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THE THIRTEEN CHIMES

The Fence Torn Down I

— Never tear down a fence without first knowing why it was put up. — G. K. Chesterton

EDINBURGH

Morning of 23 December 1869

—Well… what can I say? We'll have to call a medium, won't we, Mr Fawkes? —Malcolm Fraser was leaning against the window, gazing out at the street with disinterest.

Outside, the thick fog did not recede when the window was opened; on the contrary, it seemed to peer into the room like a curious cat.

Edinburgh was dawning—if one could call it that—as the light barely managed to pierce the veil of pollution shrouding the atmosphere.

Above, the rooftops were blackened by soot. Down at street level, Leith was waking to its symphony of misery: a motley market of sorrows beneath the fog.

From up there, Fraser gazed at symbols scrawled in chalk, marking the houses condemned for sanitation reforms. On the pavements, the evicted.

Everything smelled of coal and dead fish.

'Pardon?' Chief Inspector Fawkes grunted, sitting up with the puff of a steam engine. His knee—a small reminder of the Navy—punished him relentlessly as soon as winter arrived.

He leaned on his cane. "Excuse me… what were you saying?… Good heavens," he snorted, "I'm getting more and more deaf every day."

"I was saying," Fraser raised his voice, "that we'll have to call in a medium to tell us what the hell's gone on here." As he pushed the window wide open, Fraser found himself half out of the room. The wind swept past his back into the room, fluttering shreds of wallpaper that hung like flaps of skin.

'You can't deny,' he continued, 'that the scene has a certain… theatrical quality to it, doesn't it?

'So what?' grumbled Fawkes, brushing the dust off his trouser legs. *Margaret's going to kill me*, he thought.

Without waiting for a reply, he strode towards the narrow corridor. 'Constable Doves!' he bellowed. 'Come up here at once, for God's sake! And help with the body!'

"A medium?" Fawkes continued to grumble, now outside the room. "And what's next? Will the fairies of

Greyfriars Cemetery perform our autopsies? You've got some ideas…"

Fraser kept staring out at the street. He lowered his voice, as if speaking to the fog itself.

"If they do the job better than the coroner, why not?" A half-smile crossed his face as he thought of his friend, the coroner Lyle MacLintock. "You know, Inspector," he raised his voice again, "spiritualism is all the rage across the country. What we have in here"—he waved his gloved hand as if shooing away flies—"is slipping through our fingers."

"Don't talk nonsense, Mr Fraser," came a voice from the doorway. "There must be a logical explanation for all this."

Fraser turned his gaze towards the bed that took up most of the room. On the horsehair mattress, a corpse lay with its hands crossed over its chest, like an embalmed mummy; its eyes remained fixed—like shattered stained-glass windows—staring at the blackened wooden ceiling.

Three wounds—possibly from a dagger—were visible on his bare torso, *the most likely cause of his death*, he thought.

'Well, you'll have to tell me how,' he continued. 'The room was locked from the inside; there's nothing but this window— —which was also locked… and opens outwards.' He looked again at the considerable height separating them from the street, muttering, '…Short of an orangutan, I can't think of anything.'

"An orangutan?" Fawkes looked at him, narrowing his eyes. "Mr Fraser, if I hadn't known you for years and didn't consider you the finest sleuth in the force, believe me, I'd kick you out of here for such nonsense."

This man hears only what he wants to hear, he thought. A coachman drove past, tearing through the street fog as he turned ruthlessly down the road.

'What a morning temper, Mr Fawkes…' Fraser offered an affectionate smile without taking his eyes off the carriage as it vanished into the fog. 'I was referring to a story by Mr Poe. Paris, a locked room… you know… orangutan.'

The Chief Inspector did not reply. His footsteps were already crunching down the old staircase. 'Constable Doves! Come up at once or go home!'

'I'm coming, sir!' Doves's voice came back, trembling.

A clumsy set of footsteps announced the arrival of young Doves, little more than a lad in a crumpled

uniform with a milky complexion. He stopped in the doorway, panting as if he'd run all the way from Calton Hill.

"Sorry… Mr Fraser," he stood to attention, "…the crowd wouldn't let me through! Everyone wanted… wanted to know what's going on here…"

The moment he stepped into the room, the stench hit him like a hammer to the face. He said no more. His body convulsed once and he vomited what would have been his breakfast with a loud splash between the legs of the bed.

"Splendid!" Fawkes could be heard bellowing from some landing. "Mr Fraser? I don't envy the mess you'll be left with when I retire."

Fraser stood motionless. He had barely heard those words. His thoughts drifted far away, towards the black plumes of smoke the harbour chimneys were belching out over the Firth of Forth.

His gaze wandered around the room, as if searching for something he'd lost. 'Where is our dear Chief Inspector?

A French-[1] —of dubious provenance—and a faded pink garter momentarily stuck to his boot.

She shook it off with a grimace; the object fell with a squelching *thud* onto the floorboards. Fraser raised an eyebrow at the sight.

'He's gone downstairs,' said Doves, shrugging. 'He said we should take the body…' He glanced furtively at the ceiling and decided to change tack. '…that you should take care of it… that it won't make a week's difference either way.'

Fraser nodded impassively.

He turned to close the window when he saw her. On the corner, at the end of the opposite street, a woman was watching him.

Her face was of an almost childlike softness, and she wore a black muslin dress: translucent sleeves and a stiff collar. The dress hugged a petite figure, too well-proportioned to unsettle anyone. But what distinguished her most was her hair: a cascade of fire gathered in a high bun, which seemed to burn without being consumed.

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[1] *A reusable condom made of gut or linen, tied with a string. It was considered an expensive item.*

From his vantage point up there, she looked like a living torch, a vision born of a feverish delirium.

His heart skipped a beat.

"Sir?" Doves's voice snapped him out of his trance.

Fraser blinked. The corner was empty. All that remained was the mist, rippling as if someone had rushed through it.

Just as he'd thought… the visitor had wings. He concluded this as he looked down at the sheer drop to the cobblestones.

He closed the window. He couldn't help feeling that the city itself was watching him. Something in the room—surely the emptiness that permeates everything where death has left its mark—suggested to him that a run of bad luck was coming his way.

I don't have enough at home to get myself into another mess, he thought.

DR LYLE MACLINTOCK

The afternoon of 23 December.

They carried the body from the attic to a basement adjoining the town hall—the new morgue—as dusk was already falling.
Three officers carried it, wrapped in a sheet so stained and worn it looked like the sheet of a leper forgotten in a leper colony. They laid it on a marble table.

The night—with the dampness of the harbour—began to creep up the walls of Edinburgh when Fraser decided to pop into the mortuary. Lyle MacLintock was waiting for him there.

When he entered, the coroner had a scalpel in his hand and the expression of someone who had had to peer too often into the abyss of misfortune.
'So… a room locked from the inside, is it?' was his greeting. He didn't look up from the corpse lying face-up on the central marble slab.
"News certainly travels fast…" Fraser approached the doctor. He placed a hand on his friend's shoulder by way of greeting.
"What do you suggest? A ghost?" Lyle shifted the lifeless corpse. The wretch's body gave a dull creak, like

the sound a damp log would make when turned over in a forest.

Fraser looked around without answering. That basement smelled of science. The place had been tiled over an old grain store, with the hygienic tiles advocated by Mr Littlejohn — an insufferable little man, but one with good ideas. According to the regulations, all floors had to be washable with quicklime; drains with grates had to be installed and the walls sprayed with bleach from time to time. *Well, all very modern,* thought the inspector*, and yet the air smelled of entrails*.

As he walked round the marble table, the gas lamps flickered in the corners, casting shadows that trembled as if the room were breathing.

'Well, look,' added Lyle with a gesture, pointing at the deceased, 'what I can tell you is that this… this, he didn't do it to himself.

He lifted the body onto its side. Between the shoulder blades was another wound: a large incision that had barely bled. It was a cut made with great precision, but with jagged edges.

"In case you're wondering," he said, laying the body back on its back, "this wasn't done by the blade of any

tool. I'd say some sort of animal claw. At a guess, about fifteen centimetres or so; but what do I know… right?"
Fraser snorted. The image of the orangutan mocked him in the back of his mind.
He slumped into a chair, away from the autopsy table. He didn't consider himself particularly squeamish—in his thirties, he'd seen more dead bodies than candles at a funeral—but he'd never got used to the sight of a body cut open. *Perhaps no one ever does*, he thought.

MacLintock, for his part, seemed to have been born for it. His scalpel glinted as it caught the light from the wall lamps. With it, he made a vertical incision from the sternum to the pubis.
Beside him, on a small table covered with a cloth, lay forceps, a hook and a pair of tweezers. Further on, on the adjacent table, coloured vials and a set of scales awaited their turn.
'Do we know if he had any family?' asked the doctor, spreading the ribs apart with the retractor until the body sounded like a piece of furniture creaking. 'Because if no one claims him, we'll put him in the mass grave'—his tone was as matter-of-fact as that of a merchant discussing the price of grain. "We don't want him to

spoil our *Hogmanay*[2] , do we, Malcolm?" he winked at him.
Fraser glanced at him sideways. He wondered, just for a moment, if it might not be better to accept it as it was: as a case with no answer.
Deep down, he reproached himself for the indifference he was showing. Lately, he had settled into simmering away in his own particular misfortune.

