Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Shadowplay

Written by Karen Campbell

Published by Hodder Paperback

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Prologue

On a hill swept by oak, a single soft glow shines from a darker bulk. Grey on grey, faint smear of bruising in a sky that undulates, lifting lines of shape from shadow. Close to, the bulk becomes a building, an old mansion house so far weathered and worn that nature's creeping grasp is a blessing of disguise. Hefts of ivy and moss might be all that stitch the crumbling lumps together. That and the piles of scaffolding, propping wall unto wall.

The security guard presses his face against the window, trying to see out. Dawn soon, and all is quiet. It is always quiet here, it is fine. And he can pray when he wants to. A cousin found him the job; it means he can study in peace too, by the light of a 40-watt anglepoise which plugs straight into a tangle of wires on the floor. The men are coming soon to raggle the walls, gouge channels then smooth plaster over the live cables that will dance and spark life through this skeleton of stone. A renaissance of luxury flats.

It was a museum once, a nature display, where the spoors and splays of long-dead animals lay alongside a desiccated wasp byke and trays of thin-pressed leaves and butterflies. He has seen pictures of the glass cases and the tea room, with its potted palms and silver service. This room was the park ranger's – the sign is still screwed to the woodwormed door. Before that, it was a country house, built by a sugar baron with the proceeds of his trade. Cutting cane in the West Indies, shipping sweet and sour along the River Clyde.

The guard had learned about it as he wandered the city's rain-slick streets, took shelter in its libraries and museums, which were free and splendid. Glasgow had been the Empire's Second City, a proud centre of trade and wealth and industry. Even now it revelled in its sturdy

antiquities, offering history trails past refurbished warehouses, issuing glossy leaflets proclaiming the city's most famous sons, who slept under marble mausoleums in the Necropolis. But Glasgow didn't like to boast about the murk beneath the money; of souls being sold with bracelets on their ankles. Some of them passed through, some were kept, as pets. Maybe another black man like him had once stood here. Stood at this window and prayed he was back at home.

He'd seen a painting, in a museum in town. Done for the Glassford family, tobacco merchants who gave their name to one of the city's busiest streets. Serene mother, stern father, all the primped and becurled children in their vivid, lush silks and satins. And a darker smudge in the background, where their black page had been painted out.

Once his studies are over. He will work hard, become rich, and return home to his boy.

Then he can pay back what he owes, and the debt will be squared.

But for now, he must live in this quietness . He has been told to expect a delivery, and has cleared the basement as instructed. They never told him when, or what, and he has never asked.

Watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen go by.

Kipling was a wise man.

He turns off the lamp as the sky yawns and stretches. It will be fine.

Chapter One

The Chief Constable patted her shoulder. A manly pat, a comradely one.

'My staff officer will see you out.'

Anna Cameron saluted, then turned towards the door. Felt her back foot spin too far, her supporting leg get confused. She managed to correct her gait, watching her flat black shoes find their place beneath flat black ankles, devoid of any shape now they were at right angles to the floor. Viewed from above, her legs were not her strongest attribute. *You're all up and down, you*, her grandpa would say. *Not a pick on you*. But even the most curvaceous of women would be hard pushed to find this uniform flattering. The sycophancy, however, was.

'Congratulations, ma'am.'

The inspector, the wee gingery inspector who'd briefed her as an equal but ten minutes previously, extended an orange-tufted hand once they were outside.

It felt so good. *Ma'am*. Not marm, as in school-teaching spinster, but *M-AH-m*, as in Ah.

Aaaahhh.

Bloody AAAHHHH.

That magic extra pip glinted at Anna, winking from a triumphant shoulder. 'Cheers. That me then?'

'You'll not stay for the tea and biscuits? I've heard tell they've got ginger nuts this month.'

'Is that right? Well, if it's ginger nuts you're offering me . . .'

No, Anna. Don't. You're a chief inspector now.

'Aye. That and a nice hob-nob with the Chief. Never too early to get your face on the radar, you know.'

Oh, her face was well on the radar already. Though for all the wrong reasons. How Anna Cameron had managed to achieve another promotion was something that troubled her almost as much as her colleagues. *Gender Agenda,* Colin Keenan had sneered, even though Anna had been an inspector nearly a year longer than him. However, Colin had not yet been the subject of two discipline enquiries, some dodgy rumours and a just-filed-away grievance alleging clandestine lesbian favouritism. Try saying that ten times quickly.

