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Blood in the Water

An Alice Rice Mystery

Gillian Galbraith

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Thursday 1st December

'Look, you can see it on the screen. That's the baby… there. It's now about, say, two inches from crown to rump and weighs, maybe, a quarter of an ounce… you can see the little heart beating… and everything that should be there seems tube there…'

Dr Clarke slid the transducer over her patient's pregnant belly, keeping a careful eye at all times on the black and white image on the ultrasound screen. Mrs Greig smiled and grasped her husband's hand more tightly. He craned over her towards the screen, attempting to make out, amongst all the shades of grey, any recognisable human form.

'Can you tell the sex yet?' he asked.

'No. The sex organs only begin to differentiate in the third month, and even then assessing gender can be difficult. We'll do a more detailed scan later on in the pregnancy and we should get a better idea at that stage. Otherwise, if you are having amniocentesis the fluid can be checked and a more certain result given. What are you hoping for?'

'A girl,' Mr Greig said firmly.

'A healthy child, girl or boy,' his wife corrected.

'Well, I'll see you in about six weeks time when we'll take blood for the AFP estimation. In the meanwhile, you'll be under the care of your GP, but don't hesitate to contact the hospital if you have any problems.'

As Dr Clarke left the ultrasound room her patient was getting dressed. The white-coated consultant walked slowly towards her office, wondering why she felt tired so

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early in the day. She glanced at her watch registering that she had twenty minutes before she was scheduled to start her twelve o'clock Monday appointment in the High Risk Maternity Clinic. Sufficient time for a cup of coffee and a skim of the newspaper. The office that had been allocated to her for the morning was small and uncomfortable. One entire wall was occupied by textbooks and periodicals, and a desk-top computer with all the paraphernalia associated with it seemed to have taken over the rest of the room. The sole window was obscured by a large leafy pot plant, a legacy from the previous occupant, which despite getting the lion's share of any available light was in the process of dying untidily. The much reviled architecture of the new Royal Infirmary at Little France came out well in comparison with this, at least, and her own bolt-hole in the new hospital now seemed palatial in comparison to these dingy quarters. Clearing a stack of charts from the seat of the only chair available, she sat down and took a sip of her black brew.

Elizabeth Clarke was a tall woman, elegant in an understated way, with greying brown hair and pale blue eyes which communicated little emotion and surveyed the world with a distant, unblinking gaze. Her permanent expression of slight disdain and regal carriage gave her a patrician air, powerful enough to ward off all but the most confident. She wore almost no make-up, the slightest brush of mascara, but had begun to wonder whether she could still afford so little assistance with her appearance. As she began to daydream her mind drifted, once more, to her life and the absence of any man in it. They only complicate things, she thought, better no man than the wrong one, experience had taught her that much. But no sooner had she reassured herself than the voice of doubt whispered in her ear that she was too critical, unnaturally choosy, incapable of looking at any man other than as a potential spouse, and that she must change, learn to live in the moment and let things take their natural course, stop analysing every relationship to death and expecting perfection. She should settle for an ordinary, flawed mortal like everyone else. Her meditation was ended by the harsh tones of her beeper signalling the arrival of her first patient in the High Risk Clinic. Downing the dregs of her coffee, she rose to her feet and began to pick up the pile of medical records on her desk.

Eleanor Hutton was well-known to Dr Clarke. A patient who, more often than not, was the author of her many misfortunes and considered all advice given to her as optional. This was her fifth pregnancy, another 'mistake', and each new gestation had been more difficult to supervise than the last. The woman was a law unto herself. In between babies she turned up, erratically, at the Diabetes Clinic, usually when her condition was completely out of control. For a few weeks she would take note of whatever strictures had been directed at her, only to relapse into her careless ways until the next time. She was fat, jolly and untidy, invariably clad in tight clothes usually revealing, in unexpected places, rolls of white flesh. Dr Clarke, against her better judgement, liked her patient.

'But I ken whit I'm daein backwards, doctor…' Eleanor protested.

'Yes, Eleanor, but you must turn up for your appointments, all your appointments. You've missed the last three. We've no recent record of your weight, the baby's size, whether it has been moving as it should, the foetal heart rate. There's been no

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booking scan, you're unsure about your last menstrual period, we haven't been able to test your urine… Where do I begin?'

'Ehm… ma diabeetis is under control,' the patient volunteered, to placate her physician.

'Maybe. As you don't do half your blood-sugar tests I'm not convinced you'd know. I've told you before you are exposing your baby to a real risk. If this is another big one—and Debbie was over eleven pounds, wasn't she?—it might die in the womb. These big babies sometimes do, often shortly before they're due to be delivered. So we need to monitor their health, their size, particularly carefully… And you smoked all during your last pregnancy.' Dr Clarke was unable to suppress a sigh of exasperation.

