

A ROSE MCQUINN MYSTERY

DANGEROUS PURSUITS



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by

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DANGEROUS PURSUITS

Out walking on Arthur's Seat, high above the city of Edinburgh, Rose McQuinn discovers the body of a woman in the ruins of St Anthony's Chapel. On her return to the scene there is no evidence of either the victim or the local constable who had taken down Rose's story at the scene of the crime. Rose finds the normally sympathetic Detective Sergeant Jack Macmerry doubtful over the validity of her story, but Rose is convinced that she had come across a murder. Her ensuing discreet investigation into the mystery soon turns into a more dangerous pursuit...

Chapter One

It was to be a bad day.

It began with one death, followed by a second, and had I been superstitious and believed deaths came in threes, time was to show that I had a very lucky escape in not being the third.

Just before breakfast I buried Cat in the back garden. Thane went with me, two mourners at an old animal's funeral.

'An old animal?' friends would certainly ask. Surprised at my sorrow, they would smile pityingly, as if to admit such feeling was unnecessary and somehow wasteful except for humans taken in their prime, and there were always plenty of them. For elderly pets there was a different kind of grief. And for relatives a special cut-off clause, especially if they had survived long enough into antiquity to qualify for 'having a good innings'.

I had no excuse. I had only known Cat for six months, since I moved into Solomon's Tower that summer of 1895. She presented herself at my door, an ancient moth-eaten mummified feline on unsteady legs, a leftover from the last indulgent cat-owner who had been dead for several years.

With careful nurturing this decrepit hissing creature more dead than alive had been reborn into a purring pussycat by the fire, the companion of my evenings, sitting on my lap as I read; even her shabby fur had been restored to the ghost of its one-time elegance.

And now she was dead. I had found her stiff and cold in her favourite chair when I came down to breakfast. And I had wept. And wept.

It was a long time since I had shed so many tears, believing that I had used up such floods of emotion when my baby had died and my husband Danny had disappeared in Arizona. Now Cat's death coincided with that bitter anniversary and reopened a wound that bled afresh and would never heal.

The reservoir of tears filled up again. I'd never be able to explain it to my friends and even Jack, sympathetic and offering a comfortable shoulder to cry on, would be somewhat bewildered in his practical no-nonsense policeman's way.

But Thane, the deerhound who had his home somewhere in the vast and secret crags of Arthur's Seat behind the Tower, Thane understood. Waiting for me at the kitchen door, he sniffed at the tiny corpse wrapped in a blanket, raised a paw with an almost human sigh that said everything.

As I said, it was an awful day. In sympathy, the autumn weather wept with me. Day after day, Arthur's Seat was in a capricious mood, majestic and brooding, wreaths of heavy mist slowly descending from its lofty summit to engulf the garden. Then the house would disappear and, shivering, I'd close all the windows and look for further icy draughts to seal.

In earlier days I'd learned to live with all the sudden violent changes of temperament that made up Edinburgh's weather. And still I loved it, with no wish ever to live anywhere else than in Solomon's Tower, this magical ancient place that seemed to have evolved from the extinct volcano that men called Arthur's Seat. A magic that contained a deerhound like Thane who had once saved my life, but preferred to remain invisible to practically everyone else.

Except Jack. Jack at least knew Thane was real. He had systematically searched every square foot of the vast mountain with its craggy rocks and secret caves for traces of this mysterious animal who came and went at will. Or so he said. But he had never found any evidence of where or how he lived.

This was a blow to the pride of Detective Sergeant Jack Macmerry who must have an answer to everything, his entire life dedicated to solving mysteries, mostly of a violent nature. I would often find him staring at Thane reproachfully, as if the deerhound should provide some clues to the questions the law officer was dying to ask.

As for me, based on the recent past's bitter experiences, I take nothing for granted, happy to accept Thane as I accept Jack, as a transient part of my existence. Enjoy them both, be grateful and make no demands on a future which might not exist.

This philosophy of course does not please Jack who wishes to put our relationship on to a permanent basis, with a church wedding and mutual assurances of 'till death do us part'.

Sometimes I wonder if this conventional attitude has to do with career prospects and attitudes expected in the Edinburgh City Police, for one nursing hopes of rising to the rank of Detective Inspector. Respectability plays a considerable role in decisions by Chief Constables and selection boards. If it were widely known that Jack had a 'widow lady', to put it politely, living in Solomon's Tower, this might prove a fatal handicap to his future promotion prospects.

Perhaps I am being unkind, making excuses for my own reasons for not wishing to marry Jack. I love him, as much as I am capable of loving anyone except Danny McQuinn, for although and officially designated 'widow', in my own mind my husband stubbornly remains 'missing' only. I refuse to consider any finality until proved beyond possible doubt. Until the dream comes no longer where one day I open the door and find him waiting there.

Another factor against marrying Jack is that I have embarked on a career of my own. A lady investigator of discretion, tracking down philandering husbands, thieving servants, missing relatives and wills and even the occasional missing cat or dog.

'Nothing too large or too small. Discretion guaranteed' is how my business card describes my activities, which now provide a modest living, a somewhat irregular income based on word of mouth and the recommendation of satisfied clients.

But try to explain 'career' to Jack and he smiles indulgently, his lecture on the attendant perils of such a dangerous hobby for a woman ready at hand.

'Hobby indeed!'

My indignation is met with an indulgent smile. 'Let's face it. Rose. You're an untrained female who had a lucky first break-'

'Lucky, indeed!'

My first investigation into the brutal murder of a Newington maid was very nearly my last. Frequently stressing those almost fatal consequences, Jack points out that I should not be carried away by modest success and let it go to my head. The lecture always ends to the effect that in future I must promise to leave the law and solving of criminal activities to the police. A promise I refuse to make.

'If you must do something,' says Jack, that sad shake of his head indicating his better judgement, that the proper place for a woman (and in particular this woman) is in the home, 'you could go back to teaching. Edinburgh's expanding rapidly and in the new areas, like Newington, there will soon be lots of opportunities.'

Defiantly I shake my head and the argument reaches stalemate. He finds it difficult to comprehend that a return to schoolteaching, which occupied me before following Danny McQuinn to America, would be neither adequate recompense nor substitution.

What Jack failed to realize was that crime-solving was in my blood, doubtless inherited from my famous father Chief Inspector Jeremy Faro of the Edinburgh City Police. From childhood, he had encouraged me to observe, deduce and always ask how and why, without of course realizing the significant part it would play in my future. Sometimes I am inclined to think that his influence is why I decline to marry Jack. He reminds me too much of my father - not physically, for Pappa is as unmistakably, dramatically Viking in appearance as Jack is the typical sandy-haired, high-cheekboned Lowland Scot. But in sense of dedication they are identical.

Already Jack's sense of duty rings alarming bells from my childhood, of last-minute cancellations of outings with Pappa.

'The inspector is out on a case' were words we dreaded from Mrs Brook, as with a sigh she abandoned her kitchen and, putting on her bonnet and cape, prepared to deputize in his absence, a poor substitute as far as sister Emily and I were concerned. That was if stepbrother Vince, already a young medical student, had a more ready and feasible excuse at hand.

And that, I feared, would be my life with Jack, a repetition of days gone by. I knew what to expect a policeman's daughter who had also once been a policeman's wife.