Paradoxically, that was the one that seemed to have finally tipped the scales in Anna's favour. Some disgruntled cop trying to find a reason for why he'd been overlooked for a shot in plainers. Apparently, he'd been keeping a record. And the record clearly stated that Inspector Cameron had, over a period of seven months, put Constable Arlene Winetrobe on plain-clothes duties during five of those seven months, while he, Stuart Wright, had been allowed just one brief week of sporting his M&S jeans and Clarks sneakers. And, furthermore, everyone *knew* that Constable Winetrobe was living with a member of the Scottish Women's rugby team, and was a particularly attractive young lady, and Inspector Cameron was . . . well, no one was quite sure, but she didn't have a man, ergo . . .

Ergo . . . Constable Stuart Wright was shite. At his job, at his communication skills, and, crucially, at his powers of deduction. And Arlene was an excellent thief-catcher, who would sail daily from the office like a rosy apple picker, returning with another good crop of windblown, maggoty neds. But the cut and dried clarity of it all hadn't stopped Professional Standards from sitting Anna down for a 'chat'. One of those oblique ones, with lots of nods and trailing sentences that hung, and smelled, like apologetic smoke.

Of course, it's none of our business how you . . .

As you know, we actively encourage diversity . . .

However, this is an allegation of . . .

Very sensitive issue . . .

Anna's response had been more trenchant. 'Look, the guy's an arse, and he's crap at his job. Would *you* put someone on plain-

clothes duty after they'd trailed into the office with two bags of frozen food from Iceland, and told the divisional commander they'd been doing their mum's shopping for her, because "things were a wee bit quiet"? In Easterhouse? When we're in the middle of a bloody drugs war?'

Like I said, we appreciate that this is a sensitive issue … Shall we say we've discussed matters, and leave it at that?

And now this. A quick Divisional Panel, an even quicker Force Panel, and promotion to chief inspector. At last, at last, at bloody last. Before she was forty, too. By just over a year, but then who was counting? Not Anna. Not every day, twisting time over her shoulder, looking down the barrel of where she'd been. Who she'd been. Forty. *Forty.* Futile, faded forty. A woman who'd never worn make-up, who'd relied on sharp brains and even sharper cheekbones, now looking at age-replenishing moisturisers and wondering if they really worked. A woman who, in molten horror, had just found her first grey pubic hair. She'd tried to pluck it out, but the wiry wee bugger was rooted deep.

The speed of her surprising, jolting ascent to promotion, after years of swinging stalled in mid-air, unnerved her. 'Well done, lass. Glad to see the back of you,' her divisional commander had chortled, offering his congratulations when the news came through. And she'd laughed back, while her thoughts chased her belly down in a lurching pirouette. What if she'd been subsumed by the Peter Principle? What if that's exactly what they were doing – promoting her beyond her capabilities, in order to bump her out of the division, with minimum hassle and maximum protection?

She remembered standing on the beach as a child, feeling the sand guzzling from beneath her feet as the sea sucked in and out. All tumult, confusing movement and her, stock-still, just trying to keep her balance. Her daddy's hand coming down to help her. Anna's confidence in her abilities, in her right to reach up and demand, had been ground out of her as surely as it was from those poor defeated shadows you saw at the Women's Refuge. Receding youth and relentless mundanity had rubbed back her fine, sharp corners, blurring them flat and weary.

She'd come to Easterhouse Police Station as a shining star, with only a slightly tarnished tail. Well, everyone was allowed one misdemeanour, one learning experience. Hers had been the Wajerski case. And Jamie Worth. Discipline Hearing number one. But she'd recovered from that, excelled at the training school, and been promoted to inspector. She'd heard sufficient appreciative noises from Personnel to suggest that her stint as an operational inspector would be a brief one. *Six months on the street, then we'll look at some lateral development, eh?*

This force still did things the old-fashioned way. If you looked on websites of police forces down south, places like Greater Manchester and the Met, their entire senior management team were about her age. Bright young things with power and vigour, beaming beneath their braid in cyberspace. Strathclyde, however, liked you to take the scenic route – a wee shot of this, a sojourn in that. Slow and steady up the ladder, paying all your dues as you went.