Meanwhile, Lyle, for his part, leaned over the open chest. He felt the pericardial sac and extracted the heart with a slow movement. He held it aloft, as if he wanted that piece of flesh to confess something to him. From Fraser's perspective, the coroner adopted a posture, as he weighed the heart, that reminded him of Shakespeare's famous soliloquy. He smiled.

He placed the organ on the enamel tray with a *plop* that sounded… all too human.
"Curious…" he murmured, frowning. "No hypertrophy, nor any visible injury. Not even signs of

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2 *Scottish New Year's celebration, famous in Edinburgh for its fireworks, music and rituals such as first-footing.*

exertion. I'd say it's as if his heart had decided to stop beating before he died."

Fraser felt a chill run down his legs. He glanced up the stairs to see if the door had been left open.

"And the strange thing about these incisions," added Lyle, pointing at the wounds as if tracing an invisible map in the air, "is that there was hardly any bleeding. If he'd been alive, this would have been a bloodbath. But like this…" he paused, "it looks as though they were made after he was no longer with us."

"He wasn't, what?" asked Fraser, crossing his arms and legs and rolling his eyes. They'd known each other for years and he knew when the doctor was about to get esoteric.

The coroner didn't reply straight away. He lifted the corpse's chin with two fingers and muttered:

"Look at that expression… clenched jaws, dilated pupils. We've seen them before, Malcolm… remember? This sort of expression was what the comrades we found dead in that bloody war had." He looked at him expectantly.

The inspector remained silent. What had happened to them in that remote place was something that eluded his

analytical mind and which he preferred to bury—albeit without much success—in oblivion.

A series of drops fell from the rusty pipe on the ceiling, bounced off the tiles and joined the trickle of water disappearing down the drain. Fraser shifted in his seat, not knowing what to say.

'Fear is a silent surgeon, Malcolm. It operates where no one sees… and rarely leaves a scar.'

Fraser looked down at the corpse. He didn't reply. The sweet smell of formaldehyde began to fill the room and he slowly started to doze off, dreaming of women with hair like fire.

ELEANOR "NELLY" WITHMORE

The afternoon of 23 December.

The excess of shapes and smells led one to believe, without a shadow of a doubt, that the house must be struggling to breathe.

The entire room was lined with wallpaper patterned with lyres and decapitated angels—no one knew for certain the origin of such aesthetic horror.

Down on the floor, a Persian rug covered the floorboards; it was woven with hunting scenes so faded that only a keen eye could make out what was a deer, a horse or a dog.

Above the fireplace—unlit despite the winter—a colonial ancestor watched over from another century. From the ceiling hung curtains draped in a fabric resembling black velvet, with crimson trimmings.

The room was suffused with the scent of lilies, West African gardenias and French musk sprayed onto embroidered cushions.

In the centre of the room stood a round table, surrounded by oak chairs and laid out for the séance: black lace, a bell and a bowl of 'moon water'.

In Edinburgh, spiritualism had won the hearts of its inhabitants, from the kitchens of the lower classes to the drawing rooms of queens.

Not long before, Mr Daniel Dunglas Home had levitated tables before dukes, and even Queen Victoria—or so the gossip went—admitted to having attended 'experiments'.

The whole city seemed enchanted by the idea of believing, or wanting to believe.

Mrs Weatherby, a meticulous hostess and the widow of a merchant—one who never returned from Calcutta—had arranged every detail with almost obsessive precision.

To entertain her guests, she had given centre stage to Miss Eleanor Withmore who, dressed in midnight blue, acted as the hostess's companion: the widow paraded her before her friends like a dangerous talisman.

There in the centre, seated at the table, Miss Withmore's calm demeanour filled the room. None of the guests spoke to her; they all knew what she did outside these gatherings.

The ladies avoided looking her in the eye.

The gentlemen did not know how to meet her gaze.

She, however, smiled faintly, as if the offensive comments being whispered were slights directed at strangers.

When everyone was seated around her, Withmore rolled up her sleeves slightly and, leaning back in her chair, spoke.

'Is there anyone among those present who truly wishes to speak… with the beyond?' she asked, weighing each syllable as she looked them in the eye.

The whole room held its breath.

Timid hands went up.

A compendium of grandmothers lost in distant mists, cousins lost overseas and the odd ex-husband with unfinished business began to appear to answer the audience's questions.

Miss Withmore closed her eyes at the questions and answered without gestures or theatrics:

"He's not here."

"He doesn't want to come."

"Someone else… is answering for him."

A few nervous laughs amidst sighs of relief.

It was all harmless. Even comical.

Until it wasn't.

First there was a creak. Then, the light cast by the candles in the candelabra seemed to start beating like a racing heart. The embroidered tablecloth billowed, rising a foot off the table.

Eleanor blinked once, twice.

As if a puppeteer were pulling invisible strings, she was suddenly yanked from her chair onto the table. Up there, she crawled on all fours around the table with slow, undulating movements, looking the guests in the eye whilst her dress seemed to sway with a life of its own.

It slid down, leaving her shoulders and part of her chest exposed. The guests recoiled in their chairs: frightened, fascinated.

Several ladies stifled a scream and the gentlemen did not know whether to look or close their eyes. They were spellbound.

Then she spoke.

But that voice… it wasn't hers.

"How well-dressed you all are," she said in a broken voice, "… for a dinner with the dead."

The guests looked at one another in confusion.

"All of you," she continued, "play with names that do not belong to you; you have forgotten… our sacrifice. In your homes the fire lies forgotten; —Eleanor's hair came loose of its own accord and began to dance like a sea of flames—, you have offered us neither bread nor salt for decades.

The temperature inside the house dropped sharply.

She turned her head with a sharp movement, fixing her gaze on the guests.

"The hooves of our horses can already be heard." —her face was less than a foot from one of the guests, who was livid with terror— "When you see us, your heads

will already be rolling on the ground and your souls will have joined our ranks."

For a brief moment, Eleanor Withmore composed herself as if waking from a bad dream.
No one dared utter a word; in the background, the grandfather clock, silent throughout the day, struck thirteen times.
The medium, still on the table, arched her body; a crack was heard in her spine, like dry wood snapping.
She began to rise towards the ceiling, as if the invisible puppeteer controlling her were hoisting her by a string tied to her chest; her arms hung limply at her sides and her palms began to bleed.
The attendees recoiled in horror; one stumbled over his own chair and fell to the floor.
The lights went out and the table split in two in the darkness.

A shot fired from the side briefly illuminated the faces of the audience and part of the room.

When the lights came back on, Eleanor was standing on the floor. Her hands were clean. Unharmed. She had completely regained her composure.

Widow Weatherby stood beside her, pale, staring at the small bullet hole in the opposite wall of the drawing room; on the other side, Mr Hargrove was still holding a small revolver, its barrel still smoking.

'Darling,' she said, the colour returning to her cheeks, 'I've told you not to bring that sort of thing into my house.' Her scolding tone was feigned, as if she wanted to play down the matter.

"I… I'm so sorry, really," said Mr Hargrove, flustered, as he put the small revolver back in his jacket pocket. "It's just that it all felt so real…"

Someone laughed nervously, as if the tension needed to escape through some crack.

'How did you do that?' A woman in a lavender dress stared at the broken table, as if she were trying to find some hidden mechanism. 'It was marvellous, truly.'

"Not even Mr Dunglas himself could have done better, my dear," suggested another of the guests, a gentleman with a perfectly waxed moustache. "It was brilliant. Bravo!"

After a while, little by little, the guests began to leave, satisfied—they agreed—that it had all been a brilliant performance; a spectacle to entertain.

Once the two of them were alone in the corridor, the widow turned to Eleanor.

'What on earth happened, Nelly?' She didn't seem angry, but amused.

"I really don't know, madam," she replied. "Something I didn't invite has slipped into the session."

"Well, thank them if you see them again. I'll be the talk of the town at these parties." She winked at her.

A short, plump man, dressed in a black butler's uniform—an immaculate frock coat, a cloth waistcoat with gold buttons and white gloves—approached the women with an envelope in his hand.

Mrs Weatherby took the envelope with a distracted gesture

"Thank you, Mr Pitts, you may take your leave. Here you are, Nelly. Don't spend it all at once." She gave her a knowing smile.

Eleanor made her way towards the door. Before leaving, she paused and turned her head, looking at the widow.

'By the way… tell Mr Pitts to come up tomorrow to check the clock in the drawing room.'

"Why's that?" she raised her eyebrows.

"It struck thirteen times at midnight tonight."

"That clock's been silent for over five years, my dear."

Eleanor looked out at the empty street, covered in a blanket of snow.

'Well, today… it's started speaking again,' she murmured to herself.