But Danny was different. I was twelve years old and he - ten years my senior - was Pappa's young constable who had saved my life in a kidnapping by one of Inspector Faro's mortal enemies. Hero-worship became love that never wavered for the ambitious detective sergeant who had gone to that land of opportunity, America, to seek his fortune. And, it appeared, to die in Arizona while serving with the Pinkerton Detective Agency.

The habit and love of a lifetime were hard to break. I had - and still - loved Danny, determined to follow him, to the ends of the earth if necessary, to face any hardship, even danger and death. And so it had been. Not something I had strength to face a second time, to make welcome the agonies of uncertainties.

I was not the stuff that martyrs are made of but it seemed that I would have to make up my mind and decide about Jack. And soon. For Fate is not patient, prepared to wait in the wings for mortals to make up their minds.

Other issues are thrown in to aid decisions, where we would hesitate and go on dreaming. In my case Fate equalled Nancy, Mrs Brook's cousin's daughter. Mrs Brook had been housekeeper at our family home in Sheridan Place and on my return to Edinburgh I had used my influence to secure Nancy a situation as a children's nurse in Newington only to discover that she and Jack had been childhood sweethearts.

Jack assured me that was all they had ever been, but it had become painfully clear to me in the past five months that although such might well be true for him, my powers of observation suggested that Nancy had other ideas.

Nancy was in love with him. When they met by accident here in Solomon's Tower I saw all the recognizable signs, that Nancy loved Jack as I loved Danny McQuinn. She had probably loved him since childhood too and at thirty years old, even for a sweet pretty woman, prospects of marriage were diminishing rapidly.

Jack, manlike, was totally unaware of the effect he had on her and lately, because I wished to loosen the strings of his attachment to me, I had resorted to throwing them together. Although I didn't want to lose Jack completely, since I enjoyed his company and, when I needed a man to love me, I wasn't reluctant to share my bed with him.

Nancy, I was sure, knew nothing of this side of our relationship. I had not considered the possible outcome of my actions, that Jack might tire of trying to talk me into marriage and in despair realize what he was missing in Nancy. Here was a woman who loved him, and would be prepared to devote her entire life to his comfort, an excellent wife and mother of his children.

I found lately that Jack talked a lot about Nancy. When I was busy on one of my own investigations he would say, 'I might take Nancy then, if you don't mind.'

And I was so willing. Watching them go down the road together smiling happily in each other's company, I wondered uneasily what I had set in motion and realized that I must suffer the consequences, for such is the fate of mortals who meddle in other folk's destinies.

Whether by affinity or design, Nancy was fast becoming one of my friends and, getting to know her better, Jack had discovered she had secret longings to be a singer.

The possessor of a naturally good voice, she had immediately joined the parish church choir in Newington and had been auditioned for an amateur group who specialized in the popular Gilbert and

Sullivan operas and were at this moment rehearsing *The Pirates of Penzance*.

And there romance had found pretty Nancy. I was in her confidence and wondered how she was faring with the bass who played the Sergeant of Police.

I would swear she blushed when I asked her in front of Jack: a darting look that spoke louder than words.

Jack was amused by her conquest, which must have sent her into despair. There's nothing worse than being teased about a man by the very one you secretly long for.

She confided in me that Desmond Marks was unhappy with his wife. All was not well at home, according to him, and it was only his love of singing and the escape provided by the Amateur Opera Society and Nancy's friendship that kept him sane.

'What should I do, Rose?' she asked.

'Have nothing to do with him,' I said firmly.

'How can I when we meet every week?' she protested.

'What I mean is, have nothing to do with him outwith the opera,' I said sternly. 'Don't get involved in his personal problems.'

She sighed. 'But I am sorry for him. Rose. His wife - she doesn't sound like a very nice person at all.'

I refrained from replying, 'You should hear her side of the story, before you pass judgement,' and asked instead, 'Is he very handsome?'

Nancy dimpled. 'Divinely. And such a lovely voice. He really should be on the London stage, a professional singer. But he is too cautious for that. He says he needs his situation in the insurance office and cannot afford to take chances.'

'Any children?'

Nancy shook her head. 'Alas, no. There was a little girl but she died of diphtheria.'

'Long ago?'

'A few years back, but his wife has never got over it.'

I thought about that, a bond of sympathy with Desmond's unhappy wife. Bereaved motherhood was something I understood all too well.

'I gather they are still fairly young' I said cautiously.

Nancy frowned, considered me as if I might be a yardstick on which to calculate ages. 'About our age, Rose.'

'Then perhaps there will be more children?'

'No,' said Nancy obstinately. 'They cannot have any more and besides, since the wee girl died - er, well, Desmond's wife has - er, well...' She looked so confused I helped her out:

'They don't sleep together any more?'

'Oh yes, they share the same bedroom,' she said brightly.

I put a hand on her arm. 'Nancy, I was using the term in the biblical sense.' And thought, Here were confidences indeed from Desmond.

My experience was that unless a married man thought there was something to be gained from it, such as encouragement from a woman being wooed, they were not so forthcoming about their intimate matrimonial troubles.

Nancy meanwhile looked uncomfortable. 'You will keep this to yourself, Rose,' she said sternly. 'I mean that in the best possible way,' she added hastily. 'I know you aren't a gossip but I wouldn't like Desmond to know I talked about him to you and Jack.'

As Jack wasn't present I felt it was an unnecessary warning. I looked at her. Such a sweet trusting girl was Nancy, she deserved happiness and the first step was being wise to the ways of married men.

'Jack would understand, of course,' she said. 'He is such a dear good man. You know that.'

Oh yes, I thought cynically and wondered if she was really as innocent as she pretended about our relationship.

'A bidey-in' was the perfect expression to describe him - one of Pappa's favourite expressions, picked up while staying with his favourite auntie in Aberdeenshire. That had not occurred to Nancy. Giving her the benefit of the doubt, perhaps the virgin mind does not permit images of one's friends who are lovers and of what goes on behind closed bedroom doors.

Anyway, to leave the unhappy Desmond for the moment...

I had done my best to persuade Nancy that he was bad news and I hoped most earnestly that she would resolve the problem sensibly. Especially as she had just recently left the situation I found for her: a happy ending since her employer in Newington, Mrs Lily Harding, had remarried and gone to live in Glasgow.

A lady of some influence among her first husband's business associates, she had recommended Nancy to the household of General Sir Angus Carthew, who had served the Queen in India and had been decorated for bravery. Just before his retirement and return to Edinburgh, he had married the daughter of a fellow officer who had died fighting the Chitralis in the Himalayas.

The name Sir Angus Carthew was frequently to be encountered in the local press, for he served on many committees and was a patron of the arts and of numerous worthy charitable institutions.

No hints of any bairns forthcoming despite the difference in age and a wife young enough to be her husband's daughter. This was not uncommon however and, perhaps as consolation, the childless couple were at present fostering Sir Angus's nephew and niece.

Their father Gerald Carthew had already made a name for himself as an archaeologist and explorer. He had been about to lead a scientific expedition into the polar regions, when his wife had died suddenly on the eve of his departure - the result of an unexpected complication following a minor operation.

The distraught bereft father was in desperate need of support and, feeling that the most prudent measure to ease his predicament would be to see him off on the work to which his entire life had been dedicated, Sir Angus and Lady Carthew stepped in and gallantly offered to care for the two young children until their father returned and could make the appropriate domestic arrangements. This information about the Carthews' domestic life came not from the newspaper but from Nancy by way of Mrs Laing, the cook-housekeeper.