Anna had nodded, and smiled and taken her medicine. And had been a competent – if frustrated – shift inspector. She could do the job standing on her head. The sergeants did all the work in any case; Anna was just there to take the shit for her shift. But then, there had been her unexplained appearance at a crime scene in HMP Garthlock. Her unauthorised use of a United Nations identification card. And, once more, Jamie Worth. Discipline Hearing number two.

And then there was nothing.

Nothing but a dull ache of something closing over, a lump you'd never press; would pretend you couldn't feel. But still, she had her job, if not her career, and still she turned up for duty, day in day out, week on week, month into month. Three years, in total, of sprawling Easterhouse, until she knew every lane and gushet and alleyway and ned and local worthy and piece of political manoeuvring and threadbare patch of grass and miserable railing and brave, thwarted effort to paint a wall or form a youth club better than she knew herself.

'Come on Anna, time to get the lippy on. That's us off for our photies!' Alex Patterson, slick, dark-haired, skirt-chasing Alex

from the Flexi Unit, kissed her cheek. 'Well done you, by the way. About bloody time, eh?'

'Well done you, too.'

Alex picked imaginary lint from the silver thread of his sergeant's stripes. 'I know.' Leaned closer in. 'Fucking mental, in't it? *Me* – a gaffer!'

'No more mental than me, pal.'

'Away. You were always destined for greater things. After you, ma'am.' He gave a courtly bow, and they followed the others across the road to the Identification Bureau, where they formed an orderly queue to get their picture taken.

'Which paper will we send this to?' asked the girl.

'Ach, don't bother.'

'No, we need to send it somewhere. What's your local?'

'The Bay Horse Inn.'

'Sorry?'

'Em, I think it's the *Southside Sentinel*.'

The girl scribbled something down on a form.

'Any biographical information to give? You know, Chief Inspector Cameron lives with her husband and two children in Shawlands, that kind of thing.'

'Nope.'

'Well, what am I going to put?'

'Chief Inspector Anna Cameron has been promoted back to G Division. Scene of her earliest triumphs, and not a retrograde step at all.'

The girl sniffed. 'I'll just make something up, shall I?'

'Fine. Can I go now?'

'Do you not want a copy of the photo to take away?'

'No thanks.'

'They make lovely gifts.'

For the cat? But she took one anyway. She could post it out to her mum, with a note attached. It would save the usual awkward phone call that neither of them looked forward to and from which, she suspected, each came away feeling worse.

Outside the brushed steel and glass doors of Headquarters,

Anna paused. Let cold sunlight slip across her face as traffic rumbled and Glasgow bustled on, taxis touting, office girls with thin blouses and folded arms hurrying in their brittle heels to queue at sandwich shops. An *Evening Times* salesman stood on the corner of Pitt and West George, strangulating pitch and vowels as he yodelled titbits from the early edition.

'Coming for a drink, *ma'am*?' Alex grinned at her from the midst of a crowd of cops in half uniform, civvie jackets thrown over police trousers and shirts.

'No . . . I'm hardly dressed for it.'

'Och, button up your coat and no one will know. It's a wee lock-in anyway.'

'At lunchtime?'

'Chief Inspector Cameron, did you learn nothing when you worked in A Division?' He winked at her. That Alex wink which told you all is well with life when you've got black hair, white teeth and a groin-grabbing strut to charm man and beast alike. 'C'mon, woman. My pint'll be going flat.'

It was the 'woman' bit that did it. Against her better judgement, against everything her head was telling her, some visceral surge came open and up. They were buddies, her and Alex, part of a team going way back. And it was good to have a comrade, someone who knew exactly who she was, and how she was feeling right now. Here in this moment, where a benevolent universe had beamed its goodness direct on her, expanding her ego and bubbling her brains.

As she went to answer him, an old lady in a wheelchair tried to wedge herself through the slight gap between Anna, Alex and the road.

'Ho, come on yous. Gie an old bird a break, eh? This thing's mair skew-whiff than a shopping trolley.'

'Sorry,' said Alex. They stepped aside to let her pass.

'Do you need a wee hand?' asked Anna.

'Do I buggery.'

Alex's eyes widened; suppressed, shared laughter making a bridge from him to Anna.

She waited until the wheelchair had squeaked by. '*Charming.*'

'Well? Are you pubbing it, ma'am, or what?'

'Aye, alright, then . . . Just the one though. I'm working tonight. I'll catch you up in a minute.'