The door closed behind her, softly, with elegance.

Eleanor was left alone with her thoughts—*she had to find out what had happened today*—as she made her way back to the brothel.

In the distance, in an alleyway near the *Lily of the Glen*, a dog howled in the mist.

CHIEF INSPECTOR LACHLAN FAWKES

Dusk on 23 December.

In Chief Inspector Lachlan Fawkes's office, through the small window, the mist crept across the glass like a sentient

creature, searching for a gap to slip through. There, in the distance, one could hear the carriages on North Bridge and the bell of Calton Jail marking the long-awaited end of the shift.

Fraser slumped into the wooden chair in front of the desk. It was a mess of papers, letters with haughty letterheads, clippings from *The Scotsman* and th[3] , and objects… many objects that only Fawkes seemed to know how to find when he needed them.

It seems incredible that anyone could find order in this chaos, thought Fraser.

"Well?" Inspector Lachlan Fawkes exhaled the smoke from his oak pipe, filling the room with a faint scent of cloves and black pepper.

He was sprawled back in his armchair; he didn't seem to be in any hurry. In fact, he never was; curiously, that was what made him a good detective: he analysed everything from different angles before making up his mind.

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[3] *Newspaper founded in 1817 in Edinburgh.*

The complete opposite of his protégé, Malcolm Fraser, who was guided more by an instinct inherited from who knows where than by patience when tackling a case.

'Well… in short, Dr Lyle says he died of fright,' said Fraser, sounding more weary than convinced.

"Fear?" He raised an eyebrow above the curling smoke. "Aha… and the stab wounds, were they courtesy of panic itself?"

Fraser shrugged slightly.

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you, boss."

"No," he said, tapping the pipe against the palm of his hand to knock out the ash. "But this does."

He took a bottle with no label from his cabinet and poured into two mismatched glasses. The liquid was the colour of amber.

"To the Christmas spirit," he grumbled. "And to your future promotion and my release," he concluded.

Fraser took the glass, unbuttoning the collar of his coat.

'If no one claims the body… if no family turns up…' he paused, searching for a decent way to put it, 'I'd let it go,

you know? I don't feel like playing Mr Bucket[4] at this time of year.' The image of his marriage flashed before his eyes.

"Who?"

"Forget it, boss," and he drank.

Fawkes watched him over the rim of his glass.

—Between reform-minded councillors, liberal newspapers and this time of year… one more dead body in Cowgate won't keep anyone in New Town awake at night, he said.

He swirled the liquor in the glass; he looked at it as if searching for an answer inside.

"This city…" he continued. "The Royal, the toilets[5] … it'll all be dissected. They're kicking half of *Old Town* out and still have the nerve to call it a clean-up."

He drank it in one gulp. The sound of the liquid could be heard as it went down his throat.

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[4] *Inspector Bucket, a character from Bleak House (1853), is considered the first professional detective in English fiction and a direct predecessor of Holmes.*

[5] *In Edinburgh in 1869, the closes were narrow medieval alleys, damp and poorly ventilated; they were usually overcrowded and associated with working-class life and poverty.*

Fraser turned the glass in his hand, lost in thought. Fawkes spoke as he always did: lucid… and, *damn it, he was right*. As far as he was concerned, Fawkes was Edinburgh. Rough, blackened. When he was gone… what would be left?

'Well,' he said, standing up. 'See you tomorrow, Chief.'

"See you tomorrow, future Chief Inspector Fraser," replied Fawkes, saluting him with a mocking military gesture.

"Well, sarcasm certainly suits you, doesn't it."

He crossed the corridor, leaving Fawkes behind, who was also beginning to pack up. In the police station, the gas lamps flickered like sick eyelids. The smell of leather and damp followed him to the door.

And out there… the Edinburgh night; an old friend—blurred, damp, of coal and harbour. In its streets, the streetlamps cast long shadows, broken and reassembled to the rhythm of the wind pushing the fog. On the walls, the eyes of the houses, always crusted with damp, attended to the wishes of their inhabitants.

He descended the stone staircase, taking care not to fall. He stopped.

She smiled.

He was going to miss Fawkes. No, not just him.

She was going to miss a way of being in the world that, like the smoke from that pipe, was already beginning to dissipate.

LADY ESMÉ LILLIAN FRASER

The night of 23 December 1869

Lady Esmé Lillian Harroway de Fraser had sent Mrs Kenning away some time ago.

The old woman—a taciturn Irish widow—walked away wrapped in her moss-green cloak, smelling of camphor and vinegar, without looking back. She never stayed out after dusk; no woman walked alone through the alleys of Canongate. The stories about body snatchers, and those circulating in the parishes, did nothing to help matters.

Lady Esmé was clearing the table when she heard the latch.

'Hello, dear Esmé. It's me.' Fraser's voice, worn. As if the whole day were hanging from his shoulders.

She looked up. She smoothed her hair—blonde, almost white under the lamp—and gathered it into her usual bun with ritual precision.

She appeared in the hall carrying a plate of fruit; she forced a smile that was meant to be sincere.

"Hello, darling. How was work?" she said, setting the plate—a family heirloom—on the round hall table.

The living room was also full of heirlooms. A Georgian sideboard that smelled of turpentine; a clock that had marked the passing of time for three generations of Harroways. Ah, and the damask curtains, ravaged by time. Well, thought Fraser, *a living house… but with a weak pulse.*

The inspector leaned in to kiss her. She, graceful, stepped forward to take his raincoat. The kiss never happened. She hung the garment on the coat rack. A hollow ache settled for a moment in Fraser's chest.

'Shall we have dinner?' she asked, without looking at him. The ash-coloured dress trailed behind her as if hesitating to follow.

Fraser leafed through *The Scotsman*, which lay next to the plate of studded oranges.

'How was your day? Did you go out?' he asked, trying to piece together the mosaic of home life.

"Not much," she replied. "A few errands, as usual."

"No, if you don't mind…" Fraser lowered his voice, letting the sentence trail off, swept away by an inexplicable sense of guilt.

She smiled with an audible effort.

"Look what Mrs Kenning has left us. Her grandmother's recipe. Passed down from mother to daughter on her wedding day…" A brief silence. "How lucky."

On the table lay the *hodge-podge*[6] , apples with honey, black bread, and the harsh 'mass' wine. All very humble, but, on Fraser's salary, almost a feast.

At times like this, Fraser wondered how the daughter of someone with so much power could have ended up with someone like him. Far from feeling lucky, he found himself locked in an incomprehensible cage of his own making.

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[6] Soup or stew, usually made with diced lamb

‘I wish my mother had taught me to cook dishes like this…’ he said, almost in a whisper. ‘Perhaps then you’d love me more.’

Fraser looked up, taken aback by that revelation. Sometimes he thought she was trying to make his life miserable on purpose.

‘I do love you, Esmé. It’s just that I don’t understand you sometimes. I hate seeing you languish at home; it makes me feel guilty. I’ve offered to pull strings so you can go to university or join a book club, if you wish. And, if you don’t trust me, your father can achieve the impossible.” He moved closer to the table. “In Edinburgh,” he continued, “there are young ladies even at anatomy lectures. If you want to get out of this ‘castle’”—he gestured with his napkin—“tell me how, and I’ll be delighted to help you.”

‘Forgive me, dear. You know I get melancholic in the evenings… Don’t worry about me.’ A cry for help echoed inside her.

They were dining at opposite ends of the table. As the cutlery moved, the table seemed to grow, threatening to become a dark ocean, whilst Fraser’s words—bridges

thrown out at random in an attempt to reach the other side—sank before reaching the opposite bank.

It all began on that fateful wedding night. They slept in separate rooms. They had never touched each other again, nor even mentioned it. He accepted it, perhaps out of love… or out of that resignation that smacks of duty, of acknowledging one's place.

The clock in the drawing room struck the hour with a sharp chime. Once again, something deep inside Lady Esmé cried out to be released, but she suppressed it at once.

LILY OF THE GLEN

Late evening of 24 December.

In Leith, the harbour was teeming with life: life there was like a stew of ingredients rising and falling to the rhythm of the boil, swirling, clumping together, separating or sinking to never return.

Carriages crammed with barrels—rum and herring for the tables of the notables—circled up and down, whilst in the doorways ragged shadows, ‘ ’ jostled tooth and nail for the warm scraps dispensed by the charitable parishes.

‘I hate Christmas!’ growled Buck. A mass of ebony-coloured muscle guarding the door of *the Lily of the Glen*, the most notorious, eccentric—and profitable—brothel in all of Leith.

It had once been a tea room for widows; now, under the command of Madame Vernet, it was a temple where sin was traded with salon manners.

Buck, the doorman, once a docker in the Bonny Bay, had fallen from grace following an accident that left him with a lifelong limp. He accepted his role as doorman without resentment and, in his spare moments, played the part of a cheap philosopher: he would wander the pubs, singing or drinking with other ‘enlightened’ patrons.