'Ye'll see, doctor, I'll attend frae noo on. You jist tell me when tae turn up and I'll be there. I've gi'en up the fags this time, gi'ed them up as soon as I kent I wis expecting.' Eleanor smiled broadly, exposing denture-free gums, evidently considering, as usual, that her assurances of past and future compliance would be taken at face value.

'If you have difficulty getting to the hospital I can, if necessary, arrange for you to be picked up by an ambulance for your appointment,' Dr Clarke persisted.

'I'll be there doctor, dinnae worry yerself again.'

Dr Clarke left the clinic musing over the unfairness of human reproduction. Patients like Eleanor Hutton conceived as soon as blink, were careless of the health of their unborn children and yet usually carried to term. Others tried and tried, mangling their sex lives in the process, resorting to every quack device on the market only to conceive and then lose the child despite their meticulous care.

Collecting her coat and a battered leather case bulging with papers from her office, she left Lauriston Place and the old Royal Infirmary buildings and set off in the direction of South Bridge. When she got to Blackwells bookshop, she stopped to browse amongst the CDs in the music department and eat a hurried sandwich. On emerging onto the wet street, she congratulated herself on making only one purchase, Elgar's 'Sea Pictures' with Janet Baker. Temptation was usually succumbed to more fully; you could not have too many CDs. Crossing the road, she noticed, at a bus stop on the other side, Eleanor Hutton standing sheltering from the persistent drizzle. The pregnant woman was smoking a cigarette. The doctor was aware of a further temptation, the temptation to snatch the fag from the woman's mouth and stamp it out on the wet pavement in front of her. Instead, hoping to embarrass her patient into some minimum of care for her unborn child, she simply gave a nod of recognition, watching intently as Mrs Hutton, on meeting her eyes, surreptitiously dropped her cigarette to the ground and extinguished the lipstick-stained stub with the heel of her boot.

'It's ma last yin, doctor, ye ken hoo nervous I aye get in hospitals. Nae mair fi' noo oan.'

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Dr Clarke nodded politely again, inwardly acknowledging the futility of any further discussion.

McDonald House, the building containing the Faculty of Advocates' consulting rooms, was recessed off the High Street down a small, ill-lit wynd. Its large, well-furnished waiting room was warm, plentifully stocked with glossy magazines and reminiscent of a slightly stuffy gentleman's club forced, unwillingly, into the twenty-first century. As Dr Clarke lowered herself thankfully into a red leather armchair, CD World in hand, Kate McLeod, her solicitor from the Scottish Health Service Central Legal Office, spotted her and came to sit next to her. The young woman's face and clothes were streaked with rain, and she hauled behind her a large shopping trolley, weighed down with blue cardboard files. Seeing the doctor's quizzical gaze on it, she volunteered that all her colleagues were supplied with the trolleys in order, they assumed, for their employers to avoid any liability for injuries caused by the carrying of the reams of paper needed for most consultations. Extracting one of the files from the trolley, she opened it and handed the doctor a two-page document, explaining that it had just been e-mailed to her by their opponents, and was a report from the pursuer's expert witness, Dr Manning.

While Elizabeth Clarke was reading the report, two men dressed in black jackets and waistcoats, with sponge-bag trousers and shiny shoes, approached her armchair. Looking up, she recognised Robert Philip QC and his Junior, Simon Stewart. Both were known to her from previous court battles. The Silk was a fat man; his starched collar disappeared into the folds of his neck and two pendulous dewlaps overshadowed his tie. Yards of white shirt were visible in the gap between his waistcoat and his trousers, and a gold fob watch chain strained across his belly, emphasising its prosperous rotundity. His Junior was also corpulent, but looked less likely to melt on a hot day, some signs of muscle and bone still apparent.

After cursory greetings they went downstairs, the Silk leading the way to room fourteen, took their seats and laid out their papers on the large mahogany table that dominated the chamber. Once seated, Dr Clarke was irritated to find that she felt nervous. She was conscious that her heart was beating, thumping against her chest, and that the place had suddenly become uncomfortably warm and airless. It was so stupid, this fear. She had no reason to feel apprehensive, no cause for any anxiety. All that they wanted was her expert opinion, an opinion she was eminently qualified to provide. Breathing slowly in and out, she reminded herself, it's not me this time, it's not me that they're after.

Robert Philip quickly sketched out the case, reading when necessary from the Closed Record. It was a medical negligence action. A woman had gone into hospital for a sterilisation operation, involving the blocking of her fallopian tubes. The surgeon treating her had performed, before the sterilisation operation, a dilatation and curettage procedure. His patient had, allegedly, not consented to the additional procedure. Subsequently, she had developed septicaemia. She attributed the development of the septicaemia to the unauthorised 'D&C', and now wanted compensation from the NHS Trust responsible for the hospital.