Mrs Laing was always eager for a gossip since living-in servants were sparse indeed in Carthew House, an unusual and eccentric economy in an affluent family. Since they returned to Edinburgh, she grumbled, she had fully expected to have the responsibility of engaging a domestic staff.

The children, aged three and five, were in Nancy's own words 'a bit of a handful'. But not even their wayward antics were beyond her patient tolerance and love. Indeed, it was that devotion to Mrs Harding's turbulent toddler which recommended Nancy Brook to the Carthews as a suitable nanny.

For her part Nancy was delighted at the importance of her new situation, especially as the salary offered by the absent father was far in excess of the normal nursemaid's wage - a fact that did not equate with Mrs Laing's hints at their being 'a wee bit grippy wi' their money'.

Nor were Nancy's duties demanding. Her employers were kindly and considerate beyond the norm providing her with a handsome bedroom and sitting-room.

She was delighted, her hopes set high for an exciting year.

On that score at least she was not to be disappointed, with a sinister turn of events beyond even her wildest imaginings.

Or my own.

Chapter Two

Beyond the garden, the weather was changing, the mist lifting, and I decided that some fresh air would be agreeable. It would be restorative for my depressed state to wander on Arthur's Seat with my sketchbook, particularly as I had a reason.

A promise made to my stepbrother Dr Vincent Beaumarcher Laurie, junior physician to the Royal Family and at present at Balmoral Castle. A watercolour of the Palace of Holyroodhouse, a view looking down from the hill across the gardens and parkland, was his request as a wedding anniversary present for Olivia.

As this was something special and my painting is very much a hit or miss business, best when it is spontaneous, I felt nervous about its success.

"Nonsense," said Vince. "Olivia thinks you are a great artist and that you should be doing this sort of thing professionally."

The anniversary was still a month away but matters had been brought to a climax since in Olivia's absence, I had been invited to accompany Vince to the royal lunch in Edinburgh tomorrow.

Princess Beatrice was opening the new Hospital for Sick Children in Sciennes Road. According to the newspapers it had cost £47,000 with 118 beds and extensive outpatients' departments, designed by architect G. Washington Browne who had already contributed some splendid buildings to the newly developing south side of the city at Newington.

I realized I need entertain only a forlorn hope of having my painting ready for this unexpected meeting with Vince. Or of justifying Olivia's faith in me, I thought, flipping through the pages of my sketchbook of indifferent drawings with growing despair.

Occasionally I returned from expeditions with some small sketches that pleased me but when I attempted to transfer them into colour, the magic died and rich mud was the result.

'Now or never,' I said to Thane who was stretched out with his massive head at my foot. This was his favourite position, which took up most of the floor, but when I was seated he liked to establish what might be termed a toehold of physical contact.

Making certain that my pencils were all sharpened I prepared to leave. On my way through the kitchen, I paused at the larder to inspect the remains of a joint of roast beef, intended for Jack's supper after our evening concert at the Assembly Rooms this evening. Alas, I had received a message via Lenny the local 'beat' constable, that Jack was involved in a case.

He was sorry.

How often had I heard those words. I would never manage more than a couple of slices of meat which was already two days old, but it need not go to waste.

From the kitchen window I saw Auld Rory, old soldier and gentleman of the road, as he called himself. Less flatteringly designated an old tramp by Jack, he was wandering past the back garden, his eyes on the ground always searching for any curiosity that might fetch him a few pence.

Auld Rory was a newcomer to Arthur's Seat brought to my notice by Thane.

One stormy evening recently, I had been caught in a downpour without my umbrella, hurrying back from Newington. Thane was on the road to greet me as I approached the road leading to the Tower. Briskly he shepherded me somewhat reluctantly towards what looked like a bundle of old clothes by the roadside.

Not a corpse, I prayed, shuddering. Then the clothes stirred, began to cough. Thane ran towards him, barking gently, and turned to me with a look of despair. As if to say, Be sensible, Rose, you can't leave the poor old chap lying by the roadside, sorely troubled by a bad cough like that...

'You invited him in,' said Jack in shocked tones when I told him next day.

'Of course,' I said. 'I wasn't going to pass by on the other side like the man in the parable of the Good Samaritan.'

Jack gave a heavenward glance of despair. 'A tramp, Rose. A stranger who might be anything - anyone - he might have a criminal record, so spare me the biblical quotations. Things and people have changed a lot since they were written. And you are a woman on your own, remember - living in isolation.'

'By my own choice,' I replied.

'Aye, not by mine. There's plenty of new houses half a mile away and you just have to say the word. You could be living among civilized folk...'

He went on in the same vein, his favourite reprise. I listened politely, not wishing to remind him that there had been a particularly brutal murder among those same civilized folk just weeks after I had arrived.

A murder that I had solved.

So I let him get it off his chest. The story that always ends with us getting married and settling down in domestic bliss, in a house with pot plants in the windows and lace curtains. One with a nice cosy kitchen and with me doing his washing and ironing, darning his socks, cooking delicious meals.

And terminally ill with boredom.

Finally I interrupted and said, 'No cause for you to concern yourself. Our old tramp is harmless.'

'And how do you know that?' he demanded.

'Thane liked him.'

'Thane! For heaven's sake. You can hardly rely on a dog.'

'He's not a dog. He's a deerhound.'

Jack wasn't to be put off. 'He's a canine,' he said firmly. 'And animals go by sense of smell. Not to put too fine a point on it, old tramps probably smell great to them.'

I tried to be calm. 'I trust Thane's judgement.'

Jack put back his head, saw the funny side and roared with laughter. 'Darling Rose, you'll be the death of me, but I love you just the same. Come on now, sit on my knee. Let's be friends again,' he added tenderly.

Such an invitation was irresistible. A few hugs and kisses and there my case rested.

Once again. For the moment.

Jack was convinced that he had won but although I'd never be able to convince him, the reason Thane liked the old man was that he recognized a fellow spirit. Auld Rory had 'nae hame', as he told me. Like Thane he preferred to sleep under the stars.

A recluse whose home was under hedgerows and in ditches, in earlier times he would have achieved fame as the hermit of Arthur's Seat, his life a gift to the ballad writers.

As he wandered around the Newington area, people who encountered him regularly accepted him as 'the old tramp', ladies edging away nervously, often to the other side of the pavement.

Simple but harmless, Rory sang a lot. Mostly it was 'Soldiers of the Queen' and if he had been a man who enjoyed a drink, he would have been accused of 'the drink being on him'.

Of his past history I knew little, in a moment of confidence, he said that he was born in India, his father was an Irish soldier from Antrim in a Scots regiment, his mother Highland. He had known nothing but army life. So much was evident from the way he walked - or marched - along the road and from the military set of his shoulders.

What he had been like in youth was difficult to consider. And although he was willing to be friendly and courteous too, I was in the role of patient listener.

It was difficult to have a conversation with him, as his face was so covered with hair, it was like

talking to someone through a thick hedge. He had as much hair on his face as Thane, perhaps another reason why the deerhound found a certain affinity. He was apt to break off a conversation suddenly and stare into space, cocking an ear unnervingly to listen to the silence - this was yet another reminder of Thane.

One thing I never doubted: Rory had all his senses but something dire had happened to him during his army life in India.