Outside, the snow was beginning to fall heavily, promising to cover everything with a bridal veil before nightfall.

‘I don’t know if it’s the cold or human folly, but this time of year…’ He spat decisively into the spittoon, whilst peering out at the street through the sliding peephole. ‘…I’ve never

liked it. And with this storm, on Christmas Eve, what can I say? Not even Christ himself— —is going to come here. Mrs Vernet would do well to give us the night off… by Christ's nails!

"Ha!" came a sing-song voice from the inner corridor of the brothel, drawing closer to the entrance. "You're certainly a Christian when it comes to that, aren't you, black man?"

Eleanor Withmore appeared barefoot in the corridor, her long hair cascading over her shoulders like a raging fire. She wore a corset embroidered in green and gold that seemed to hug her small breasts. A crimson skirt, slit up the side, revealed the white curves of her legs.

"Thanks to good old Mr Dickens, we can celebrate this marvellous occasion," she continued with a frank smile on her subtly childlike face. In contrast to the chill emanating from the street door, the warmth of her body seemed to evaporate the icy air. "Don't be a Scrooge,[7] ," she said, resting her hand on the big man's shoulder. "Besides, being here gives you an excuse to be with Maggie; no one will say a word if you slip away for a while, you know what I mean..."

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[7] *Ebenezer Scrooge, the protagonist of* A Christmas Carol *(Charles Dickens, 1843), embodies the miserly businessman redeemed by charity and the Christmas spirit.*

she winked at him, sticking the tip of her tongue out from the corner of her mouth.

"Apart from the day off, I don't see much charm in this day," he grumbled, adjusting his coat, as if that could ward off anything other than the cold. "And don't give me any of that nativity scene and peace stuff..."

"You? Not even with that, or the turkey, or the mistletoe; I wouldn't dream of it, you insensitive brute," added Nell, amused. "But the Christmas spirit does exist. Mind you, in its own way…"

She leaned towards him and spoke in a tone that sounded as if she were reciting a spell:

'Because now… at this time of year, everyone thinks the same. Souls, even the most tainted ones like yours, align themselves with something older than winter for a common purpose. And that, that gives us licence to live another year just as filthy as the last, my friend.'

Buck chuckled under his breath.

"I always forget how strange you are, Nell. And with that hellish hair… no wonder only eccentrics come looking for you."

He pulled a sooty cone out of a large pocket in his raincoat. He held it out to the girl.

"Chestnuts. To warm that unbearable spirit of yours."

"Thanks, big guy," she replied, accepting the cone as if it were a tribute. "And don't forget: the eccentrics pay better. One day I'll make a grand exit… maybe I'll take you along as my porter."

A mocking remark was her farewell as she returned to the stairs in the lobby, slipping through the dimness of the corridor.

When she reached the lobby that divided the building into two floors, she heard in the distance, from the staff kitchen downstairs, the murmur of the other girls handing out tea and leftover cake. Every now and then, one of them would peek out through the back door and leave a few coins wrapped in paper for the kids on the quay who came, year after year, for 'the night ladies' Christmas treats'.

For a moment she thought she heard something upstairs; she stopped, everything seemed to be silent.

Upstairs, apart from Madame Vernet's private room, there was only one client, who, moreover, was waiting for her.

Eleanor was about to climb the stairs when she suddenly felt a chill. She shuddered, but the sensation was immediately forgotten as she realised she'd forgotten the ropes; her chatter with Buck had distracted her. Resigned, she turned on her bare feet to go and fetch them.



Meanwhile, young Constable Doves stood frozen in front of the door of *the Lily of the Glen*. If they didn't open up, he'd end up like a snowman. *The worst fate for a policeman*, he thought. His cousin Moira came to mind, offering him comfort.

He considered ringing the bell—the door handle was frozen solid and he didn't want to touch it again—when the wooden peephole slid open and a pair of eyes bore into him.

"The second moon?" said the doorman from inside in a deep voice. The question sounded more like a password than a greeting.

Doves swallowed hard, realising that the cold had robbed him of even the strength to speak.

"Er…" he began. "I'm Constable Doves. We've received a report at the station about an incident that occurred tonight in this bar…"—he corrected himself immediately—"in this establishment, sir. I've been asked to come and check it out."

He was rubbing his hands together as he spoke. The officer's clothes were completely white with snow. Buck had to stifle a laugh at the sight of the little mounds piling up on the officer's shoulders and cap; he was certainly starting to look like a snowman.

"Nothing's happened here, little bird. Go back and get some shelter, officer, or I'll catch a cold."

Doves replied sharply:

"We'll both end up covered in shit if I go back empty-handed and Chief Inspector Lachlan Fawkes has to come out here on Christmas Eve… don't you think?"

No sooner had he finished the sentence than he was taken aback. Had he said that out loud to what was surely a hulk standing guard outside the brothel? *Perhaps the cold has short-circuited the filter between my head and my tongue*, he thought. Or perhaps I simply didn't want, under any circumstances, to stay out there any longer, exposed to the elements.

The peephole snapped shut. A silence, brief but deadly… and the door—without a creak, without warning—swinged open to the officer with a blast of heat.



Eleanor was crouched in front of the opening of a false panel fitted at the foot of the stairs. Inside was a wooden box that seemed to contain the arsenal of a mad hatter: ropes of various thicknesses, pliers with padded jaws, small metal counterweights. She gathered them up.

Back on the stairs, she heard the door open. Buck must have been receiving a visitor: a lonely widower who preferred the shadows of the Lily to the pain of seeing bright family dinners in other people's windows. Eleanor thought these men were driven by society's etiquette and courtesies. She knew of sons, brothers-in-law or brothers who passed each other in those corridors without looking, as if ignoring the other could erase their shared guilt.

Distracted, she pulled down her bodice for a moment to free her breasts; out of curiosity, she wanted to try hanging small weights from her nipples to see how it felt. Up there, as she climbed, watching the weights swaying to the rhythm

of her hips, her thoughts were interrupted by the hurried sound of swift, desperate footsteps rushing down the stairs.

Madame Vernet appeared before her, covered in blood, her dark curls clinging to her face like wet tentacles, and without giving her time to utter a word, she lunged at her, grabbing her by the shoulders with unusual force.

"What have you done to him, you fool?" she hissed through clenched teeth, shaking her.

Without waiting for an answer, she dragged her down the stairs by the hand.



Isadora Vernet had poured herself a drink. Sitting in the dim light of her study, she set the glass of absinthe down on a blackened mirror with a weary gesture. She delicately placed a slotted spoon on the rim of the glass; on top of it, a sugar cube. She poured in ice-cold water drop by drop. She watched as the green liquid turned milky, cloudy, *like a man's judgement*, she thought.

She took a slow, generous sip —*to ward off the cold*— she told herself.

'We won't make half a guinea today, I can see it coming,' she muttered to herself. 'I'm about to tell the girls to stay in their rooms if they wish.

She opened the false drawer in the writing desk, where she kept the book of reservations and the master key, and consulted it. That night there was only one name: Sir Alistair Baine, an old devotee of Nell's. A gentleman with a penchant for games that would have made even the most tolerant clergyman blush: according to Nelly, he liked to be suspended upside down, like a gutted deer, with weights hanging from the places where pain becomes a promise and pleasure a threat. Nelly was an expert in such matters, and he had made her his personal tormentor.

A fleeting thought struck her. The rest of the girls would be downstairs, in the kitchen, devouring 'their' larder instead of lining 'their' pockets with guineas — she felt disgust for them; she felt guilty for it.

No, Christmas was never a good business, she thought bitterly. And even less so since that second-rate writer had consecrated it as a shrine to family.

'Stupid Dickens!' she toasted aloud. 'I hope the turkey chokes you and you die.'

She drank the rest of the glass in one gulp.

A faint crash in a room at the back, near the staircase, made her spin round: broken glass?

With more resignation than anger, Isadora made her way to the only room occupied by Nelly and Sir Alistair.

"I swear," she muttered, "if that twisted bastard's broken something, I'll let Buck loose on him to give him a beating…" She thought better of it. "No, he might actually like it."

She smiled at her own thought with a cynicism she no longer knew whether to regard as a shield or her moral ruin.

When she arrived, she checked that the door wasn't locked—an unbreakable rule for the safety of her girls—and entered without hesitation, believing that, at this stage, nothing could surprise her.

How wrong she was.

The room was a *sanctum-sanctorum* modelled on a medieval dungeon. Padded iron hooks were embedded in the stone; pulleys concealed within gilded mouldings; a carved wooden rack bearing inscriptions that looked like prayers. Whips,

leather masks and artificial limbs made of polished wood and ivory were scattered about the room.

The air smelled of incense, iron and something else, indefinable.

And there, in the middle, on the floor… Sir Alistair Baine.

Face up. Gutted like a fish. He was still gasping desperately, as if trying to bite the air he could no longer swallow. His eyes met hers first, terrified, and gradually faded, his gaze drifting towards the ceiling and beyond. She, stunned and motionless, watched them freeze: crystalline and hollow, like broken mirrors that no longer reflected any image.

