Murder Lies Waiting

A Rose McQuinn Mystery

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CHAPTER ONE

'You'll be safe enough there,' said husband Jack about my intended visit to Bute. He called it a neat, tidy island. Nothing exciting ever happens, the only murder – and that not-proven – was twenty years ago. You'll be safe enough there. His final words, somewhat cynically expressed, related to the fact that wherever I went, murder always seemed to be waiting for me.

Safe enough. Those words were to haunt me.

But to go back to the beginning. A clash, between my essential appearance as a lady investigator on a client's behalf in the court at Glasgow – details of which have no place in this narrative, including the possibility that matters might not be concluded in one day – and Chief Inspector Jack Macmerry's long-planned annual family holiday: dates non-negotiable and set in stone by the Edinburgh City Police, daughter Meg's half-term school holiday and,

most important of all, his parents' golden wedding day at Eildon, a farm in the wild Border country near Peebles.

Sadie Brook, our housekeeper at Solomon's Tower, had been given a week's holiday. 'Seemed grateful and delighted, probably had plans of her own. And if you don't go with us, Rose, then she will feel obliged to cancel them. And who is to look after you?' Jack added anxiously.

'No need for that, I am used to being here on my own. A few days will hardly be a hardship.' In a curious way, I hated to admit that I was rather looking forward to having the Tower on my own when I returned from Glasgow, no immediate investigations and time to attend to much neglected domestic matters, discarding items from Jack's much loved but extremely shabby wardrobe, Meg's outgrown clothes and toys, as well as the contents of forgotten cupboard shelves.

'Are you sure? You're still not yourself again,' Jack said.

I found his concern touching. I was hardly at death's door, merely recovering from what seemed a lingering head cold and cough. Listening to that cough disturbing his night's sleep, Jack said desperately: 'You're not well, Rose, you're needing this holiday. A change of air and some of Ma's cooking will work wonders. Make a new woman of you.'

'Do you really want a new woman of me?'

He grinned: 'You know the woman I want.' His accompanying look said it all and proved that even after ten years it could still bring a blush to my face.

He went on to enthuse about the golden wedding long regarded as an exciting local event, a rare gathering of the clans, not to be missed. The Macmerrys were a popular couple and families from miles around would converge on

the farm, none too young or too old to be excluded, as long as they had breath in their bodies and were capable of eating and drinking, particularly the latter, and with the inevitable ceilidh, for those not rendered completely legless.

The prospect of a whole week of social invitations to more remote farms and cross-country bone-shaking journeys, more food, drink and hangovers, very bad fiddle playing and ear-splitting shrieks from would-be dancers, did not, if I am honest, seem that enticing.

But as all the arrangements had been carefully planned by his mother Jess, Jack was furious with the clash of dates. She would be so disappointed. Although as a high-ranking officer in the Edinburgh Police he was liable to cancel more personal engagements than he had hot dinners, and frequently both, as I knew to my cost through the years, it was a totally different matter for his wife. I tried to muster interest in his suggestion that I might come for part of the week as the Glasgow meeting might involve two days' travelling with little in the way of transport – unless he collected me from Edinburgh on my return. I knew from the slight frown and immediate change of subject that this idea did not appeal to him.

'They'll be getting enough of me. I'll be here when they come back with you next week.'

Andrew Macmerry's birthday also marked his retirement, the farm handed on to his nephew having long ago been declined by Jack, who decided to be a policeman, much to his parents' disappointment.

Jess Macmerry wistfully fancied a few days in Edinburgh, with memories of her one and only visit on their honeymoon fifty years ago. She had never been to Solomon's Tower and

there were hints that a large amount of luggage might also be transported separately – Jess would be indulging in an orgy of baking and food preparation and since Jack's motor car could barely squeeze in Meg and I, plus Thane, there would be little room for another passenger. And there was no question that Thane would be travelling too. He went everywhere with us and was a popular favourite with Jack's father, who declared Thane the most extraordinary dog he had ever set eyes on, something most folk would agree with.

I sighed. Although they both boasted to being fit as fiddles, as Pa Macmerry was fond of stating, Jack decided that an aged couple used to living in a low-lying, one-level farmhouse should not have to cope with an ill-lit perilous and ancient spiral staircase, the only access to the Tower's upper floor.

We often slept in Jack's study in winter, cosy and close to the warm kitchen when the rest of the Tower was impossible to heat, and Sadie was set to work immediately transforming the Guard's Room into a pleasant bedroom.