Once, in more expansive mood than usual, he sat in my kitchen while the rain poured down the windows and hinted that he had been wounded, tortured by rebel tribesmen and left to die. He had survived by something of a miracle.

'Jesus saved me,' he said simply. He was now a devoted reader of the Gospels, bound to the image of a Christ with whom he shared the fellow feeling of having not even a roof over his head. Living on fresh air and the occasional charity of passers-by, he had no possessions but a bible, his clay pipe, which I rarely saw lit, and a blanket to keep out the cold.

God would provide, give him his daily bread, he said. More than often I was the provider, I thought, guessing how he would appreciate fresh meat between slices of new bread.

As I put them together I reflected this was the fate of many of my doomed suppers these days. I would willingly have given the old man a bottle of ale purchased on Jack's behalf, except that Rory was strictly tee-total. Long ago in his boyhood he had taken the pledge of temperance and had, in his own words, never seen good reason to break his vows.

Outside Thane ran over to him. There was a lot of head-patting and, on Thane's part, an excess of joyous tail-wagging.

I stood by smiling indulgently with the pleasure of watching a couple of children.

Man and dog were friends without a word shared, they knew each other in a bond I could not possibly understand, happy in their existence, fellow creatures living under a firmament of stars.

'Bless ye, lass,' said Rory, taking the package containing his supper to which I had added a slice of Jack's favourite fruit loaf. 'Aye, ye're a grand wee lass, so ye are.' This, I presumed, related to my diminutive size rather than my mature thirty years. 'And where's that bonny man o' yours the nicht?'

'On duty, as usual.' I had never tried to explain that Jack wasn't my man in the way respectable folk understood as a lifetime's obligation 'for better for worse, for richer for poorer'. I suspected that an old soldier as worldly-wise and unconventional as Rory wouldn't have cared one way or the other as he opened the package and grinned at me. He doubtless knew the ways of policemen and guessed without being told how this generosity came about.

His glance took in the sketchbook under my arm too.

'Ah, weil, lass, I'll no' be delayin' ye. God bless.'

As the afternoon light was already waning, I was quite relieved. With the right sympathetic audience, ready and eager to listen, Rory was a natural story-teller. Catch him in the right mood and he would expound at great length on his service in the outposts of the Queen's Empire.

Did I ken that he had once served alongside General Carthew's regiment in the Sudan campaign? I had read about Edinburgh's well-decorated illustrious soldier in the newspapers I got from Jack and handed over to him.

'Did I ever tell ye...!' His stories always began with those words, so that I knew there was some great tale to be unfolded.

'Did I ever tell ye my laddie was the General's batman?'

I'd heard it before but on one such occasion there was an unexpected embellishment.

'The laddie wasna cut out for soldiering, although he'd been born and reared in the barracks wi' the rest of us. He was a gentle kind o' lad and hadna ony taste for fighting. He wasna a coward though,' he added with a reassuring glance. 'Why, I'd seen him separate snarling dogs, and rescue small bairns

who got into danger. He dragged two bairns out of a swollen river too. But he wanted other things from his life, things I didna understand. When his ma died, he was fourteen, our only bairn. Maybe if she'd lived, it would have been different, what happened. She'd have sent him back home, here to her kin. That was aye in her mind, though the dear lass never put it into words, afraid to offend me. So after the funeral, he said he would stay on with me.'

He stopped, sighed deeply, his eyes half closed as if seeing it all. 'I never stopped blaming myself, not after all these years, ever since the day they told me that my laddie barely seventeen had been waylaid and murdered in an ambush.

'They never found his body and he was missing, presumed dead, ye ken. I still canna believe it,' he added with a bewildered shake of his head. 'I was sure then and still am that he's alive - somewhere. Something tells me.'

He had stopped, raising his hand, listening, eyes closed, sniffing the air as if it could tell him where his laddie was now.

Turning, he looked at me. 'I'll find him some day, ye ken. That I will.'

I nodded sympathetically. 'I lost my husband - in Arizona.'

I wondered if I should explain Arizona but he nodded vigorously. 'I ken where that is - in the Wild West,' he added proudly. 'Did the Red Indians get him?'

'All we know is that he was reported missing - most probably killed in a local massacre.'

He was silent then he took my hand and held it tight, his eyes filled with tears. An unexpected gesture, and I looked at him in amazement as a bond was formed between us.

He had loved a son who had vanished, who he refused to believe was dead. I had loved a husband who had disappeared without trace.

After that, he began to arrive at my back door and sit in my kitchen at regular intervals when Jack was absent, as if seeking comfort with another sufferer at the hands of destiny. The days were closing in. Darkness coming earlier meant long evenings and I looked forward to human companionship with Thane stretched out in front of the fire between us, as I listened to tales of Rory's parents and the Great Famine in Ireland, the massed emigration only equalled in disaster by the Highland Clearances.

I also learned at first hand the reality behind newspaper reports of trouble in India, of the desperate battles, the squandering of men's lives in order to hold on to the outposts of the Empire. Their boast of 'gallant men' defending the Empire masked the truth, of newly raised regiments like the 96th Foot reinforced by a pioneer battalion and a scratch force of Sikhs more accustomed to handling picks and shovels than rifles, with half-trained tribal levies to support the most dangerous expeditions ever undertaken by the British Army.

The slaughter was glossed over with no list of casualties and only a line or two in the daily papers, which did not expand on the fierce cruelty inflicted on soldiers or the hardships and tortures that were not for the eyes of polite and gentle readers.

Rory had witnessed the treachery of the Chitralis who, at peace with the regiment, had invited them to a polo match; when the vigilance of the guards was diverted by such an innocent amusement, at a given signal, the match was suddenly ended. Picking up their knives, the tribesmen began to dance, a wild dance applauded by the onlookers delighted by this unexpected entertainment. Until the tribesmen turned their knives on the polo players and slaughtered every one of them.

Besieged in a mud fort, under attack, the soldiers in Rory's regiment had to eat the horses with the pea soup. It didn't bother Rory, a foot soldier.

'Meat was food. Any kind of meat, ye ken, rats, dogs, anything that was flesh. But an officer might be a wee bittee squeamish about eating his own horse, so they worked out a system so that they didna know whose horse they were eating wi' their soup that night.'

And so another bond was forged between us that day. I had lived in forts with Danny in Arizona

besieged by Apaches. I had not questioned what I was eating either. In one such fort I had given birth and subsequently lost our baby son.

Remembrance came back swift and fierce; the bile rose in my throat as Rory talked and darkness steadily enclosed us, the past refusing to be banished in a warm safe kitchen in Edinburgh, with a deerhound lying by the fire.

I wanted to stop him but I could do nothing to stem the tide of reminiscences opening old wounds, all twisting knives in my heart sharp as any tribesman's treachery.

At last, perhaps aware of my silence, Rory apologized for 'boring me wi' his long stories'.

I assured him I wasn't bored. He looked at me, shook his head, sighed and said, Well, he was an early bedder.

As was his habit he left abruptly and I watched him from the door, deciding he must have eyes like a cat's as he walked unflinchingly towards his favourite ditch where an overhang of rock once part of Samson's Ribs hid and sheltered him from the elements.

On the day of my walk to St Anthony's Chapel, aware that the weather was changing rapidly and what the onset of winter might have in store for him, I asked Rory why he didn't go home to the Highlands and what brought him to Edinburgh of all places.