'Right you are. We'll be in the back bar at D'Arcy's. And you're buying, what with your vastly inflated wages and all.'

'Can I remind you, Sergeant, you'll probably be earning more than me, all the overtime you'll be racking up. Us chief inspectors just do it for love of the job.'

She watched the jostle of back-slapping arms and puffed chests spill left towards Sauchiehall Street; the Alley of the Willows that had paved over its trees, grown crops of shops and pubs instead. A much better prospect for a drink. There was little to keep you in Pitt Street, save the red-brick heft of Headquarters and a discount tourist hotel. The very first time Anna had come to Headquarters was as a child, for a Christmas party, just before her dad had died. These doors had seemed huge and heavy then, the black-glazed tiles inside like glossy liquorice. As they were led downstairs to the Assembly Hall, she'd pressed her hands against one of the tiles, watching her fingerprint form and fade. All these other policemen and their children, her dad the tallest of them all, holding her hand and getting her a bottle of fizzy juice with a straw.

On you go, Annie-kins. Away and have fun.

Kids standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, bursting balloons and playing tig, the parents in a circle round the edges. Mostly clusters of men in ill-fitting jackets, some joking, calling her dad nicknames she didn't know. The lady helpers all seemed to be typists and office staff.

Her dad had walked through these doors on his last day on earth. Been up to collect some urgent thing, parked the panda on the double yellows and bounded in. He was always big and springy, her dad. Like Tigger. What was the *thing*? They never told them what the thing was – a production, some incident tape, a gun? A box of shirts for his sergeant? But the *thing* never got to its destination either.

She refocused her eyes. The old lady had stopped by the kerb, just a little further along. She seemed to be struggling to get up from the wheelchair, but every time she put her weight on her arms, the chair would slip, and she'd collapse back into the plastic seat.

'Excuse me. Sorry,' said Anna, going over, 'I think you need to put on your brakes first.'

'Put on my brakes? I'm like a bloody tortoise as it is, hen. If I gang any slower I'll stop.'

'No, to stop it skidding like that, I mean. But are you sure you should be standing up anyway?'

The woman's pupils punched out across cloudy irises, like a cat before it jumps. 'Listen hen. Ma hair's a mess, I've had this dress on three days now, and ma daughter-in-law's trussed me in a big nappy to take me out. I can walk fine – just no fast enough for *her*. I've no very much dignity left, but what I have, I'd like to keep.'

'Of course. I . . . I'm sorry.'

The old lady leaned a bit closer. 'But if you could just gie me a wee punty up, I'd be awfy grateful.'

'Sure thing.' Anna slipped one arm beneath her elbow. Slowly, with equal effort on both sides, they got her on to her feet.

'So, where is it you're off to?' said Anna.

'I want to go to Watt Brothers and get a new frock, but that bitch of a daughter-in-law willny take me. Ah, oh, that's better.' Her eyelids fluttered in utter bliss. 'Oh, there's nae support in they seats – ma back was bloody louping.'

Anna stood with the woman a moment as she let her back stretch straight. She smelled powdery, like a baby. The top of her head, her wild, black-grey hair, came up to Anna's shoulder. Unnaturally black, with remnants of perm; you could see where the dye stopped and broad, truthful white emerged. Whiskers on her chin, too. She must have sensed Anna looking, for she scratched her fingertips on the transparent bristles. Frowning, she looked at her fingers, then her elbow, then at Anna's face.

'Who are you?' The black sharpness of her gaze had vanished. Eyes completely vacant, one drifting slightly to the left.

'I was just helping you. You said you wanted to stand up?'

She blinked, and it was like another person, the first person, had returned. 'Och, that's fine hen. That's just lovely. Right.' The woman began the process of folding herself away, 'Back down we go. Ah . . . that's it. Now, if you could maybe gie me a wee hurl across the road . . .'

She broke off as a blonde in a velour leisure suit and white trench coat flapped towards them, thin jowls and ponytail bouncing.

'Mum! Mum! Where the hell have you been? Whit in the name of the wee man did you think you were doing?'

'I was *trying* to go shopping.'

'Now what have I told you, ya stupit besom?' The younger woman seized the back of the chair. 'You'll no be getting out again, that's for sure. Come on now, or I'll be getting another bloody parking ticket . . . Christ, I don't know. I try to do a nice thing, but see you? You're nothing but a . . .'

