

CHAPTER ONE

I thought that danger belonged to the past and that happiness would last forever.

But I was wrong. Soon I was to lose the two most dear to me. Once again I had not heeded the harsh truth that happiness is to be counted in brief moments, too often in hours only, although fate occasionally grants a few extra days. That is all we can hope for.

That early autumn of 1897 was blissful for me due to a long and eagerly awaited visit from Pappa and Imogen Crowe, who had cause to celebrate. Orphaned, when she was sixteen she had been brought over to London by her Fenian uncle who had secretly planned to assassinate Queen Victoria. They were both arrested. Now past forty, her wrongful conviction as an Irish terrorist had been acknowledged by the British Government as a miscarriage of justice.

Recent celebrations had included a visit to my home in Solomon's Tower where we enjoyed a succession of divine days and – for Edinburgh – divine weather. For me, every day was another awakening to joy. My fiancé Jack Macmerry, Pappa's son-in-law elect, joined in the family celebration and so did Thane. Normally so elusive with strangers, my shy deerhound looked in cautiously, wagged his tail and permitted the newcomers to pat his head.

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A merciful Fate, with a taste for irony, provided no inkling, no intuitive flash in that time of magic how close I was to losing those I held dearest.

On the day Pappa and Imogen left to continue their travels to the Highlands I was aware that Jack was unusually thoughtful, a preoccupation I put down readily enough to the stress of working as a detective inspector with the Edinburgh City Police. I smiled indulgently, recalling how I had enjoyed watching Jack with Pappa, ex-Chief Inspector Faro, as they compared notes. How I had warmed to the intimacy of those moments, which had almost persuaded me that I was doing the right thing in marrying Jack.

But I did not marry him.

When at last I recovered from the almost fatal events of the disastrous Golden Jubilee visit to his parents' home in Peebles where we were to have been married, doubts again crept in at the prospect of legalising our life together, which we had enjoyed for three years without the benefit of a marriage ceremony.

The main reason for my reluctance to tie this particular knot was a growing certainty that with it must end my career as a Lady Investigator, Discretion Guaranteed. There had been hints and more than hints, stern reminders, that Jack – a clever young detective with ambitions to become a chief inspector – could not be expected to tolerate a female sleuth as wife. Especially one who dabbled in domestic crimes which anxious clients considered for their own varied, and not always respectable, reasons unworthy of police investigation.

'Most unsuitable.'

Jack had long made it plain that such a role would place in jeopardy any hopes he had of elevation to the higher ranks of

the City Police. And it did not take long for me to realise that, much as he protested his love for me, I had a rival. His ambition was even stronger.

The choice was mine and it had to be made. Did I love him enough to sacrifice a promising and flourishing career? The answer was simply that I could never be just Mrs Macmerry warming her husband's slippers by the fire. I was a Faro, after all, and my father's daughter. Solving crimes, for good or ill, was my inheritance.

But even as I rehearsed and discarded suitable words I was in for a disagreeable surprise when Jack, following me indoors after we had waved goodbye to Pappa and Imogen, solemnly declared that we had urgent and important matters to discuss.

Once again I presumed that this was to discuss a date for our wedding and, armed with a plausible excuse to merit yet another delay, it never occurred to me that Jack might be having second thoughts himself. In fact, I could hardly believe what I was hearing as he stumbled through the words.

I was being told by Jack, my faithful devoted Jack, that he had met someone else. A young woman in Glasgow.

He spoke rapidly, just a little above a whisper. Obviously very embarrassed and deeply upset by this confession, I almost pitied him as he stammered that he thought he was in love with this young lady, but needed time to think it through. Would I be agreeable to a short separation, 'a little breathing-space' until he had made up his mind and was certain this was not just a fleeting infatuation.

Suddenly I was aware of my own reactions. Shaking, my heart beating wildly, I had never been so shocked. It was unbelievable. I blinked rapidly. Surely this was a dreadful nightmare, one from which I would awaken any moment with

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Jack's arm about me. But I didn't wake up. This was not the stuff that dreams are made of. This was real life. Truth, rejection, harsh and bitter.

Quite correctly in the circumstances, he did not stay at Solomon's Tower that night and I lay sleepless beside his empty pillow with the certainty that the love I had taken for granted was about to be snatched from me.

The irony was that all the while I had been craftily considering a convincing escape clause, so too had Jack, but with a much stronger reason.

I was honest enough not to pretend that my heart was broken. That had happened once already when my husband, Danny McQuinn, vanished in Arizona three years ago. I had to accept that he was almost certainly dead and I would never open the door of Solomon's Tower, as I had so often in dreams, to find him smiling, waiting to take me in his arms.

I had rebuilt my life without him and, although Jack's rejection was a grievous blow, I had suffered worse in my life: the loss of a beloved husband and an infant son. I had survived.

I was not completely lost. I still had my career, Solomon's Tower and Thane.

Or so I thought...