We had no idea where the name for the study originated, but I suspected from similar rooms on the upper floors that the Tower had once served as a soldiers' barracks. Solomon's Tower, resting on the now peaceful slopes of the extinct volcano that was Arthur's Seat, had Edinburgh's grim history confirmed by relics of battle – rusted swords, helmets and even the occasional skull – unearthed from time to time through the passing centuries.

My change of plan being discussed, I looked around the supper table. Angry, tight lips from a now grumpy Jack. Meg seemed slightly sad and was making all the right noises – but those grandparents in Eildon, who could resist

them? She loved the farm and the animals, to say nothing of the overindulgence.

Like all young creatures she didn't seem to feel any discomfort from cold draughts, doors left wide open and faulty chimneys belching forth smoking fires. Certainly not with so many good things to eat, all proudly home-baked and with a loving grandma who also applauded her desire to help in the kitchen and learn how to cook, seeing in Meg the potential for what she called growing up to be 'a real woman', unlike her daughter-in-law, Jack's wife, seriously neglecting family duties by doing an unwomanly and potentially dangerous job involving nasty people and occasional dead bodies, activities best left to the police.

Jack had another cup of tea and was considering a final plea. He had also observed that there wasn't much work for the 'lady investigator, discretion guaranteed' coming my way in Edinburgh at the moment. It wasn't as if I was turning prospective clients away from the door, he said.

That was true, I had to agree. A temporary hiccup or perhaps Edinburgh society was also becoming more modern, in keeping with King Bertie and that loosening of the shackles of tight morals, a code put down, sternly fixed and adhered to in his mother's long reign.

Her son, perhaps because of that stern upbringing, showed more understanding of the frailties of human nature. And that, most folk agreed, was a good thing. 1906 was the twentieth century after all, and ready for a lady investigator.

CHAPTER TWO

The following morning Jack left for work and after waving goodbye to Meg as she hurried down the road to the Pleasance and the convent school run by the Little Sisters of the Poor, I sat in the big kitchen enclosed by the grim and ancient walls, and the lost history of Solomon's Tower.

Life was becoming a little dull. Sadie was washing the breakfast dishes. She looked across at me, heard me sigh and smiled. 'Is it as bad as all that? Anything I can help with? Here, have another cup of tea, still warm in the pot,' she added, her favourite antidote to all ills.

Sadie had been invaluable during the past two years, showing remarkable abilities as a nurse as well as running our lives with her customary efficiency, duties awakening memories of childhood afflictions and the devotion of her aunt Brook to whom Chief Inspector Faro frequently abandoned his two daughters, Emily and me, during our stay

in Sheridan Place from Orkney on our annual school holiday.

Grandma Faro had taken us to live with her in Kirkwall after our dear mother died when I was eight, giving birth to a stillborn baby, the son she and Pa had longed for.

Sadie took a seat opposite, and the next moment, I was drinking more tea and pouring out my tale of woe, glad to have someone whose sympathetic ear I could bend for a change. We had become close in recent times – Sadie Brook the housekeeper had suddenly become Sadie the companion and secretary. I needed help and she was so good, not only keeping the house but also keeping my study in order. While I was laid low recently, she had taken the opportunity to update my filing system, which would make life much easier in future, that is if Jack's dismal prophecy of my lack of clients was not fulfilled.

She had said apologetically: 'I hoped that you would be pleased. That it would help. You are always so busy taking care of Mr Jack.' I had on request dropped the respectful title of Mrs Rose and guessed that she understood from observing, without my putting it into words, that sometimes I had problems with Jack. We were happy together and had much to be thankful for, in harmony most of the time, but like all married couples there were brief moments when we stared angrily at one another across that kitchen table and harsh words were not always bitten back.

I sighed. 'Forgive me. I am at this moment in danger of being sorry for myself.'

'And you have every right to be,' she said firmly. 'You're not your usual self at all. You've been very poorly with that wretched cold and that takes its toll—'

I shook my head. 'This golden wedding and my absence

has brought it all to a head. I should be ashamed to admit any of this to anyone. I have absolutely no reason for moans.' Feeling defensive and that an excuse was needed, I added: 'Jack is a great husband and we have had ten years of a good marriage.'

She sighed. 'Aren't you lucky! Sounds wonderful to me.'

Such statements like 'good marriage' always suggest perfect happiness to the unmarried and I said: 'I might as well tell you I have another reason for not being tempted by a whole week at the farm. A brief visit is quite enough. Jack's parents are somewhat stoical – I'm not implying mean . . . just careful – about heating cold rooms and keeping doors shut against draughts.' That I always felt cold was a matter of amusement, and dare I add, even contempt to my mother-in-law, who saw it as a slackening of the moral fibres to admit to such weakness.