Her voice fragmented off the high walls of the city buildings, then disintegrated as she bustled away. In her chair, the old lady shifted round. A mournful face looked back at Anna, features and hope receding.

A sudden, skipping guilt-trip. Was that how Anna's mother looked, every time their phone conversations ended? Or when another summer rolled by with no visits and no excuse? Anna had no idea. Had no idea how her mother was looking at all, in fact, not since the Christmas letter and the snaps of her-and-Teddy's-cruise, when her mother had seemed scrawny, almost, in her halter-necked dress.

Ach, why not send her the stupid photo? And, if that prompted another invite, then maybe this time she'd go. Maybe.

Some man clipped her leg with his briefcase. A tut as he manoeuvred round where she stood, still watching the judder of shrinking shoulders from tears or Parkinson's or merely uneven pavement; watching the flow of a hard, busy city, and a woman being swept away. The man brushed past Anna up the steps into Headquarters, pulling hard through the glass and steel doors, which whumped all the air and left a hissing vacuum.

That drink was calling.

★ ★ ★

Nearly half past ten when Anna made it back to E Division. She'd had to take a taxi straight from the hotel. Her car was still at Pitt Street, and she was probably over the limit in any case. Pulling on her crumpled uniform; leaving Alex sleeping on his back.

Oh God forgive her. Alex.

She closed her eyes and was back in the daytime dark. The half-shut curtains of a half-decent hotel room, cloth curving round a crescent of window light where the two panels of fabric joined. Faint, unfamiliar furniture; a trouser press, that little casket where they kept the tea bags, all soft-sketched; but she could see enough. Flat belly facing her, sinewed muscle rippling like tongues. Him up high, almost vertical, the dimples dark at his groin, pulsing as his hips moved, slowly at first, rotating, screwing tight, and tighter, fully in, and still gyrating as she folded her legs across his back, pulling him deeper, further, faster.

'Oh God, oh God. Anna, I've wanted this from the moment I saw you. Anna. You're so beautiful.'

Her lapping it up, sucking on his fingers as he moved inside her, letting damp hands trace her face, which gravity stretches young and taut again. Nothing more than indulging in extra cream on top, an extravagant party-popper, and Anna, what is wrong with you? What are you so scared of that you would prostitute yourself for a couple of pints? She remembers sitting in the pub, Alex's arm draped loose across her back, his hard, blunt fingers stroking the flesh beneath her hair. Casual, proprietorial, insistent, until she was loose inside. Couldn't wait to get there. Her credit card, her treat. Her need.

She sees her body sprawled wide and wanton. Nothing more than a cheap, pished shag. She flies above herself, ashamed, yet still she watches them. One dark, one fair, curved in a heart shape, but the heart is empty. Then he stirs and tugs her head down.

'Suck me, Anna . . .'

If it was nothing, then why is she still there; growing lighter and clearer? She witnesses herself take Alex's prick in her mouth, her tongue running over.

'Oh, Anna,' he whimpers. 'Oh, you dirty wee cow.'

Then she bites on his thigh, on the soft inner flesh, until he yelps like a dog.

'Something to remember me by,' she says later, when the bruising has come up, and he is climbing on to her again, gone crazy with the need to be inside. And she lets it happen, riding high on the moment and his ten-years-younger prick.

Her last glimpse: him, lying there, asleep. One arm flung high above his head. Just a boy, with his smooth, wide brow and solid-orb biceps. A beautiful boy, who should go home to his wife, or his girlfriend; they all had one. Anna felt grubby, her head hurt. She was never doing this again. In the morning, when she got home, she'd flush all her contraceptives away. No pills, no shagging – a simple equation even Anna could master.

She had the taxi stop a few streets away from the office, got out and walked the last wee bit in the fresh air. Or as fresh as it could be in Easterhouse. Sometimes, the yeast of the distant brewery crept as far as here; other times faint fruit and fish from the markets at Blochairn. Tonight, the air was redolent only with greasy chips and dogs' dirt, and the lorry-loads of intermittent noise and monoxide that swept down from the motorway; sounds and scents augmented by the lack of intact streetlamps along Bogbain Road. But it was worth the walk to see the sharp spring sky. Deep blue and clean, the same matt-dark of her favourite Christmas bauble, which was midnight velvet ribbon over eggshell, studded with pin-tip golden stars. Her dad had made it, before she was born. It was he who had shown her how to weigh your egg, testing to see if the shell was sound. Then a tiny tap either end with the special bodkin he kept in the tin, and out, out damned spot, on to a saucer, yellow ooze on white. The shells that broke, they'd make into mosaics. Amazing that it was still intact, that bauble. She stored it boxed and cotton-wrapped every year. It was older, even, than her.