It was then that Madame Vernet noticed the window open inwards.

Broken glass covered the floor and the aristocrat's entrails, whilst the blood slowly claimed its space, black and viscous.

Instinctively, the madame tried to leap towards the window, searching the street for the face of an assailant. In her mind she leapt; her old body, not so much; she stumbled.

The impact sent her crashing face-first onto the corpse. The viscous warmth of the entrails cushioned her fall; the pale

satin of her dress absorbed the blood like a thirsty man finding an oasis, soaking the lace right down to the hem.

'You piece of shit!' she roared, kneeling, her fingers slipping in blood and guts. 'Look what you've done to my dress!... No, you've probably died enjoying yourself like a pig…'

The sentence hung in the air, broken, because a thought burst in with the violence of a lash: *Nell?*

Panic made her spring to her feet. She searched desperately, scanning every corner, every shadow, hoping to find a small, lifeless body. It wasn't there. A brief flicker of relief comforted her: her investment must be alive. Almost immediately, panic seized her again.

Buck sprang to her mind as a source of salvation. Rolling up her skirt, she went out in search of him, bumping into Nelly herself halfway there, who, smiling, was climbing the stairs with her corset undone, playing with small weights dangling from her nipples.



'It's freezing out there, sir,' said the young agent Doves, coming in and rubbing his hands together.

"It's this bloody period piece," Buck growled at him. "I can't wait for it to be over already… Well, what's the news?"

"Well, it turns out…" began the young man, peeling off layer after layer; the porter thought he looked like an onion, "that tonight a sir… damn it!" He glanced at the ceiling for a moment. "I can't remember his name right now… Anyway, the man came to the station saying that here"—he nodded towards the interior of the building—"something had happened which he described, word for word, as 'a settling of scores'." I went to tell Inspector Fawkes, who hadn't left yet… but he… well, he brushed me off, saying he was already on his way home and not to bother him with nonsense.

"To protect and serve!" Buck laughed sarcastically, accompanying Doves down the corridor towards the lobby.

'I must tell you, sir, that the truth is the bloke who came in was acting strangely. Absent-minded, I'd say. Or, more likely… drunk. Quite normal at this time of year, mind you, don't you think? Well, be that as it may, the inspector said to sort it out myself and that, if I saw it really was an emergency, I should notify Inspector Fraser. He's my line manager, you see?

"Good heavens, lad," Buck interrupted, stopping almost at the end of the path; he was beginning to like the lad. "If you want my advice: for a policeman, you talk too much; let the others do the talking."

Doves blushed to the tips of his ears.

"Thanks, sir, I'll do that."

They were about to step out into the lobby when they came face to face with two women.

One was covered in blood as she dragged along another, much younger woman, two small weights dangling from her pink nipples and an ambiguous smile on her face.

Doves' eyes and mouth fell open, unable to utter a word. His eyes sought an answer from Buck.

Buck rolled his eyes.

A restrained blow from his fist landed with a sharp crack, like thunder in a closed room.

Doves fell to the floor without uttering a sound, at Buck's feet.

"What a disgusting night," he muttered.

THE FRASER HOUSE

The night of 24 December 1869

Being alone in that huge house turned out—not unexpectedly—to be a blessing, thought the inspector.

One does not usually admit to the comfort of silence when guilt sets in, and even less so when that silence is so thick you could almost spread it on bread.

Fraser made his way through the corridors, and the echo of his footsteps, far from being a premonition of some intrusion, restored to him for a moment the illusion that a long-lost domestic peace might still exist.

That his wife, Lillian, was far away—safe at Longniddry, that family villa on the coast, where the gardens bow to the salt and the mist—was a relief he did not dare acknowledge, even in the twilight.

In that immense mansion, the Harroways lived in a mausoleum disguised as a stately home: its bottle-green shutters, arched high, reminded him of the sleepless eyelids

of a toad. The hedges surrounding that castle— of Otranto[8] —were several storeys high, always brimming with lilacs which, by a twist of fate or a spell, bloomed regardless of the season.

His wife's surname, Harroway, was steeped in history and ambition, carrying echoes of Livonia, a distant land in Eastern Europe—so it seemed—where pacts sealed on snowy steppes had generated the fortune the family still held.

More than once he found himself justifying his wife's coldness by the strict upbringing she had received from her parents. Cold, always aloof. Although he did not understand the radical change in the character of the woman who, not so long ago, had been his fiancée, now his wife.

A dog trainer from East Lothian, Hamish Calder—he thought he recalled—once told him that in captivity dogs adopted survival behaviours and that, after being rescued, it took them about three months to reveal their true nature, weighed down by their past experiences. He imagined Lyle

[8] A work by Horace Walpole, considered the first Gothic novel. Set in a cursed medieval fortress. Widely read during the 19th century, its influence endured in horror and mystery literature.

suggesting he confess it to his wife: that he compared the to a dog. *Separation guaranteed,* he thought, amused.

His joy was short-lived: he remembered that, barring any unforeseen circumstances, tomorrow, without fail, he would have to sit at the family table in that very spot. His role was that of the awkward guest, an intruder tolerated out of social obligation. Nothing more.

In the absence of servants, he cleared the tray—Mrs Kenning had left early, leaving that scent of camphor behind. Something in that woman's character seemed to be shaped with military precision: the legacy of strict governesses and blows from a ruler. *Surely*, he thought, *a bitter loneliness*. One thing was clear: the day his wife walked through the door, Mrs Kenning would shut it behind them both.

He walked into the living room and, passing the mantelpiece, looked for the Christmas bonus envelope. It wasn't there. Mrs Kenning had collected her Christmas pay: ten shillings; fair and generous for someone who looked after him better than his wife and, even so, someone to whom he mattered even less.

He settled into the sofa, the backrest creaking under his weight, ready to face the austere but sufficient supper the maid had left for him. On the table, beneath the cloth, a cold piece of turkey, bread hardened by the dry air of the pantry, and a redcurrant pudding covered by a crumpled cloth peeped out .

He tied his napkin and lifted his fork; he wasn't sure whether he was hungrier or sleepier.

He had barely pricked the pudding when the door knocker clattered in the night. A knock at that hour was always a bad omen.

He hurried to open the door. The snow swept in brazenly, piling up rapidly in the hallway.

'Constable Doves, may I ask what has happened to you?' asked Fraser, pointing at the young constable's battered face with his fork, as if drawing a diagram in the air.

Young Doves, stiff as a board, his face contorted with cold and embarrassment, stood motionless in the doorway.

"Nothing to worry about, Mr Fraser. I didn't mean to disturb you, but… it's important that you come with me."

He glanced furtively into the house, looking for signs that he had interrupted something.

"Don't worry, lad. Besides, you have no idea how much I needed this. Thank you very much."

'Thank you very much?' He looked first at his boss and then, puzzled, at the hostile outdoors.

"Sir," he continued, turning to look at the inspector again, "you should come with me urgently to *the Lily of the Glen*, sir." He emphasised it again, lest the journey have been in vain.

LILY OF THE GLEN

The night of 24 December,

Snow was falling haphazardly onto the city's cobbled streets; it looked as though the sky had decided to shake

out the dirtiest sheets it had over that corner of the earth.

Fraser, wrapped in the coarse, "[9] " *loden* of his coat, trudged on, now truly cursing the hours and the night; beside him, Doves, who had already grown somewhat accustomed to the storm, walked with ease.

Amidst the white waves of mist, illuminated by an orange lantern, the doorway of *the Lily of the Glen* appeared, there, amidst the blizzard, like the lighthouse that helps sailors avoid perishing beneath the waves.

Once in front of the gate, they knocked. Buck opened the door just enough to examine the new arrivals.

The look of growing concern that the doorman first directed at Doves — whose cheekbone bore the fresh mark of a misunderstanding between them — and then at the inspector, Chief Inspector Fawkes's right-hand man, was enough of a silent confession.

"Buck…" said Fraser, as he entered the premises, "bad habits, or did you just want to warm up?"

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[9] A thick, waterproof wool fabric with a matt finish, originating in Austria; used in men's coats and travelling cloaks during the Victorian era.

Buck, true to the economy of words previously recommended, chose to remain silent. Nothing was to be gained by arguing with authority.

Together they crossed the carpeted corridor, with Fraser and Doves in the lead, followed by a resigned Buck. The scent—a blend of heliotrope, lavender and undoubtedly imported essences—permeated the rooms.

The reception room was a *horror vacui*, a ver[10] d with recessed brass wall lights. A large crimson carpet ran down the corridor from the entrance to the hall. At the far end, a three-panel screen with Japanese motifs stood next to some black iron coat racks holding a single coat and hat. Behind the screen, quite openly, a corridor led down to the lower floor: the kitchens and the girls' quarters.