He looked into space for a few moments and I wondered if he had heard me or was a little deaf as sometimes suspected. Then with a sigh he said, 'I was led here.' And turning his head he looked at me intently. 'God willed that I should come here and find my laddie.'

His late wife's birthplace seemed a forlorn hope in which to find a young soldier who went missing, presumed dead long since in India. Perhaps I didn't conceal my thoughts too well for he shook his head and stood up.

Straightening his shoulders he leaned both his hands on the table and stared across at me.

Shaking his head vigorously, he said, 'I ken well that he is here. I've seen him, lassie.'

'You've seen - that's wonderful,' I said, wishing to God that I could see Danny McQuinn wandering around Edinburgh.

His expression was far from joyful. 'Na, na, lassie, nae so wonderful. He was coming out o' one of them posh places in the city. I didna' recognize him at first and he didna' see me.'

'Why didn't you speak to him?' I demanded.

'Na, na. I couldna - seeing what had become o' the lad I loved.' He choked on the words. 'I was glad his ma had gone long since. It would have broken her heart. Like it did mine.'

Overcome by emotion he dashed a hand across his eyes and walked rapidly to the door. 'I'll bid ye goodnight, lass.'

He went out quickly, avoiding the questions I was dying to ask. Then, aware of me watching him, he turned and waved, the package of food still in his hand.

We were to talk again when, unable to resist a mystery, I mentioned the meeting with his son.

'I should have believed them, lassie. My laddie's dead now. Dead for me,' he added firmly.

Events moved tragically fast after that and I never did get the end of the story then.

At least, not from him.

Chapter Three

Thane had watched Rory take his departure, his expression under those magisterial eyebrows very broody, even wistful, as if he would have enjoyed accompanying him.

Inside the Tower, I realized I must make haste. The tilt of the earth in autumn has a dramatic effect on Scotland's landscapes and the best light is toward sunset. Hills like Arthur's Seat are thrown into sharp relief against an often cloudless sky, colours bleached into insignificance under the blaze of summer sunshine becoming vividly alive again. Rock fissures take on shadows deep and mysterious, hinting at the presence of lurking caves with ancient secrets long lost to men. The lines of the runrig agricultural system set down by the early inhabitants of the hill stand out sharply in the fading light and, over all, the breathtaking beauty of deep purples, wine red heath, trees and bushes dappled gold sunlight.

It is a magic time when almost anything could happen, an artist's paradise when even an amateur like myself could find inspiration in shapes and shadows.

Conscious of urgency, of the need to get something down on paper for Vince's approval, I followed the path high above the Tower, which soon disappeared among the rocky shapes. As I clambered across, far below me was the road with its magnificent views of Edinburgh's distant spires.

I had walked these tracks so many times in the last six months that I knew every stone, with Thane to lead the way, bounding ahead. Watching him, I wondered how old he was. He looked like a young dog, but his life was still one big unsolved mystery and he didn't help much by preferring to remain out of sight most of the time. He was shy to the point of invisibility to all except a chosen few.

Myself, Jack and now Auld Rory and Nancy. His acquaintance, his trust in humans was expanding. As for me, I still had not the least idea where his lair was or how he managed to keep his coat in that silky condition.

Sometimes it seemed impossible that Thane was a stray dog roaming the hill, a tramp who identified with one from the human species like Rory. Strays, as I knew, were scruffy and wild: Cat had been a perfect example of an animal who had abandoned the Tower when her old owner Sir Hedley Marsh died and had taken to living rough.

I watched Thane loping joyously ahead. So often when I went out to sketch, he seemed to know of my intentions. He would sit at my side and watch very solemnly as I put pencil to paper. As reward, I often included him.

My track led across the Haggis Knowe, also known as the Fairies Knowe, with its superb view, of the Old Town, Holyrood Palace and St Margaret's Loch.

St Anthony's Chapel came into view steeply some two hundred feet below us. On the path leading up from the road was an ancient well, once famed for its healing powers. These were allegedly very reliable on the first Sunday in May, Beltane - the pagan and Christian religions seemed to coexist in this area.

The chapel was built in the fifteenth century, its dedication suggesting that it was once connected to a hospital for those afflicted with 'St Anthony's Fire' as erysipelas was commonly known. Tradition claimed that it was founded to guard the holy well and supported a hermit to tend the altar. His duties included lighting the lamp which shone through the night guiding mariners through the treacherous waters of the River Forth.

All that remains of the ancient chapel is a picturesque ruin. Lit by a magnificent sky of rosy sunset clouds, a worthy painting for Olivia - if I could hope to do it justice.

I sat on a boulder overlooking the scene, took out my sketchbook. This time, I wasn't to have

Thane's company. Sniffing the air, he barked, a muted 'Woof', and loped away.

Looking around I failed to see anything that could have given him this quiver of excitement. The scent of deer, perhaps? I didn't have long to wonder as he reappeared.

'Woof!'

'Too late, were you? Pity. Sit down, this won't take long.'

'Woof!' Deeper now, more urgent. He seized the edge of my skirt gently and tugged. The cause of his agitation was invisible but I was familiar with the note of distress in his bark.

'All right, I'll come.'

Gathering my pencils with a sigh I went after him somewhat reluctantly as he darted ahead, loping down through the heather, then turning and rushing firmly back to my side. Making sure that I was doing what he wanted...

I could see nothing amiss. 'What is it -what have you found?'

A dead animal? Hardly. A buried treasure? Surely not. I didn't expect him to understand the human greed for lost gold...

'Woof.' Once more, he turned to make sure that I was with him and disappeared behind the one remaining chapel wall.

I scrambled down the last few yards and into the ruin.

And there on the ground, her back against the wall, a woman sprawled apparently asleep.

Asleep or - dead. She looked crumpled enough to be dead.

I shuddered as I approached. Kneeling down, I touched her shoulder gently, praying that she was asleep or had fainted. There was no response.

'Hello! Hello, are you all right?'

Even as I said the words I knew the silence mocked me. She was in profile; I turned her face towards me. Her eyelids were half closed, her face a greyish colour.

As I bent down to loosen the scarf tight about her neck, there was a faint smell lingering about her. Not perfume nor incense - something indefinable, which I did not recognise until I encountered it unexpectedly much later.

My main concern was for a pulse. There was none.

I sat back on my heels. She was dead. I had seen too many dead by violence to be mistaken.

This poor woman had been strangled with her scarf.

And death had happened very recently.

Which indicated that whoever had done this must still be in the vicinity - perhaps close by!

Trembling I stood up, looked over my shoulder, chillingly aware that with a killer not far off, perhaps watching from behind the boulders above me, my own life was in imminent danger.

I seemed to be alone. Indeed I seemed to have the whole of Arthur's Seat to myself, towering and majestic in the glowing light.

I needed help. I am no hysterical woman to faint at the sight of death. I'd been at the site of an Apache massacre and barely escaped with my life a year ago.

I looked at the dead woman again. This was murder. Of that there was no doubt in my mind. Again I glanced round nervously for someone, a sinister watcher, hidden in the rocks.

I wanted to yell, to shout accusingly, 'Come out. I can see you.' I was aware of Thane standing very close, touching my side, shivering slightly.

He knew danger and death when he saw them. If only Jack were here, I thought longingly, suddenly practical and searching for a reticule, something that might provide the dead woman with an identity. There was nothing. If she had died from natural causes then that was suspicious in itself.