Yes, I still had Thane and any day now my beloved stepbrother, Dr Vincent Beaumarcher Laurie, junior physician to Her Majesty's Household, would visit Solomon's Tower, as he did whenever the Royal train was stationary for a few hours in Waverley Station on the journey to or from Balmoral Castle.

Without Jack I would devote myself to my thriving career. Jack might well scorn domestic cases, but I was relieved. True, there was a certain sameness about absconding wives or husbands, thieving servants, lost wills and frauds – all too predictable to merit more than a brief note in my logbook, where only murders justified a detailed case history.

But I certainly had no wish for murders. There I was treading – often innocently unaware – on dangerous ground. I shuddered to remember that on two of my previous investigations but for the timely intervention of Jack and Thane I would have become the killer's next victim. I had them to thank for my deliverance.

When Vince arrived two days later, I told him that Jack and I were to separate for a while and there would be no wedding in the immediate future. I hoped to sound casual. For Jack's sake and perhaps as a sop to my wounded pride, I preferred to take the line that this was a shared decision, especially as Vince liked Jack and should we get together again, might thereafter regard him in a poorer light.

His reaction was unexpectedly noncommittal. He merely shook his head, called Jack a fine fellow and hoped that I might not regret agreeing to such a proposal. I was relieved that he did not make as much fuss as I had feared. Indeed, he seemed more preoccupied than usual on this brief visit, and I had encountered the signs of frequent throat-clearing, suppressed sighs and uneasy glances often enough through the years to recognise that he was the bearer of unpleasant news.

It couldn't be anything involving Olivia and the children; he had already told me at first greeting that they were in splendid health, thank you, and sent their love. Nor could this concern

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Pappa and Imogen, whose visit he had just missed. Her Majesty, then; could it be something to do with his court appointment? Had he fallen foul of some protocol or misdiagnosed some Royal condition?

Yes, with reassurances at the ready, I decided that would be the reason. But then he asked suddenly:

‘Where is Thane? I expected to see him.’

‘He was here just before you arrived,’ I said. ‘You know what he is like—’

Vince nodded, clearing his throat again, and glancing unhappily towards the window. Then, leaning forward, he took my hands. ‘It is really Thane I want to talk to you about. I know you have always been doubtful about his origins.’ A deep breath and his grip on my hands tightened. ‘Rose, I have to tell you. I have found his owner.’

My heart lurched. Suddenly I felt sick with apprehension. ‘After all these years,’ I gasped. ‘It’s impossible – I don’t believe it.’

‘Three years, Rose. Stranger things have happened. And I’m afraid what I have to tell you is true. Hubert Staines – you have heard of him? No? An artist, a great photographer. Family groups are all the rage just now and we met at Balmoral when he was commissioned by Her Majesty to take a series with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

‘Hubert lives in Northumberland at Alnwick and, as there is a railway station – a convenient diversion for the Royal train on visits to Alnwick Castle – he suggested that I call on him. A lovely manor house, the site of an ancient priory on the edge of the Duke of Northumberland’s estate. We got along splendidly and he showed me his collection of magnificent photographs, quite outstanding. We had much in common,

and he visited us in London recently to take photographs of Olivia and the children.’

Vince paused, bit his lip and sighed. ‘Olivia has your painting of Thane in the dining room, in pride of place above the mantelpiece—’

I felt momentarily flattered as, pausing, Vince sighed. ‘I could see he was much taken by it. He kept going back for a closer look. Then he turned to me and said, “Quite extraordinary, Vince old man, but would you believe that I have – or had – a deerhound exactly like him?”

‘I explained that you were the artist. He asked where you lived and when I told him Edinburgh and of the mysterious circumstances in which you had found Thane – or rather in which Thane had found you – he questioned me closely and asked when all this happened. When I said three years ago, he looked startled. “What a strange coincidence. That is when we lost Roswal, or rather, I did. I was at Holyrood on a commission for HM, Roswal was with me and we were walking on Arthur’s Seat. There was a heavy grey mist and it was chilly too, but he had to have exercise. Usually so serene and biddable, that day he was agitated, restless. I thought the weather had upset him, but suddenly he took off, bolted like an arrow from a bow. Always obedient at home, he had never been known not to respond to a command. Not this time, alas. I whistled and called and waited, and then I searched and searched, but all in vain.”

‘Poor Hubert,’ said Vince. ‘He shook his head and looked so sad. “I have never seen him or his likeness again until—” And pausing, he pointed to the painting of Thane and said solemnly, “until this very day. I had to leave Edinburgh and there was nothing I could do, except break the news to my

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poor little stepdaughter. A frail, lonely child; an invalid. She was heartbroken. Roswal had always been hers from puppyhood. She is now gravely ill with consumption.”

Pausing, remembering, Vince sighed. ‘Poor Hubert,’ he repeated, ‘he looked at me with his eyes full of tears, and whispered, “Her weeks, perhaps even days, are numbered, and all she asks and still prays for every night is that she will see Roswal again – before – before—” ’

Vince left the sentence unfinished and a silence fell between us. I said nothing. I was too stunned. There was nothing in this world I could think of except – selfish and heartless as it must sound on paper – that this could not be happening to me.