Easterhouse Police Station lit her way, a recumbent lighthouse in the dark. No banners or balloons for her there – well, that wasn't true. There were plenty of balloons there, mostly with superior airs and shiny red faces. Anna slipped through the door, past the big mosaic of a knife being binned. Kids at a nearby primary

had made it, children not yet in their teens who lived daily with gangs and ghettos. *Don't be Afraid – Trade Your Blade*, the little tiles demanded, with a childish courage and certainty she wished she could preserve. But experience had taught her differently. In a few years' time, many of these kids would be forced to choose fight or flight, would spend their days working round an intricate series of demarcation lines, spray-trails of who ruled where. They would take wide detours, change buses, go on foot. Avoid football matches, reject jobs, refuse dates, all to avoid encroaching into enemy territory. And some would tool up. For protection at first, then for kudos. Then for fun.

Anna went into her office. Her shift were due to start the night shift, and this would be her last time mustering them. They were a good bunch in the main, keen and productive, and she would miss them. Arlene, with her ribald jokes and eerie ability to see around corners; young Emma, who was a nurse before she joined; Stuart, whose name she glided over quickly because he never quite fitted; Big Al and Spike, who were like Laurel and Hardy; and Grandpaw Broon – Peter Brown, who had silver sideburns, the quiet, practised dedication of a military man, and slightly more service than Anna. Then there were her sergeants – shit-hot Sarah and world-weary Fred, who began each day by opening his Scope record on the computer, and relating exactly how many days were left until he could retire.

It was an alchemy, this coming together of disparate minds and moralities. Shaping them into a single, smooth entity that had an ethos and a drive, recognising their differences and pushing them to places in which they would thrive. 'Ahem.' A cough outside her door. 'That's the troops ready for muster, ma'am.'

'Okay, Fred, I'll be right through. Sorry I was late in – I got held up . . .'

She hoped he'd prepared the e-brief already, checking through the day's crime reports, confirming vulnerable premises, areas requiring extra attention, bail checks to be carried out. Anna normally came in early to oversee this process. She gave her hair a quick brush, sprayed some Gold Spot in her mouth. Another

sparkle from her shoulder. It was okay, it was. She wanted to stroke that sweet silver bump. Next stop, a crown, and then she truly would be back on track.

Enough, Anna, enough. One step at a time. But already, it was shifting. Like a sleepy animal stretching awake, a forgotten ember that had smouldered unseen, ambition stirred. She was allowed to feel the sun on her face again. Entitled. She glanced at her watch; her clock and all her gear were already packed away. There was still time. She sat back down, pressed the contacts list on her mobile. Scrolled down until she found it.

It was answered after seven rings; her limit was always ten.

'Hello, Mum? It's Anna.'

'Anna? What's wrong?'

'Nothing. Nothing's wrong. I just wanted to—'

'Then what are you doing calling at this hour? Teddy's *sleeping*.'

'I'm sorry . . . I just wanted to let you know—'

'What? Are you ill?'

'*No*. I just wanted to tell you something.'

'Tell me what?' A sharp catch of breath. 'Oh God!'

Anna was convinced she could hear her mother gulping.

'Oh, Anna. You're not *pregnant*, are you?'

That chiding lilt, borne not of empathy, but despair. No matter how hard Anna tried, she would always be a failure to her mother. She was her father's daughter, you see.

'Bloody hell, Mum. Quantum leap or what?'

'Well, I just—'

'No, no, it's nothing like that. Anyway, after all this time, I thought it'd make your day if I was.'

'Oh darling.' The hard edges of her mum's voice dropped away. 'Of course it would.'

'Well, I can assure you I'm *not*. I'm phoning to say I was up at Pitt Street today—'

'Are you in trouble again?' Immediately, the shrivel in her mother's voice returned. 'Honestly, what *is* it with you, Anna? Why do you always have to make life so difficult?'

A warning clench at the back of her eyes; that redness again.