I stared down the hill. The road below was already deep in shadow, the dramatic sunset glow had disappeared from the high rocks behind me, the hill turned cold and forbidding as the twilight of

gloaming faded into darkness.

I had the landscape to myself and uneasily I realized that on an autumn day when the weather on Arthur's Seat had been atrocious, there would be few passers-by in carriages or casual strollers out with a dog.

But how I would have welcomed the sight of another human being. I knew what I must do...

I must inform the police. I looked again at the woman. She was perhaps thirty-five. The plain face worries in life indicated by a furrowed brow, was pallid in death. Her dark hair was pulled back from centre parting, gathered into a neat bun from which some of the strands had escaped, perhaps in her struggle with the killer. But her garments were undisturbed - which hinted at decorum even in death. She had not been the victim of sexual assault or rape.

Glimpses of a starched white petticoat, lace-edged, a dark blue serge costume, white high-necked cambric blouse, a row of imitation pearl buttons, neatly fastened. Black cotton stockings and boots rather shabby but well polished.

Not a well-off lady's outdoor garb, especially as there was no sign of a hat anywhere. That omission was odd since most women whatever their station in life wore hats out of doors. Her clothes were clean, neat and respectable, well cared for.

An upstairs servant, or a lower middle-class wife. And there were plenty to choose from to fit her description in the new villa area of Newington.

No gloves and no rings. I lifted her hands carefully, remembering how Pappa had always stressed the importance of examining hands.

I shuddered a little as the hands I touched were colder than her face had been. White and dead, but uncalloused with well-kept nails. A seamstress or a shop assistant. She certainly hadn't scrubbed floors for a living.

I was glad of the sketchbook and did a quick drawing, just as she lay, with the chapel wall behind her.

As I finished it, Thane was on the move again, darting down the hill, heading for the road.

'Thane! Come back!' I called to him, panicked.

I didn't want to be left alone. Maybe he had seen someone, I thought hopefully as I ran after him and saw the reason for his sudden flight.

Below us the road was not empty after all. Pointing in the direction of the Tower stood a hackney cab. It was stationary but must have been there for some time, or I would have heard the clip-clop of the horse's hooves.

There was no driver in sight - on this unfrequented road with plenty of boulders, not an unusual occurrence. Coachmen after putting down a fare often seized the opportunity to stop and, concealed by the bushes, attend to the needs of nature.

'Having a quick one,' as Jack rudely described it.

A deep-throated growl from Thane. A warning 'Woof!'

And there on the road walking in our direction was the best sight in the world for me at that moment.

A helmet and uniform cape.

An Edinburgh policeman on his beat.

'Wait,' I called and leaped down the last few yards.

But Thane was already there, running round him in circles, barking.

That got the constable's attention. When I reached him he was being confronted by Thane and at a loss as to how to deal with the situation, holding out his hands defensively.

I was surprised and gratified he hadn't resorted to using his truncheon on the massive deerhound who had appeared from nowhere and was calculated to put the fear of death into even the fearless

heart of an officer of the law.

He heard my footsteps, turned and shouted, 'Call off your dog, miss.'

'It's all right. He won't harm you,' I called.

As I reached him, Thane came to my side, sat down and looked at the constable with an air of triumph.

'Thank goodness we've found you,' I gasped.

Still keeping a wary eye on Thane, he asked, 'What's the trouble, miss?'

'We've just found a body - a woman, up by the chapel.'

He looked at me impassively, as if I was mad, and asked quietly, 'Is she dead?'

'I'm afraid so.'

He nodded and said, 'Are you sure, miss?'

'Yes, I'm sure. Look, come with me and see for yourself.'

He seemed a little reluctant. Now that I got a closer look, I could see that he was quite young - in fact his face looked still too young to have grown the heavy grey and somewhat elderly moustache.

I must be getting old, I thought, when policemen start looking younger.

He must be new to the force, I decided. As, with Thane in the lead, we climbed up to the ruined chapel I saw that he hadn't been issued with the ugly but serviceable uniform boots yet, nor the even more serviceable truncheon.

The dead woman was still there and the young constable didn't say a word. He just stood very still looking down at her with what I can only describe as considerable distaste and revulsion. Obviously I didn't want to touch her but, aware of my stern gaze and what was expected of him, he knelt at her side, touched her wrist and dropped it hastily.

In the background I sighed. A lily-livered lad who would not go far. Death by strangulation was a fairly clean-cut murder, wait until he came upon the gruesome kind, with lots of blood.

He stood up, shaking a little.

'I'm afraid she's dead.'

'I'm afraid she's been murdered,' I said.

He looked at me quickly, asked sharply, 'What makes you say that, miss?'

'Look at the scarf around her neck. She's been strangled.'

'The scarf's loose.'

'I did that, trying to find her pulse, hoping I wasn't too late. But someone had tied it tight enough to kill her.'

He gave me a tight-lipped look. 'Well, we'll see when we get her to the mortuary.'

'How are you going to do that?' I asked, remembering police procedure. 'Aren't you supposed to wait and touch nothing until a senior officer arrives?'

He seemed amused and surprised by my knowledge.

'Why would that be, miss?' he asked, humouring me.

I shrugged. 'Clues to her killer - that sort of thing.'

'But we don't know for sure that she's been murdered, do we, miss?'

We stared at one another indecisively and I said, 'Do you want me to stay until you get someone?' I hoped not. It was a bold offer but as soon as I got the words out I was wishing I had not volunteered. By the time he came back, it would be black dark and even with Thane I didn't fancy sitting in the old chapel guarding a corpse.

The constable was impressed by my offer. 'You're not scared, miss?'

'I've seen dead people before.'

'Have you now?' He looked interested, as if he'd like to hear more about that.

I pointed down towards the road. 'I noticed a cab down there.'

He nodded. 'So I saw.'

~~'You didn't happen to notice a driver?'~~

He smiled. 'That's all right, miss. I know him. He does a bit of rabbiting. There's a lot of them about when it's getting dusk.'

We walked back down to the road. When we reached it he saluted me gravely. 'You can be off now, miss. I'll do the necessary. And thanks for your help,' he added politely.

The closed carriage was still unattended. We both stared at it.

'I'll get Charlie to take a message to the station, for the ambulance wagon. No need for you to worry any more about it,' he added smoothly. 'I'm sure there'll be a simple explanation.'

'Simple!' I gasped. 'Is that what you call murder?'

He gave me a pitying smile. 'We don't know that, miss,' he repeated. 'Until we get the body examined. So if you'll excuse me, I'll look for Charlie.'

'You'll need my name as a witness, won't you,' I reminded him as gently as I could.

'Oh yes, of course.' He began searching his pockets. 'Dammit, I had my notebook - I must have dropped it on the way down!' He pointed vaguely towards the chapel. 'You just tell me, miss, and I'll write it down when I get it back.'

I tore a sheet out of my sketchbook, wrote it down firmly. He read it carefully and said, 'You live as near as that, miss? Ah well, no need to see you safe home.'

'My dog will do that, constable.'

He gave Thane a hard look. 'We'll be in touch if we need you, miss.'

The usual beat constable, Lenny, knew Jack well and I was tempted to say. Don't bother, my young man is a detective sergeant.

I don't know why I restrained myself from giving that piece of information, except a sense of propriety. I didn't think Jack would want my name bandied around the constables, with appropriate nudges and winks.

'You're new on this beat, constable. What's your name?'

