did he scramble across the side of the ditch and look into the car through the open passenger window. Sandy was still sitting watching the birds; he looked up as they took flight at Bob's precipitate arrival.

A puzzled expression flitted across his face, settling in the back of his eyes. "Jim?" He shook his head and continued to look out of the passenger window. "No, you aren't Jim. But..."

Bob was assessing the angle of the car. He thought he might be able to get Sandy out through the passenger door, but first he needed to know if anything was broken or damaged. "Sandy, are you hurt anywhere? Do you think you can get out if I give you a hand?"

Sandy was still looking at Bob with a puzzled expression. "I don't know. I suppose so."

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm one big ache, but I don't think there's any real damage to my body. Mind seems to be playing tricks a bit." He continued to sit in the driver's seat.

"I'll explain in a minute. Let's get you out first." Bob was sniffing. A strong smell of petrol hung over the car, like a country town at silage spraying time. He pulled the passenger door, which opened easily, but due to the angle of the car, had a tendency to shut again with the force of gravity. Eventually, Bob leaned his whole body in and grasped Sandy's hands. Sandy was no lightweight.

Bob had purchase, but lacked the brute strength to pull Sandy out. He stepped back, panting, vowing to up his visits to the local gym. A voice hailed him and a squad car came to a screeching halt on the roadway, its siren making conversation impossible. Doors slammed and two hefty police constables appeared either side of him like a couple of armoured genii.

"If we take an arm each, sir, you could maybe hold the door out of the way." Bob got the gist of the idea, more from pointing and action than from the words spoken.

Bob grabbed the door and the two men took an arm each and lifted Sandy, bodily, and almost vertically, out of the seat. They kept hold as they wriggled back away from the canal side and lowered their detective inspector to the ground on the kerbside a little distance from the car, which from this vantage showed an exhaust at an angle never anticipated by the manufacturers.

One of the constables went away and turned off the siren. Sandy, willing but still mystified, sat on the edge of the pavement. Bob lowered his own body and sat next to him, breathing deeply.

The sound of a police presence was beginning to attract residents from houses nearby. Other squad cars started to arrive, and men to move in a purposeful manner towards the two

detectives, some peeling away to form an effective barrier to the rubbernecking populace. Bob, after a quick look at Sandy, stood up. "Don't foul the scene. Get some tape up so that we can figure out what happened here." He looked around at the gathering crowd.

"Constable," he looked at one of the senior men, "get Traffic out here. I want a scene log. They've got the most experience." He stopped as the wail of an ambulance could be heard rapidly approaching. "And cordon off and keep clear for now; that car might just go up yet."

Bob moved back to Sandy Bell, who was watching all the activity. "Why the flak-jackets? Are we expecting something major?"

Bob looked around. "Not now. Let's get you into the ambulance and get you checked out, Sandy."

He helped Sandy to rise as the ambulance pulled to a stop and the paramedic jumped out. A fire engine followed. The narrow road was filling up with service vehicles. Bob, noting the gathering crowd of personnel, nodded with satisfaction as the senior constable took control of the scene and started delegating his men. He was dragged back by the plaintive voice of his partner.

"Aye, that's all well and good. But who the hell are you? You look like Jim McInnis, but you ain't him!"

Sandy stood up, grabbing Bob's shoulder as the world went black at the edges, cutting out the bright sunshine. He looked at Bob and Bob looked right back, as both men grappled each other and the problem.

Into the hiatus dropped the cheery words of the paramedic. "Would you like to sit down again, sir, so that we can assess you?" He grasped an arm and seated Sandy on the ground, while the two men continued to look at each other.

"Anything hurt anywhere, sir?" The paramedic was running expert hands over Sandy's nether regions, while another green

clad ambulance man dropped a stretcher next to him on the ground and opened a medical bag.

Sandy absently answered the question. "No, I ache, but nothing hurts exactly."

"Did you bang your head; you've got a lump the size of a duck egg at the back here, sir."

"Can't remember." Sandy put a tentative hand up to his occipital region, fingered the lump, and said, "Ouch!"

"I think we'd better have you away to A&E for a checkup, sir. That lump has a cut in it. It could do with a stitch. Would you follow the penlight, sir?" The paramedic was holding a small torch in front of Sandy's face, and he finally stopped looking at Bob to focus on it.

"That's it, sir; just move the eyes, not your head." He turned to his opposite number who was now noting things down on a form. "PERLA."

Bob glanced from one to the other. "Perla?"

"Pupils, equal, reactive to light, accommodation. It means he probably hasn't got concussion." The man turned back to Sandy. "Now, sir, can you tell me who you are and where you live?"

Sandy smiled. "Easy, Detective Sergeant Sandy Bell, I live at..."

Bob held up a hand. "You're a DI now, Sandy."

"Oh, bugger! And you're young Bob. Only you aren't so young, and I'm in the shit."

Sandy looked from one man to the next. "What's the date?"

"Easter Sunday, 2010." Bob supplied the answer, his eyes full of compassion and worry.

"I thought it was ninety-eight. I appear to have lost a few years, gentlemen." Sandy forced himself to an unnatural calm. "I think I would like to see your doctor now."

He looked at Bob. "Just one question."

"Yeah?"

"Sarah?"

"At home, and she is going to be seriously annoyed with you this time."

"Jim?"

"That's two questions." Sandy continued to hold Bob's eyes, waiting. "He died twelve years ago, Sandy. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I'm sorry too." Sandy nodded and then turned to the two hovering men. "If someone wouldn't mind giving me a hand, I'll get into your nice ambulance and lie down for a bit. I feel a nightmare coming on."