Madame Vernet was waiting for them, flanked by two green velvet armchairs, guardians of a small table where a little clock ticked away the hours. She wore a burgundy dressing gown to conceal—not very successfully—the blood-soaked garment peeking out from beneath it,

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10 "Fear of emptiness"; in Victorian aesthetics, a tendency to fill all spaces with ornamentation or detail

which . Behind her stood six girls: some trembling, others bored of feigning horror.

No one could have foreseen that, from that night onwards, Madame Vernet would be known in Edinburgh as the Red Empress.

'A dreary night for visitors, Inspector Fraser,' she said, tilting her head slightly, with a smile of sharp edges. 'Or have you decided to come seeking redemption amongst sinners?

'Well, yes, Madame Vernet; as it happens, that is precisely what I had in mind. Although, far from seeking redemption, I have come in search of answers. If I may ask, where is Mr…?' He waved a hand in the air.

As no one answered, he exaggerated the gesture whilst pacing in front of the girls with a look of feigned anticipation.

"The gentleman is none other than Sir Baine, Inspector," said Madame Vernet, bored by the charade.

'And what did this fine gentleman do for a living?' He was about to start his pantomime all over again when the landlady interrupted him.

"Sir Alistair Baine, my dear Inspector, was the owner of *The Thistle Compagnie of Maritime Goods*. And, before you ask, it is a company that trades in spices and textiles, mostly from Ceylon and Java," she paused, glancing for a second at the coffered ceiling, "as well as owning three merchant ships." She smiled, pleased with her memory.

"Memorable," her eyes tried to take in the scene discreetly as she paced up and down. "And is he…?" she left the sentence hanging.

Madame Vernet pointed to the staircase with a brief gesture.

The party began to climb.

Before reaching the door, the future Red Empress stopped.

"I want you to know, Inspector, that there are things even the most generous clients won't pay for. Not even someone like him."

The door was barely ajar.

Inside, the air was thicker, laden with a metallic stench: blood, yes, but also a rancid sweetness, a very

recognisable, un d odour that Inspector Fraser could not place; it made him uneasy.

Sir Alistair Baine lay half-twisted, flung onto the floor of the room, partially covered by the snow that was blowing in—rather insistently—through the shattered window.

Fraser froze the moment; in his mind, everything slowed down: the snowflakes which, as they settled on the pool of blood, turned scarlet, forming tiny islands that dissolved into the soaked carpet; the cold, which had transformed the entire room into a frozen sanctuary, with no apparent signs of a struggle; the silence, save for the whistling of the wind, which blew in through the broken window like an unwelcome voice crying out to be heard.

For a few seconds, he didn't move.

With measured steps, taking care not to touch anything significant, he approached the window; he looked down. At the end, a street, black, snow-covered. He surveyed the surroundings: everything was empty, not a soul in sight.

'How high up is it?' he muttered, thinking aloud.

His own breath clouded his face for a moment.

Doves, after what had happened to him the other day, decided to stay outside. From the doorway, he consulted his notebook:

'About seven metres, Inspector… perhaps more,' he said proudly.

"Another impossible window…" muttered Fraser.

He returned to the present, rubbing his frozen fingers. He turned, looking at the landlady.

"Was Sir Baine alone? Are we missing anyone else?"

Madame Vernet tilted her head.

"Yes, to the first question, Inspector… As for the second, the answer will be up shortly."

"Why isn't she here right now?" insisted Fraser, who was already beginning to get fed up with the madame.

"He is… pulling himself together," replied the madame, with a hint of annoyance, glancing at her dress beneath her dressing gown. "And since we're on the subject of propriety, I shall retire to to correct this bloody mess. I trust you'll understand."

Without asking permission, she turned on her heel and left, leaving behind an invisible trail of perfume. Her footsteps faded into the carpeted corridor.

Doves looked at his boss from the doorway, dismayed, unsure whether or not he should have stopped the landlady's stampede. He looked at him with a hint of anxiety; Fraser responded with a slight gesture, playing it down.

"Well…" he sighed, "Buck, please go and fetch the person we're missing. Tell him to come up."

He finished his sentence as he knelt beside the body, scrutinising the wounds in the dim light.

"There's no need," said a clear voice behind him.

The inspector turned his head and felt a sharp blow to his chest.

There she was.

Framed by the dim light of the corridor and the ghostly blue glow of the snow, the figure of Eleanor Withmore seemed to float. The same woman who had watched him from the street, in the shadows, days earlier, in the alleyway.

She was dressed in midnight blue velvet, *mercilessly tight-fitting*, he thought. The hem brushed against the wood as she moved and sounded like rough paper. Her figure was small; not fragile. The skin that was visible was pale. She looked like a doll imported from Paris.

Her eyes were green, with glints brought to life by the fire of the lamps. And, framing it all, her hair: a river of copper and burnt gold that fell over her shoulders with the softness of silk, breathing?, in time with the air.

That apparition, Fraser thought, was reminiscent of the angels in medieval grimoires: beautiful to the point of offence, with an insulting innocence that, in her, suggested more threat than comfort.

Fraser, his pulse racing in his stomach, gazed at her, unable to look away.

Eleanor broke the spell, stepping forward and offering him her hand, gloved in black lace.

'Eleanor. Eleanor Withmore, sir…?'

"Inspector Malcolm Fraser," he said, surprised at himself, leaning over the outstretched hand and kissing it—a mere brush. Beneath the glove, her wedding ring

weighed on him like a warning. The inspector prayed that this moment of the night would freeze, that the snow would block the doors, trapping them inside. He was surprised to find himself wishing, for the first time in years, to send it all to hell

—Well then, Inspector? —Doves' voice from outside the room brought him back to reality. It was the second time she'd done this to him.

Fraser found his voice:

"Doves, go to the station and get someone to come and collect the body. If they can make it here in this weather," he added, glancing at the window.

"Buck, find some planks. Anything to board up that window before the deceased turns into an ice statue… and we along with him."

The movement, the action, restored his sense of control. He avoided looking at Eleanor. Every time he did, he felt his resolve melting away, like candle wax beneath a flame…

When Doves and Buck left the room, Fraser was immediately overcome by a dizzying wave of fear. Being left alone with her was a test he hadn't anticipated.

'Well…' he ventured, seeking refuge in his profession. 'Could you explain to me what your relationship was with the deceased, Miss Withmore?

She didn't answer straight away; her eyes darted around the room, as if she were sniffing the air. Her lips curved into a childlike smile.

"An open grave. That was it. I couldn't quite place the smell that's been here since I came in… well, apart from…" she gave a slight nod towards the body.

Fraser looked at her in surprise.

"Excuse me, Miss…? Are you used to scenes like this? You don't seem… particularly fazed by the presence of your former client."

From the street, Doves could be heard stumbling and swearing in the blizzard on his way to the police station.

"Actually, yes, Inspector. My father was a forensic pathologist at a hospital in Ireland. When I was little, he'd leave me in his office during his night shifts." She

paused briefly, as if there were something behind that story she wasn't going to reveal. "You could say I learnt the smell of a diseased liver or a punctured lung before I learnt to spell my name." Even so," she lowered her voice, "one never ceases to be shocked when violent death strikes those one knows.

'And did you and the gentleman know each other from…?' she asked, not entirely wanting to know the answer.

"Here, Inspector."

"Call me Fraser, please."

She nodded, looking out of the window.

"They call me Nell here, but you can call me Eleanor," she took a step back. "I look after the… special clients. The ones who were looking for what you can't ask for out loud."

Fraser, suddenly exhausted, took the notebook out of his pocket.

"Forgive me for pressing the point, but… what exactly were you doing with the deceased, and where were you at the time of the incident?"

"Sir Baine liked…" she paused briefly, searching for the words, "to be punished. I don't know if you understand."

Fraser nodded involuntarily.

"When this happened," he pointed to the body, "I was downstairs, preparing… the necessary items for the session. I was heading to the room when I saw Mrs Vernet come down covered in blood," he emphasised the last words.

How can a woman like that resign herself to such tasks? Fraser thought. That thought hurt him more than he would have liked.

As if time knew exactly when to make an entrance, Madame Vernet appeared crossing the threshold, completely transformed. She was no longer a crimson monstrosity, but a figure of authority, clothed in a strange majesty that smelled of expensive perfume and accumulated misery. The velvet was new, and so was her gait: it was not that of a brothel-keeper, but of one who had outlived all her clients and the entire city. And then, without warning, the lights at the Lily of the Glen went out with a sudden flash.



‘Damn it all to hell!’ roared Buck from the storeroom, staring at the blackened lamps. He had been left in complete darkness in the storeroom whilst searching for the boards to cover the window. ‘Damn the night.

The planks he was holding clattered to the floor; he needed both hands to feel his way along the wall and climb the steps to the kitchen without smashing his face in.

The storeroom, which opened onto the outside via one of the building’s side walls, was dug out below the level of the house. Normally, it served as a discreet passageway for those wishing to flee the ghosts of their reputation. At this time of year, in the early hours, it was where the children collected what the ladies had left for them the night before and during *Hogmanay*.



Upstairs, Fraser spun on his heels; his hand, almost instinctively, sought the cold touch of the metal hidden beneath his coat.