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Listening to the crisp, unemotional summary of events, Dr Clarke wondered whether the lawyers involved had any idea of the degree of concern that a suit, such as that being so coolly discussed, engendered in the doctors under attack. Whether they liked it or not, they would have to live with the allegation of negligence day after day, probably for up to six years or so, until they were found guilty or innocent of the charge against them. To exonerate themselves they would have to endure days in a witness box being harangued by an aggressive young Turk intent upon making his reputation by destroying theirs. Any hidden insecurities they felt in carrying out their difficult jobs were exacerbated by the litigation and would eat away at them. Even if the case against them was finally dismissed, their professional confidence was dented, the shadow of a stain on their record.

The afternoon passed slowly, with Dr Clarke explaining in detail precisely what was involved, in surgical terms, with a D&C procedure and a sterilisation operation using fallope rings. When asked, she drew, on paper thrust hurriedly before her, diagrams of the relevant anatomy, the uterus, cervix, fallopian tubes and ovaries, and Robert Philip quickly scrawled the names of the organs, or structures, onto her drawings. As she spoke, Junior Counsel took copious notes in his old fashioned blue jotter and, she observed with amusement, sketched caricatures of his Senior whenever she became remotely repetitious. Before long the atmosphere in the windowless room became heavy with the odour of warm work-clothing, and she was much relieved when Philip announced, at about six pm, that their meeting would have to end, as he had to pick up his child from kindergarten. Not for the first time she considered the fate of the offspring of the professional classes, in a nursery or some other care practically from birth onwards, their needs always secondary to their parents' ambition. Better not have a child at all, for the child's sake; there was no longer any question in her mind about that. It was a modern myth, this 'having it all' for women, about as achievable as a cache of fairy gold or a clutch of phoenix's eggs. Choices had to be made, and she had made hers.

The air outside was cold, a sharp refreshing cold after the foetid warmth of the consulting room. Deliberately exhaling the used air from her lungs, she breathed in deeply and, pulling up the collar of her dark blue coat, walked up the High Street towards the Castle, turning right to go down the Mound towards Princes Street. She felt a surge of childish delight on seeing the mass of white lights on the huge Christmas tree opposite the twin gothic towers of Playfair's New College, the brilliant strands swinging wildly in the wind that was beginning to rise. In ten minutes the Dean Bridge and her home at 1 Bankes Crescent came into view, partially obscured by the bare winter trees that flanked the north side of the Dean Gardens. She removed her gloves to unlock the impressive black front door that served the three flats and picked up her mail. Nothing more than the usual advertising circulars and a couple of dull looking brown envelopes. No Christmas cards yet.

Elizabeth Clarke had never subscribed to the view that drinking alone amounted to the taking of the first, few, faltering steps along the road to perdition. A maxim coined by some bibulous married man, never short of domestic company. Anyway, if it did, she was half-way to hell already and quite determined to reach journey's end. The long gin and tonic she poured herself would simply allow her taut mind to relax,

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enabling her to enjoy the Elgar more fully and dull the shrill, ever-present voice in her head which told her that she should be doing something, achieving something. She took the new disc from its box, put it into her CD player and switched the sound to the speakers in her bathroom.

The warm water enveloped her, caressed her aching limbs. She stretched out her arm lazily for her mobile phone, thinking that once she had spoken to her mother she would be free of all responsibilities, at least until after supper, when she would have to compile the medical report commissioned by those aggressive solicitors in Glasgow.

'Hello Ma, it's me. How's your back been?'

'It's much better, darling, it's really the pains down my legs that are more troublesome now, but they're beginning to lessen. I've been taking those anti-inflammatories you told me about. More importantly, how are you? How was work today?'

'Fine. I was at the old Royal Infirmary for a clinic, probably one of the last I'll ever have there, I expect, so I didn't have to take the car to Little France for a change. I'd almost forgotten what a pleasure it can be to walk to work. In the afternoon, I had to consult in a legal case in the High Street and I could go straight there from the hospital. Otherwise much as usual. I'm glad your back's better. I wondered whether you had any idea what you'd like for Christmas? I thought you might enjoy that new book on the Mitfords, and I could get you some fine soap too. What do you think?'

'I got the Mitford book from the library yesterday, but I'd love the soap. What about you, have you thought of anything? Is there any new disc you'd like?'

'Not at the moment. I'd like a surprise. I know it's more difficult but I'd prefer it if you can be bothered. By the way, I got excellent news today, I'm off on Christmas Day and Boxing Day so I'll be able to come home and spend a night. We might even manage a service at St. Mary's.'

'Wonderful! I was beginning to think that we were going to be out of luck this year. I'll order a turkey from Fenton Barns and we'll get a ham too. You'll be pleased to hear that Aunt Judith can't make it, she's…'

'Sorry Ma, I'm going to have to go. Someone's ringing the doorbell. I'll phone you back later tonight or sometime tomorrow evening.'

Dr Clarke put down the phone, dressed in haste and ran to the front door. Despite the delay her caller was still waiting for her.

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