Sadie's eyebrows rose. 'Considering this house is not the warmest, perhaps they just think that you are used to the cold.'

I looked around me and smiled. 'I never get used to it, but I love living here so much.' And looking out of the window at the vast height of Arthur's Seat, I added: 'Living here in an ancient tower that looks as if it was built from the very boulders and stones that flew down millions of years ago at its last eruption as a volcano, is a rare and exciting kind of home. I feel privileged. I would never want any other place.'

She followed my gaze, a grey dull day outside, and she seemed surprised. 'Not even one of those grand houses in the New Town,' she said wistfully, 'if Mr Jack had that kind of money?'

I laughed. 'Not even then. Besides, as you know well, we live mostly in this kitchen.'

She smiled. 'I hope it's always warm enough . . .'

'It is indeed. And you make sure that our bedrooms are too.'

She stood up and put the kettle on to boil. 'You know, it is quite natural for Mr Jack's parents to be disappointed. They are devoted to him and Meg, and so proud of you and all your achievements.'

'Are they? I wonder. I'm not at all sure about that. Perhaps I have never been quite forgiven for not presenting their only son with an heir for the farm.'

'But they have wee Meg and they adore her.'

That was true and I made no comment, but it had long been obvious that I was not the light of my in-laws' lives. That position was unassailably and rightly held by Jack, always had been, and in more recent years by his daughter, ever since Meg came into the Macmerry family six years ago. A newcomer, a ready-made granddaughter, she was their flesh and blood, after all, and blood was for them far, far thicker than water.

I didn't say any of this to Sadie because she just believed that Meg was my daughter and I was happy to let her go on thinking so. She had made another pot of tea and as she handed me a cup I thanked her and said: 'I'm afraid Mrs Macmerry never quite approved of a daughter-in-law tainted by a life investigating crime. She's very proud of her chief inspector son but crime and other such sordid things – that is a man-only business, very brave and commendable, but definitely not for women!'

I paused, wondering how best to rephrase Meg's arrival. 'As soon as we had Meg, she firmly decided

that I should have immediately cast aside my career and devoted every moment to my new role—' I stopped just in time. I almost said 'as stepmother'. Although to give Meg her due, she regarded me as her mother, the only one she had ever known.

'Mrs Macmerry is like most women, you can't blame her for that.' And giving me one of her intense looks, Sadie went on: 'You are quite different, a new species, a career woman, it's not her fault if she doesn't quite understand that. She's puzzled by you, I expect.'

I smiled wryly. 'I know. I see it in her eyes each time we meet. She looks at Meg and then at me and I feel that I am falling short by not fulfilling what she regards as a woman's only role in life. That is, spending all my waking hours cooking, sewing and making clothes, darning socks and being quite content to wait on my two, hand and foot.'

I stopped, suddenly embarrassed as I realised this described Sadie's role as a housekeeper exactly. With sudden compassion, I wondered how she felt about it and whether she had secret ambitions stretching way beyond biding her time in Solomon's Tower.

Sadie seemed unaware of my discomfort. 'But you are much more than a career woman. I noticed from various things in your study that you are also fighting for votes for women. And I approve of that.'

'You do? Well, I am glad to hear it.' For another convert in the making, I added enthusiastically: 'You must come to our next meeting.'

'I'll be delighted. I should like to join your movement, take an active part, become a suffragette.'

My eyes widened at that. The word 'suffragette' made

Jess Macmerry blanch and I tried my best to keep that other piece of grey evidence against me well under wraps, with visions of a mother-in-law's agonies concerning this weird woman her son had brought into a respectable God-fearing family. Grievances suppressed under a polite and smiling surface but doubtless unearthed as the door closed on our visits and poured into Andrew Macmerry's long-suffering ears, used as they were to considering only the vicissitudes of poor harvests and sheep-farming matters.

Sadie was clearing the table, opening cupboards to make a list of what we needed for a meal that evening. Leaving such matters to her, I was only to be consulted on special occasions like birthdays and entertaining visitors.

'Such a pity you have to go to Glasgow midweek,' she said, 'if it had been Monday or a Friday you might have been able to go with them.'

'Jack knows there is no way I could be in both places on this important day. We've discussed it plenty, as you well know.'

She had been present, trying to look invisible through sharp discussions, seeing Jack looking angry and resentful, and me making matters worse with reminders about how often being a policeman's wife, not to mention a policeman's daughter, arrangements had been changed in the past.

I said: 'My sister Emily and I had our childhood blighted by hardly ever seeing our father, without a mother; we grew up in many ways closer to your aunt Brook when we visited Edinburgh.'