For a few seconds, before his eyes adjusted to the streetlight, no one seemed to move.

'Are there any candles in this house, Mrs Vernet?' he asked.

"Perhaps in the kitchen…" she replied.

'If you'd prefer, I'll go and fetch them,' offered Eleanor, inexplicably calm.

"That, my dear, won't be necessary," cut in the madame, with a sarcasm that Fraser could not—nor did he wish to—decipher.

In the end, the three of them decided to go down together. In the hallway, the light dimmed considerably until it became invisible by the time they reached the stairs. They descended the steps, hands on the banister and feeling their way down each step, as if the floor itself might give way beneath their weight.

Downstairs in the kitchen, one of the girls, Maggie, waited alone, gazing anxiously at the door leading to the storeroom. The others had chosen to make their way to the hall in a procession, holding their candles aloft, as if they were carrying torches . Some murmured Psalm 91 under their breath.[11]

Maggie stood still, waiting for Buck. She held, fearfully, a candle already worn by time, whose dirty orange flame cast shadows as vivid as bony fingers dancing on the walls.

'What a night, eh?' she said, raising her voice in a bid for courage, but failing to find it. 'Buck?'

In her eyes, exaggerated in the flickering light, flashed the anxiety of one who had learnt the hard way that misfortune never comes alone.

His Buck was late. He was taking too long.

At last, the warehouse door opened at the far end.

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[11] In the Victorian era, and particularly in domestic and rural contexts, it was attributed with strong apotropaic significance.

"Buck…?" she whispered, her voice so fragile it dissolved into the air.

The doorman, who was just emerging from the storeroom, did not see the shadow that emerged from the darkness behind him.

A blow, sharp and forceful, split the air. Wood, jars and knives flew in a thousand directions, whilst a swift shadow snatched him up, roaring through the air until he crashed onto the kitchen table.

Maggie thought time had stopped; she watched as *her* Buck was dragged through the air onto the table. The impact was tremendous.

The doorman didn't scream: all that could be heard was the wet crunch of his spine snapping.

The Beast—it could not be called anything else—straddled him, sank its claws into his torso and, pulling them apart with force, tore him open like a sack of burlap.

Blood spattered against the walls, against the floor, against Maggie, who stood petrified. Her mind

plummeted, without a safety net, into the bottomless pit of horrors, leaving her catatonic.



Meanwhile, Fraser, Eleanor and Madame Vernet had just reached the landing, now illuminated by the girls' appearance. The candlelight outlined their faces and mouths, parted in fear.

Fraser was about to give orders when, below, at the end of the corridor leading to the kitchen, a crash—the echo of splintering wood and an animalistic scream—rumbled through the entire building.

Fraser, without a moment's hesitation, drew his revolver. He ran down the corridor and, slipping on the carpet, set about descending the stairs two at a time; Eleanor, behind him, glided along without losing his pace, with a lightness that seemed impossible in such a setting and in those skirts.

Madame Vernet, seized by an ancient fear, tried to flee up the stairs, but stumbled on the first step, her body

crashing against the banister with a muffled groan, a mixture of pain and frustration.

The girls, seeing the stampede, froze; they looked like a display of statues, unable to decide between crying or fleeing.

A gust of wind and snow lashed against the wall of the building. It seemed as though the storm was pushing against the house, as if biding its time to enter.



The Beast—gasping with Buck's mouth full—sat up. Its neck turned with a slow crack, as if its vertebrae were part of a gear mechanism adjusting itself.

Fear, a mixture of cold sweat and adrenaline, left a trail in the kitchen, sour and salty, around Maggie, who remained standing like a wobbly doll, her gaze lost. The animal seemed to savour it as it approached the woman, when it heard them coming down.

"Halt!" bellowed Fraser, the echo of his voice bouncing futilely off the walls lined with pots and pans and kitchen utensils. "Halt, in the name of the law!"

Fraser, followed by Eleanor, burst through the doorway: the inspector, gun raised—all his senses on high alert—just as a blur, a fleeing shadow, slipped through the small storeroom door, leaving behind a trail of damp earth and carnage.

"Fraser!" Eleanor shouted, trying to grab him, but the hunter's instinct had already propelled him forward, running towards it, revolver in hand.

From the far end, the small side door—a final barrier between the monster and the world—slammed shut.

Fraser burst into the storeroom at that moment, ready to kill that thing.

The door leading out onto the street was hanging off its hinges and shook with every gust of wind and snow that blew in. He approached the exit, trying to see beyond the white curtains: the night was a wasteland of snow; the blizzard, it seemed, had not abated.

He stepped out onto the street cautiously, grimacing against the cold. On the ground, he could see shapeless holes piercing the white crust. Footprints that the snow was already busy erasing, covering everything with a

blanket of oblivion. He looked around; the closed windows stared back at him expectantly.

A few steps up, Buck hung from the old table: his legs were broken at impossible angles, his arms dislocated, and his gaze frozen in a question that would never be answered.

Good old Buck would never again be humming in bars in the wee hours: death had caught him with his eyes open, condemning him to witness the horror that had claimed them.

Eleanor approached Maggie, who was finally curled up, rocking in a corner, hugging herself. The candle she held was still rolling across the floor; its flame cast shadows that danced across the walls.

Further up, in the lobby, the rest were plunged, expectantly, into a tragic silence. The building creaked, like a wounded animal. Then, the lights of *the Lily of the Glen* flickered and, with a dull hum, came back to life.

Like Lazaruses rising from the grave, the gas lamps in the lobby came to life. Their glass shades cast the light in bursts that bounced off the aged mirrors on the walls, multiplying the pale faces of those present.

Fraser leaned against the side of the wooden counter. He still had his snow-caked coat draped over his shoulders. He set the pistol down on the sideboard for a moment to wipe the melting snowflakes from his face.

On the other side, the women closed ranks around Madame Vernet, who collapsed into the embrace of one of them. More than a matriarch, that woman had become, once again, a parody of elegance: her dress splattered with blood—this time her own—her face blackened by the tears of the blow and her spirit crushed.

Fraser took a deep breath as he surveyed the scene, tucking the gun into the pocket sewn into his coat.

'Well…' he drawled. 'I'm afraid that, with this blizzard, the men from Calton Hill won't be coming for us. And certainly not…' he bit his tongue, *'to collect two dead bodies from a brothel*,' he thought.

The women, huddled together beneath the lamp, looked like creatures rescued from a shipwreck: shoulders hunched, eyes wide open.

No one answered.

"Miss Elea… Nell is downstairs, looking after Maggie, despite my refusal," he continued. "Mrs Vernet, I'd be grateful if you could tell us which room I can lock them in"—a flicker of panic ran through those present—"for safety's sake…" he added, softening his tone, "in case the evil decides to knock on the door again before dawn."

He must not let them see his doubt. He was certain—or rather, he was sure—that if it returned, it would kill them all.

Madame Vernet nodded slowly —muttering a 'sure' through her bruised lips—.

'Don't worry. I haven't yet come across anything these can't handle,' added Fraser, tapping gently on the spot where the weapon was holstered.

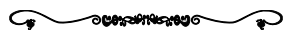
He imagined himself using the gun against whatever had spread terror throughout the place, like someone

holding up a crucifix in the face of a storm: it was useless.

After a while, they all returned upstairs together.

Good God… thought Fraser as he walked down the corridor, rubbing his frozen knuckles… *I don't even know where to begin to make sense of this madness.*

The lamp flickered, as if the house had heard him.



He left the women behind, barricaded in the dim light of a room on the ground floor: Maggie, wrapped in her statue-like silence, sitting at the foot of the bed; Madame Vernet, feverish and trembling, the rest gathered around her. They bolted the door and blocked it with a piece of furniture, as if the wood alone could halt the onslaught of that Beast.

For a second, the shadow of Fawkes and Lyle crossed his mind: *Just wait till they find out.*

As he turned, there was Eleanor. She had chosen to stay in the corridor. No one protested. Not even Fraser.

'It's curious,' he said, more honestly than he intended, 'that you are the only one of us who has kept her composure tonight.

'Don't be fooled, Inspector. Sometimes composure is just a mask,' she replied, brushing a strand of copper-coloured hair aside with an almost offensive calm…

How beautiful! The thought sprang up, unbidden, like a dagger between the folds of duty. Given the situation, he silently chided himself.

They walked together towards the room where Sir Baine lay. He opened the door carefully. He was surprised to find the body still there.

He was even more surprised that this surprised him.

The body looked like a twisted version of itself, unrecognisable beneath the blanket of snow that was still unleashing its fury through the broken window. The cold was a guest that had already claimed the space as its own, leaving everything a bluish-white.

No. Here, with the snow covering everything, I won't get anywhere. Better to go and see Buck, he thought.

He closed the door behind him, leaving the cold trapped on the other side.

Eleanor was waiting for him.

"What do you think?" she whispered.

"There's little we can get out of this in these conditions. I'd rather focus on Buck, see if we can find anything before they arrive tomorrow to move everything," said Fraser, resuming his pace.