Thane was mine.

I dreaded what was now expected of me and knew that I would resist it – that I would do anything, anything to keep Thane. As for Roswal, I remembered that was the name of the deerhound Sir Walter Scott had written so lovingly into his novel, *The Talisman*. Roswal had been the cause of considerable friction between his owner the Scottish crusader Sir Kenneth and his Royal commander, King Richard.

‘What I am going to ask you, Rose, may not be easy for you,’ Vince began hesitantly.

‘I can guess,’ I said bitterly. ‘You want me to hand him over to this Hubert Staines, that’s it, is it not?’ I cried. ‘Well, I cannot do it. What’s more, I will not! Thane is mine. Oh, Vince, please, forget this conversation. Forget you ever told me. I beg of you, don’t ask me to do this,’ I sobbed – I who so rarely shed a tear.

Vince again grasped my hands. ‘Hear me out, Rose, there’s a good girl. I told Hubert you had become devoted to Thane

and he to you. How he had saved your life – Hubert already knew about Stepfather, he had heard of Chief Inspector Faro, of course, from the Royal family, and when I had told him about your activities as a lady detective, he understood how vital Thane had been to protect you—’

I wriggled from his grasp, my hands over my face, moaning in protest as he went on. ‘Rose, Hubert only asks that you take Thane to visit him in Northumberland so that Kate may see him once again in her last days on earth. Surely you cannot refuse this request,’ he added sternly.

Ignoring that, I said bitterly. ‘And when I take him away again?’ I said bitterly. ‘What then? How could I possibly do that—?’

Vince took my hands again. ‘Look into your own heart, Rose. This is a dying girl’s last wish. You will only be required to stay until – until that unhappy event then you and Thane will be at liberty to return home. There is no other obligation. Hubert has other dogs, but Roswal was Kate’s. How can you refuse?’ he repeated reproachfully.

I knew that I was trapped. It was so easy, too easy, to put myself in Kate’s shoes. But first I had one of two questions.

‘Have you met this little girl?’

‘Kate? Alas, no. She was in a Newcastle hospital on my visit – being examined by a consultant in respiratory diseases. Hubert said it was his last hope that some means might be found of prolonging her life, for cure there is none.’

‘What about her mother?’

Vince shook his head. ‘Sadly Hubert is a widower. Mary died last year, the result of an accident, I gather. He was too upset to talk about it. Mary had been married before and as there were no children to this second marriage, Hubert is

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absolutely devoted to Kate. It's a sorry, tragic business, Rose. He is heartbroken at the prospect of losing her so soon after his dear wife. He has taken many photographs of them both, the very essence of family life. I'm glad he will have those at least to comfort him.'

'What is she like?'

'Beautiful, but so frail. Her eyes were remarkable for a child, as if she had seen all the world's sorrows. My heart was touched too when I heard her sad history—'

I shook my head, turned away. I didn't want to hear any more heart-rending accounts of Hubert Staines' tragic life that would make a refusal impossible.

'There is one other consideration,' I said. 'One you obviously haven't considered. How on earth will Thane react to being removed from here and taken on a long journey down to Northumberland?'

Vince's mocking shrug clearly indicated his reactions. 'He made the journey to Peebles with you and Jack by train and seemed to take no ill effect from what I have been told.'

'Yes, but this is different.'

'How different?'

'Because it concerns him, his past. I must know how he feels about meeting – meeting his former owners.'

'I don't see how you are to do that, Rose,' he said sternly. 'After all, he is only a dog.'

'He has feelings,' I said angrily. 'Just like the rest of us.'

Vince's despairing shrug again said clearly what he thought of that absurd idea.

'A pity he isn't around. The Royal train will be heading south just as soon as HM completes her visit to Holyrood. We could have arranged for a stop at Alnwick, and telegraphed

Hubert to collect you there. A half hour's journey later you could be at his home,' he added encouragingly. 'How would that suit you?'

I thought of the carriage waiting to take Vince back to Waverley Railway Station and shook my head. 'I cannot possibly go back with you, even if Thane were here. I need time to prepare.'

We got through the next half hour somehow, and for the first time I wasn't sorry when Vince's visit ended, since my anguish at losing Thane made it difficult to resume our usual family conversations and my normal curiosity about Royal events was stunned into silence.

As the coachman outside signalled Vince's departure time, he stared out of the window towards Arthur's Seat.

'What on earth has happened to Thane? He usually rushes in to greet me. Most odd,' he added. A reproachful look suggested that I might be concealing him somewhere.

But the carriage had hardly disappeared from view when Thane appeared – from the direction of the kitchen. I realised he had been staying out of sight and I did not doubt he had heard every word of our conversation.

I told him that we were going to Alnwick.

I stroked his head. Did he remember Hubert Staines and little Kate? Of course, he couldn't reply. I would have to wait and see – and hope. Hope that he was not and never had been the missing deerhound, Roswal.