She smiled. 'Aunt Brook was wonderful. She brought me up after I lost my parents.'

I remembered that in Orkney this summer for Emily's

husband's funeral, Pa and I had thrown a safe bridge to travel over this sad omission of parental care. We loved each other, and having much in common he was well pleased and proud of his daughter's role as a lady investigator.

Sadie was about to take my bicycle down the Pleasance and then into Princes Street. 'I have parcels to collect from Jenners for Mr Jack,' she said.

That would be the wedding anniversary present for his parents and from the children's department something special for Meg to wear, chosen by Jack on their visit to the shops while I was ill.

Sadie left and I went into my study. I had nothing to do and the Tower now so still and empty, I felt very alone. Being sick had drained me of energy and enthusiasm. Sorting idly through papers on my desk, my mind backtracked to my soul-bearing with Sadie. I thought of her collecting the parcel for Meg and that I should have been the one to decide what she would wear. It was no comfort to know, as I had always known from the moment she came into our lives, that given a straight choice, however much Jack had once loved me, now he would always choose Meg.

She was his child, she was his image and these days I noticed an increasing movement of our world around 'Meg thinks . . . Meg says . . . Meg wants . . .'

Not for a moment must this imply that I was resentful, the wicked stepmother. I loved Meg with all my being. She was the child I had never borne, the replacement for that beloved infant son with my first husband Danny McQuinn. The baby who still lived in my heart, whose frail ghost still rose from the unmarked grave in the Arizona desert that I had dug with my own hands and laid him to rest.

After several miscarriages I knew I was unlikely to bear Jack a child. The St Ringan's curse my sister Emily and I called it, by which all Faro women could bear only one live child. If Jess Macmerry never forgave me for Jack's baby I had lost in those early months and was at that particular time my only reason for getting married at all, I had sought and found a granddaughter for them, reunited with her father but with no past memories. She loved both of us, her mother and father. But Jack was first – and the thought came unbidden and sometimes too often that now in my early forties, I was almost there, stepping over the threshold into middle age. With a loving husband and step-daughter, I had nothing to complain about, but it didn't help to know that somehow I had failed as a wife.

I was not – or ever likely to be – the first person to live and die for anyone's love; for blood, as previously mentioned, is thicker than water and that no amount of devotion can equal. Once I had prided myself, preened secretly, that I was first with Pa – now he had Imogen, happy together and settled in Dublin. Now there was no one wanted me above all others, and that included Thane, rushing to Meg's side, tail wagging in delight, as soon as the door opened or he heard her footsteps on the stair.

I made a resolve that morning. Unburdening myself to Sadie had been a catharsis, a confessional Meg would have said, like the Catholic pupils at the convent. Yet Sadie had seemed impressed, even envious.

I stood up, cleared away the papers from my desk and made careful notes of what was required for the Glasgow court, telling myself to get a grip, stop feeling that life was slipping away. Be grateful, and be like Meg, say

thank you, God, for every day. And go now, feed Thane.

Yes, there was Thane, my beloved deerhound. What about Thane? Thane had always been Meg's from the first day they met when she was three, his allegiance was to her. He would go with them to the farm, sure of a warm welcome, indulged by Andrew Macmerry. And give Thane his due, he knew when he was on to a good thing.

Sadie had returned and smiled as she unpacked the groceries. 'You're looking better, Rose. A bit more cheerful than when I left.'

'I've been gathering the threads, busy with things, that's always good for the spirit.'

'I was going to ask you something,' Sadie hesitated, frowned. 'I've been thinking just now. If you had been going with them, I would be off on a week's holiday. Now that you are staying—'

'No! You must still have that holiday. I insist. You deserve it, you work so hard for us all the time. And I can look after myself for a few days.'

'Are you sure?' She looked at me doubtfully.

'Of course I'm sure. Have you somewhere to go?'

'Yes. I was planning to go to Bute, catch up on old relations,' she added.

'Is that where your family came from?'

'My parents, yes.'

I laughed. 'I had no idea. I thought Mrs Brook being your aunt, Edinburgh born and bred . . .'

She nodded vaguely and I realised that was a foolish presumption as she said: 'I was born near Rothesay.'

She said no more, retreating up the spiral stair to tidy Meg's bedroom and put out her change of clothes when

she returned from school. Scrambling about with Thane outside on the hill in her uniform was strictly forbidden after one or two disasters.

Suddenly I was aware of how little I knew about Sadie or of what had been the pattern of her life before coming to Solomon's Tower.

She came downstairs, looked at me and said: 'I've just had a great idea.' Pausing, she smiled eagerly. 'Why don't you come with me, Rose? To Bute.'