He seemed taken aback by this request. 'Smith, miss. PC Smith.'

'And your division number?'

'A654.'

'You're new to Edinburgh?'

'Yes.' And anxious to be on his way, saluting me once again, he said goodnight and disappeared over the edge of the hill, calling, 'Charlie - Charlie, are you there?'

Thane looked all set to follow him. I called him back and he came with me reluctantly, occasionally stopping in his tracks as we made our way back across the hill to the Tower in the darkness.

What was wrong with him? His behaviour was as strange as PC Smith's. Why not use his whistle to attract Charlie, for heaven's sake? What an incompetent, I thought, losing his notebook and being on his beat without even a truncheon. What was the Edinburgh City Police coming to? Pappa would never have tolerated such behaviour. As for Jack, a stickler for efficiency... I shook my head sadly. Well, we all have to make mistakes and make allowances for beginners.

I'd keep my comments to myself. I didn't want to get the raw young constable into trouble.

Chapter Four

We had almost reached the Tower when I heard the sound of an approaching carriage on the road below. It was too dark to see clearly, and for a moment I thought it must be Charlie driving in the wrong direction.

Then the swinging lantern halted outside the Tower. I ran through the garden and to my delight the door opened and the passenger who descended was Jack, grinning at me.

At the sight of him, Thane loped off up the hill with a look in my direction that said, 'You'll be all right now. You're in safe hands.'

Jack watched him go. 'Walking the dog, were you? Good job I caught you. Well, are you ready to go to the concert?'

I stared at him. 'I thought you were on a case. You sent a message.'

'Inspector Grey let me off. He knows I'm a music lover,' he said mockingly. Telling the cabbie to wait, he followed me indoors. Closing the door, he kissed me.

'I felt so badly about this, Rose,' he said sounding contrite. 'Duets from the operas with Signor and Madame Rossi. They're not to be missed. According to the reviews, straight from London and New York. Let's go - a bite of supper somewhere first-'

'Jack,' I interrupted. 'There's been a murder.'

He looked astonished. 'A murder? Where?'

'At St Anthony's Chapel. I found - or rather Thane found a body. A woman - thirtyish. I was at my wits' end. She'd been strangled. I didn't know what to do, but then I saw the constable on the beat. Not Lenny - a new chap. He went back with me. He took over, sent a cabbie back with a message to the station.'

'How long ago was this?' Jack demanded sharply.

'Ten - twenty minutes ago.'

'I'd have left by then. They'll send someone but as I'm on the spot I'd better have a look. And as you found the body, Inspector Grey will want a statement.' Jack sighed deeply. 'Dammit, Rose. There goes our supper and probably our evening out as well. Can't be helped - I'll be as quick as I can. St Anthony's Chapel, you said?'

'Wait. I'm coming with you.'

When he said I should just wait for him, I replied, 'Don't argue, Jack. It's all right. I'm not squeamish about dead bodies.'

As the gig trotted back along the road towards the ruined chapel, I filled in the details about the dead woman, her description and my good fortune in finding PC Smith passing by.

Charlie and the carriage had disappeared, doubtless by now at the station with a message for the inspector.

'So you know PC Smith?' I asked Jack.

'No, but that isn't surprising. A lot of new young bobbies have been recruited recently. They're needed since the outskirts of the city are expanding in all directions. Go on...'

At last the dark ruins hovered above us. The cabbie, told to wait, obligingly lent Jack one of his lanterns.

I heard my heart beating fast as we scrambled up the last few yards, Jack running ahead, the light held high.

He shouted, 'Hello there, constable.'

There was no reply, only a chill and eerie wind blowing down from the hill, the darkness unbroken.

'Hello?' Jack called again and turned to me, his angry exclamation indicating that Smith should have been here guarding the body until the ambulance wagon and some senior officers arrived.

So where was he? Jack waved the lantern, shouted again, 'Hello?'

But there was no sign of him.

Worse, the dead woman had vanished.

Jack swore and turned to me.

'Sure this is the right place. Rose?'

I pointed to the base of the wall. 'She was lying right there.'

He went over and knelt down. 'Here?'

'Yes.'

I watched him methodically searching the stones for clues. There were none and he was annoyed with good reason. At last he shook his head and stood up, dusting down the knees of his best trousers.

'What the devil has happened?'

'I'd suggest that as the carriage has gone, your constable got the driver's help and they've taken the body to the mortuary,' I said helpfully. 'He was young and he seemed inexperienced,' I added in the lad's defence, remembering his fumbling attempts at taking a witness statement from me. 'Perhaps he was scared to stay with her alone.'

'Come on, Rose,' Jack said impatiently. 'Even young constables have to learn not to be scared of dead bodies. I'll have strong words for Constable Smith when I get back. He should know - for God's sake, it's first rules that you never leave a dead body found in suspicious circumstances until a senior officer - a detective and a doctor - come and have a look at it.'

Raising the lantern again for a closer look at the wall, he added grimly, 'He'll be even more scared of the living than the dead when I'm through with him.' And turning to me: 'This cab you say that was waiting on the road down there...'

'Yes, the cabbie was called Charlie. According to the constable he was out rabbiting.'

'Hmph,' said Jack.

'Since they've all disappeared, I'm sure there's a simple explanation,' I insisted, 'and your over-zealous lad took the law into his own hands.'

'He needn't expect any thanks for that,' said Jack grimly. 'He sounds pretty useless from what you've told me. I doubt whether he'll last long in the force.'

Those were also my thoughts as he went on, 'No doubt the inspector in charge - probably Grey - will take care of the details. Nothing we can do here, Rose. Better get to the concert.'

'I need to get changed, Jack' I protested.

He stared at me in amazement. 'You look great.'

'I don't. I have to do my hair. I'm a mess.'

My unruly mop of yellow curls needed constant discipline if it wasn't to end up looking like a haystack. And I was still in my outdoor sketching clothes. It wouldn't do at all.

I was looking forward to wearing my new skirt and jacket. It was a flattering shade of deep blue and this would be its first outing.

Poor Jack shook his head in bewilderment. 'You look absolutely stunning as you are,' he said with manlike indifference to the vanities of womenkind.

Half an hour later we were on our way to the concert. But I didn't really enjoy it very much. I kept thinking of that dead woman and working out logical reasons for the thoroughly incompetent PC Smith's behaviour.

Jack didn't stay that night. He decided to go straight back to the station, an attack of conscience, in case Inspector Grey needed information about the dead woman we believed would now be lying in the police mortuary. After seeing me safely back to my front door, he drove off in the hackney cab.

I didn't feel like being on my own and didn't sleep much either. This was the first night I had been completely alone in the house. When Jack was around my faithful deerhound made himself scarce and this night's sinister events - the walking dead - awakened uneasy memories of Edgar Allan Poe's morbidly lurid *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*.

With Thane sleeping in the kitchen downstairs I would have felt safe. Even Cat's presence had been a comfort. She wasn't in the least like Thane who could tackle anyone, the perfect guard dog, but I still felt reasonably secure with any animal that could make a noise to alert me and possibly frighten off an intruder.

Wide awake I stared out into a dark sky broken by swift-moving clouds accompanied by an eldritch wind that rattled the windows and sent scurrying leaves pattering like rapid footsteps along the stone paths around the old Tower.