'Fuck knows, Mother. I have no idea where I got that particular skill from.'

'Don't you *dare* swear at me—'

'Look, I won't keep you. Just wanted to let you know I got promoted today. I had this weird notion you might be interested, but hey ho, we mustn't disturb Teddy, must we?'

'Promoted?'

'Aye. And don't sound so bloody surprised.'

'I . . . I'm, well, no, that's lovely, dear, well done. But – it *is* rather unexpected, isn't it? I mean, with your track record and all . . .'

'Jesus Christ, Mother. Is it impossible for you to be pleased for me at all?'

'Oh, I *am* dear, I am.'

But Anna was talking over her, blotting out the clangs of anticlimax in her mother's words. 'Aye, so you bloody are. Just don't bother sending flowers, alright? In fact, don't bother phoning me back either, because I won't be in. Sorry I bothered you – and *Teddy* of course. *Adi*-fucking-*os*.'

She laid her forehead against the surface of her desk, anchored by the weight of skull on neck, the pulse in her temple. She must still be drunk. Never had Anna used that amount of foul language before; not in her mother's presence. It did not feel cathartic, the way swearing normally did.

Two palms flat on the nice, cool wood, two knees unlocking. She stood, took off her tunic, smoothed down her shirt. Her hand trembled as she straightened her cravat. No time to change the ridiculous skirt for her usual trousers. Well, her legs would be hidden behind the desk in any case. Her mobile stared at her, unblinking, ,and she shoved it in the drawer.

'Ma'am,' said Fred. Impatient. 'You ready?'

The muster hall was dark and airless, small high windows screened with dislocated blinds. Her shift sat in their usual places, Spike fiddling with his hair, Big Al stuffing the remains of a packet of Maltesers into his mouth. Anna whispered to Fred, 'Where's Sergeant Black?'

'Be in in a second, ma'am. She just got held up. Oh, and Stuart Wright's phoned in sick.'

'Is that right? Surprise, surprise.'

'Hmm.' Fred smoothed the pages of his blotter. He was going bald on top; she'd never noticed that before.

'Right folks,' said Anna. 'Will we just get started then? Sergeant Graham, over to you.'

Fred led them through the muster, reading off the computer in front of him as the same words lit up the projector screen behind, allocating cars and duties and CRs for investigation, a rundown of the top ten offenders (in no particular order of merit), advising them of a special lookout for a vehicle involved in a robbery, reiterating memos about domestic violence indices, and the importance of wearing your hat in patrol cars, then asking them to check the list of forthcoming officer safety training courses to make sure they were up to date.

Anna sat quietly, looking at the faces in front of her. She'd never do this again, never have her own shift to nurture and groom. Chief inspectors were station managers, a further step removed from the bustle, blood and bluster of real-life policing. 'And that's your lot,' finished Fred.

Anna waited for him to say something, maybe offer her some congratulations, but none was forthcoming. Was that it? Were they all just going to wander off without even saying cheerio? Well, she wasn't. Couldn't. Anna held up her hand.

'Em, before you go guys, I'd just like to say a few words. I'll be around for the rest of the shift, obviously, so I'm sure I'll get the chance to speak to you all before I go, but, I just wanted to say, well, thank you, I guess. I know we've had our differences at times, but,' she smiled, 'you've been an excellent shift. We've had some hairy moments – remember the siege at the post office, Peter? And we've certainly had some triumphs too. Emma, there is a little girl who, but for you having got down on your hunkers to deliver her in the close, might now be walking round called Tracey-Chantelle McGurk instead of Emma.'

'Aye, but her big sister's still called Shangri-La,' Big Al called out.

'True. But every one of you has played your part in making my role as your inspector easier, by your commitment to your

job and to this community. You've grafted exceptionally hard for me, and I'm very proud to have worked with you all.' She stopped abruptly. 'So . . . well, that's it really.'

Her shift gave a few curt nods, Emma a little dimpled grin. All sitting lightly on their chairs, poised forward and alert. They looked as if they were waiting for something. Then she realised what it was. That same itchy starting-block frisson Anna used to feel. Looking for a signal to go out and get on with it.

'Okay, yous lot,' said Fred. 'Away and fight crime.'

As one, in silence, they stood. Then a roar of cheers and clapping woke up the mustery dust, and Sarah, who had been there all the time, came in with a cake. *Good Luck Gaffer* iced in blue.