

A steady drizzle fell from low clouds that echoed the slate roof of Dryfesdale parish church and leached colour from the red sandstone walls. The world was monochrome with grief.

*Good intro*, Allie Burns thought, hating herself even as the idea crossed her mind. She'd come to the church before dawn, knowing she'd have to beat the rest of the world's press to the Lockerbie bombing memorial service if she was going to stand any chance of a decent exclusive that would hold till the Sunday paper. The main door of the church was still locked but she'd lurked among the worn sandstone grave markers until a florist's van turned into the access road. She sidled through the headstones to the front of the church. A middle-aged woman in a nylon overall under a rain jacket was struggling with an impressive load of floral tributes.

'Let me give you a hand,' Allie said, not waiting for a reply to get stuck in to unloading the flowers.

'Thank goodness. Are you with the church?' the woman asked.

The correct answer would have been, 'No, I'm the northern news editor of the *Sunday Globe*.' Allie opted for the less problematic, 'I couldn't see you struggling by yourself.'

VAL McDERMID

Between them, they unloaded the van and carried the flowers in through an unobtrusive side door. Allie quickly took in the typical Church of Scotland spartan interior, the simple wood pews, the plain communion table and the pulpit built from blocks of local stone. The gallery above boasted a barrel roof, its panels painted a surprising pink in contrast to the white ribs. Towards the rear of the church, a young boy sat with bowed head.

‘Oh, my,’ Allie’s new friend said. ‘That must be the wee laddie that lost his mum and dad and his brother.’

Allie knew exactly who she meant. He’d gone to a friend’s, to play table tennis. When Pan Am flight 103 had disintegrated above the small Scottish town thanks to a terrorist bomb, part of the scatter of wreckage had obliterated eight houses. One of those houses had been home to the boy’s family. Four days before Christmas.

Now she had an even better intro.

Before she could say more, two burly men in dark suits hustled in the side door with a harassed air. They gave the florist a cursory glance then glared at Allie, betrayed by her belted black raincoat and fashionable footwear. ‘Who are you?’

Allie’s smile was conciliatory. She held up her hands, palms facing them. ‘I’m out of here,’ she said.

The younger of the two was faster than he looked. A hand shot out and grabbed her arm. ‘Not so fast. What are you doing here?’

‘Nothing sinister. I’m press,’ she sighed. ‘I’d just arrived, and this lady looked like she needed some help.’ With her free hand, she reached in her pocket and produced her NUJ press card. ‘I’ll get out of your way, if you’ll just . . .’ She nodded at the fingers gripping tightly.

'You're not supposed to be in here,' he snapped. 'Have you got no shame? This is a memorial, not a press conference.' He let her go. 'Away and join the rest of the vermin.'

Allie squeezed out a smile. Never let them see you're intimidated, no matter which side of the good guys/bad guys fence they are on. On her way out she nodded to the florist, whose expression gave no clue to her reaction.