And tomorrow, I remembered, was 31st October - Hallowe'en. That witches' sabbath still made me uneasy, recalling an Orkney childhood of Gran's superstitions and ghost stories, some pretty horrific, especially the dead walking...

Although common sense said that such things belonged to the pages of fairy tales, this would be my first encounter with the most sinister date in the year in Solomon's Tower. I hadn't thought much about it before but it now took on a new significance: I was living on the scene of many strange goings-on through the passing centuries. Which included, I did not doubt, any number of forgotten grisly rituals and manifestations of a past lost to history. The upstairs floor showed indications of a place of Christian worship dating to the time of the Knights Templar, but I suspected the origins of the building went further back to the time of pagan gods on Arthur's Seat.

There were still many unanswered questions, unexplained and tantalizing mysteries like the miniature coffins which my father as a schoolboy had discovered, and whose existence had been seized upon by news-hungry journalists as sensational evidence of black magic and witches' covens.

And much nearer home for me there was Thane. Where did a mysterious deerhound who came and went with no evident lair fit into a legend that included the deerhounds of King Arthur and his knights? They were said to lie sleeping in a chamber deep in the heart of the mountain. A shepherd boy had seen them with his own eyes in my great-grandfather's day but, raising the alert, he had never been able to find the place again.

I had learned to accept Thane. He was real enough and perhaps I didn't want to know the answers in case they included an indignant owner who might appear any day to reclaim him.

Determinedly pushing scary thoughts aside, I let my thoughts drift to the cheerful prospect of seeing Vince tomorrow for this was a big event for me and a big day for Edinburgh's calendar.

Princess Beatrice, Princess Henry of Battenburg, the Queen's youngest daughter, was to open the new children's hospital. And my stepbrother Dr Vince Laurie was to be one of the royal escort.

It made Vince feel very important, this medical care of royal personages. He had promised to come and see me before returning to Balmoral. And then just a few days ago I received a letter, that I was being invited to accompany him to the royal lunch since Olivia had stayed in London to look after the wee girls and the new baby.

Olivia was a conscientious mother who refused to follow fashion by relying on nannies or to allow anything to interfere with Jason's four-hourly breast-feeding. Right from the start she declined to hand over little Jason to the care of a wet nurse, which would have left her free to accompany Vince to Balmoral, Windsor, Osborne, or wherever the Queen's whim took her. Vince accepted Olivia's decision, having decided that Jason would be their last child anyway.

Eyebrows might have been raised at this pronouncement against the will of God, but Vince, as a doctor, knew a thing or two which I had found invaluable about birth control. As soon as he realized that Jack and I were more than just friends, he had tactfully sat me down on one of his rare visits to

give me the benefits of his advice and instructions. I was not the only beneficiary, I gathered that such knowledge had been useful and was much in demand in royal service.

I concentrated my thoughts on what to wear tomorrow, going through my limited wardrobe. The most elegant and suitable items were mostly cast-offs from Olivia and my wealthy friend Alice, remade to my smaller measurements. This reviewing did not take long but it was exhausting enough to put me to sleep.

Sorely troubled by nightmares I was glad to open my eyes at last to another dawn, a thankfully greeted grey square in the window. Downstairs I pulled out the tin bath in front of the peat fire and, aided by several kettles of water, had my daily ablutions.

Returning upstairs to the bedroom, I held up the claret silk dress with its ruffles of Chantilly lace. Critically considering my reflection in Olivia's long mirror, I saw that I was far from my best. If only I were taller, what a difference that would have made to my morale. I stood on tiptoe: those extra two inches would have brought me over the threshold of five foot which had always seemed eminently desirable. And if only I had smooth amenable hair instead of a mop of wild unruly yellow curls. If only-

The sound of a carriage outside announced Jack.

Throwing on a robe, I ran downstairs and knew by one look at his face that all was not well. I could expect bad news.

He kissed me absent-mindedly and said, 'Rose, are you quite certain that the woman you found was dead?'

I looked at him. 'Sure as you are standing there. Jack. A scarf tied tight around her neck, she was strangled - quite dead.'

Jack frowned. 'You said you undid the scarf.'

'I didn't realize she was dead - her eyes weren't completely closed. I had to feel for the pulse in her neck to make sure.'

Jack's expression was grim. He shook his head. 'Rose, I think you made a mistake. I hate to question your judgement,' he added quickly and gently still, 'but I think she wasn't dead at all. Her eyes were partly open, because she was merely in shock. She had fainted, had an attack of some kind.' He shrugged. 'Maybe she slipped on the hill, knocked herself out. Who knows? But whatever it was she recovered and walked away-'

'Jack, that's impossible. I've seen too many dead people to make that kind of mistake,' and, taking an unfair advantage, added, 'I've had more experience than you in that direction for a start.'

He ignored that. 'Listen to me and try not to get angry. I'm as anxious as you are to get the facts right.' He paused and added slowly, 'No dead woman has been brought into the mortuary.'

'Then ask PC Smith, for heaven's sake. He was there.'

'Rose' he said patiently, 'there is no PC Smith.'

'But I gave you his division number. A654.'

He shook his head. 'There is no A654 on the records either.' Tapping his teeth with his forefinger, a familiar gesture when he was worried, he regarded me gravely. 'If she wasn't injured, as I think was the case, the only other explanation is that you were the victim of a practical joke. And you arrived at the wrong moment for whoever it was intended.'

'Jack Macmerry,' I exploded, 'no one in their right senses plays that kind of joke. The constable was really scared. And besides, before I saw him down on the road, I made a drawing of the woman.'

I went to the sideboard. 'Here, look for yourself.'

Jack smiled. 'Damned good drawing, Rose. But she doesn't look dead. Now, honestly, does she?' He handed it back to me. 'And it isn't really evidence of what you're trying to prove.'

'Thane was with me. He knew she was dead. He led me to her. A sleeping woman would have

jumped out of her skin when a huge deerhound started sniffing around her.'

Jack sighed. 'Thane! A dog nobody ever sees - but us. He could hardly be called in to give evidence. Try producing him in court as a witness-'

"Then there was the cab driver - Charlie.'

'Did you see him?'

'No, he was down the hill rabbiting. But I heard the constable shouting to him. As I told you, he was going to take a message to the station, ask for the ambulance wagon to be sent.'

'Rose' said Jack patiently, 'there was no message. No dead person. Look, I'll have to go, I just had to tell you.'

He kissed me. 'I don't want you worrying - put all this out of your mind and enjoy your lunch with Vince. Give him my best.'

Angry, disturbed and confused, I was momentarily speechless at the arrogance of men, at being patronized. I didn't like it, cast in the role of the wee woman who sees things and has a phantom dog!

He kissed me again, with more feeling this time, aware that I was unresponsive. 'It will all get sorted out, you'll see.' And at the door: 'I'll be round this evening.'

'Vince will be here,' I said coldly.

'Yes, of course,' he said vaguely, waiting for me to say please come.

I didn't. My time with Vince was too precious to share, although the two men liked each other and shared a common interest in my future. They both wanted to see me married again, settled down in woman's proper role in man's life.

'Have you checked your missing persons list at the station?'

He looked vague and sighed. 'Not really.'

'Then please do something for me, Jack.' I tried not to sound exasperated. 'Check who you have on it already and how long they've been missing.'

And taking the sketchbook I tore out the drawing I had made. 'When you have a spare moment, see if there's anyone who could remotely resemble this likeness. And let me have it back when you've finished with it.'

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