He walked in silence, struggling to concentrate. Eleanor's presence, following him at a short distance, unsettled him. But it was also true that she anchored him.

When they arrived, the inspector stopped in the doorway.

"Wait here," he asked. "Don't go in yet. I'd like to see it as untouched as possible."

"That, Inspector, hasn't been possible for a long time," smiled Eleanor, tilting her head; her half-smile lit up the gloom.

He felt his face flush. He was grateful for the darkness.

'The scene, I mean,' he corrected himself. 'I was referring to the crime…'

"Of course…

Fraser let out a slight snort, somewhere between resigned and delighted, before entering.

Buck was still there.

Hardened by years of experience, he surveyed the surroundings meticulously.

The whole place was pure chaos.

Blood splattered in chaotic patterns across the walls and floor.

It doesn't follow the pattern of a knife, nor that of a gun, he thought.

The shelves next to the door—ripped from its hinges—leading down to the storeroom were overturned, the crockery smashed to pieces.

The size of whatever came out of there must have been impressive, he continued.

In a corner, the candle Maggie had been holding was still burning, casting its dirty, flickering light.

Let's see if we can question her tomorrow, Fraser thought.

He approached the body.

The body was hard to look at for more than a few seconds.

The ribs jutted out, the sternum split open—not cut, but burst open—; the neck showed irregular, savage tears and gaps.

Has it eaten half her chest?

He bent down, examining the edges of the flesh.

The skin was torn outwards. An uncontrolled attack. Instinctive. Unstoppable.

He sat up slowly, running a hand over the deceased's face.

'They say the image of the murderer remains etched in the eyes of the dead,' she whispered from the doorway.

"That's just superstitious nonsense, miss," replied Fraser, barely turning his head.

"You'd be surprised how many superstitions turn out to be true, Inspector,"

He didn't reply. He turned and headed for the door at the back: the storeroom. He descended the steps, his gun at the ready.

The cellar, which served as a storeroom, was a wreck of broken barrels, sacks and scattered rusty metal. The back door of the premises was hanging outwards. Snow was piling up outside; the storm had finally stopped.

Still faintly visible in the snow, shapeless tracks. Too long to be human. A pattern of movement too human to be that of animals.

And worst of all, he thought, they were fading away in the middle of the white blanket. They changed appearance after a few metres.

As if their maker had… changed. As if the form that left those tracks no longer existed.

A shiver—from the cold, or from the thought—ran down his spine. He shut the door as best he could, with a sharp slam, and rested his hand on the stone frame.

Think, Fraser. Think.

It wasn't human.

No one could do that with bare hands.

No one walked like that.

An animal.

He'd read reports of wolf attacks in the Highlands, including caged bears escaping in the ports, but this…

A bear?

A bear in Edinburgh. In a brothel.

Absurd.

'A bear…?' he whispered, knowing he was lying to himself.

And yet, the wounds didn't lie. There were no clean cuts. Rather than being deliberate, the attack seemed to have been carried out solely out of hunger and fury.

When he climbed the three steps again and reached the kitchen, he came face to face with Eleanor, who was watching him from the doorway. At that moment, the clock in the hall began to strike the hours: one, two… up to twelve.

"Merry Christmas, Inspector," Eleanor gave him a brief curtsy.

Fraser, unable to respond with words, merely nodded.

SOMEWHERE IN EDINBURGH

The night of 24 December.

His anger demanded to be tamed. How many times had he sworn to contain it? And yet, once again, he had failed.

A sense of guilt crept over him.

Everything he had patiently built up over the years was shaken by a wave of rage — '*Stupid*,' he thought, ' '. How was it possible that his discipline had been shattered by a childish outburst of fury?

Although he occasionally went out to track, as time went by he began to believe that the prophecy spoken of his end had no basis.

I must learn to be disciplined—not just out of prudence, but for survival, he corrected himself—*; if it takes me too long to satisfy myself, I lose control when I travel: I cannot go so long without answering the call.*

For several long minutes—or were they hours?—he lay reclined on the divan with its curved back, whilst the dim light of the room seemed to adjust to his vision. He could not close his eyes again, or the call would drag him away once more.

From the street came the distant murmur of the wheels of a horse-drawn carriage crossing *New Town*, reminding him that, outside, the city continued to breathe, oblivious to what had happened.

In the small sitting room where he found himself, the furniture was sparse, but every piece seemed antique: a built-in bookcase crammed with leather-bound volumes; a spotless walnut desk, without a single sheet of paper; an antique armo , and, in a corner, a full-length

mirror covered by a black cloth—superstition or mourning?

The only concession to comfort was the divan from which he had risen with some effort and a Persian rug covering the floor.

As he rubbed his bare feet over it, the hairs on his back stood on end; he still felt that his flesh had not quite returned to the present.

The most tedious part of returning to his other form was always the same physical torment: savage aches in the days that followed and sensitive skin, as if after a burn.

He felt his left hand. The clumsiness with which he had rammed that damned door was going to leave him with a bruise the size of a *Bramley* apple.

I'll have to make up an excuse, he mused, with the weariness of someone who has lied too much. *A stumble, a fall on the stairs at Surgeons' Hall, perhaps.*

Alibis had become routine years ago; that irritated him even more than the pain, as he had to remember them all so as not to contradict himself.

A memory struck him: in the brothel, in that kitchen, he had detected… another scent. Not the one he was looking for—he'd just committed that one to memory. No. One that must have come from the upper floors.

Someone… or something like him… had been there too, just minutes earlier.

It wasn't possible. It couldn't be, under any circumstances.

He stood motionless, completely still, listening as if the room might give him the answer. Even the gloom seemed to hold its breath.

The sounds of the city eventually brought him back to his senses.

THE HOME OF LACHLAN AND MARGARET FAWKES

Morning of 25 December 1869

'First you come to me with an orangutan. Now a bear… What's next, a leviathan emerging from Candlemaker's?' growled Fawkes, amused, as he flopped down onto a leather sofa so cracked it looked as though it were about to fall apart. 'I don't know, Fraser… really, what on earth is happening to you in this city?

The Chief Inspector's office — as one might expect — was in chaos. Shelves laden with books, arranged in such a disorderly fashion that they resembled the teeth of a wretch. Numerous treatises and summaries of old crimes were piled up in the corners. On top of the desk — if you could even see it — lay a copy of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.

However, beneath that tangle of papers lay the cleanest record in the entire division: one hundred and seventeen cases solved in five years, a figure that not even the *sheriff's* own prosecutor had managed to dispute.

Fraser always took pride in being the protégé of someone who didn't flaunt decorations on the walls—*we'll leave that to the vain*, he'd say.

Fawkes held a glass in his gnarled fingers. There was not a trace of mockery or reproach in his voice.

'All things considered, Malcolm, there's no redeeming you,' he continued, barely smiling. 'You won't even leave me in peace on Christmas Day.

Fraser, still standing, looked out through the misted window onto the street. Christmas Day had dawned unusually clear and blue. A cloudless sky, rare in Edinburgh, seemed to want to wash away people's sins.

It must be Christmas, he thought.

The chimneys of *the New Town* were barely smoking; even the coalmen were resting that morning; everything seemed deserted. The stationary carriages lay buried beneath a crust of hardened frost.

In the background, in the lower reaches of the alley, a few young men were shovelling salt with slow, resigned movements, wrapped in scarves that covered their eyes

up t . The sound of their shovels was the only murmur in that white theatre.

"Margaret!" called Fawkes, barely raising his voice, more as if summoning her presence than issuing a command. "Would you pour us a little brandy? I think our guest needs it after yesterday's spectacle."

From the kitchen came the faint shuffling of footsteps on the wooden floor, and immediately his wife, Margaret, appeared, wrapped in her Scottish woollen shawl and her cheeks still flushed from the heat of the stove. Her grey eyes sought out Fawkes first—a whole life shared in a single blink—and then Fraser, with tenderness.

'This young man ought to be offered a drink of something stronger, but we'll make do with what we've got,' she said. 'You look as though you haven't slept for three nights.

Fawkes nodded.

"He doesn't sleep. Nor will he until he's untangled this mess. We know each other well…" he looked at his wife. "He's more stubborn than the clock at the *Old Tolbooth*, I swear."

Margaret poured the liquor and handed it to Fraser, who accepted it with a slight nod.

That house was the closest thing to a home he'd ever had in his life.

Fawkes glanced sideways at Fraser; he saw the restrained grimace on his face and thought it was the result of the impropriety of drinking so early. He added with a wink:

'Don't be a killjoy, Inspector. If we can't be indulgent at Christmas, when can we?' He downed his glass in one gulp. 'If you'd told me this story of yours from yesterday thirty years ago, I'd have locked you up in a cell for drunkenness,' he joked.

Deep down, it worried him, and greatly so.

Fraser, now by the fire, held the glass in his hands, the brandy untouched, his gaze lost in the dance of the flames.

'I don't know if he's an animal. Or if he's stopped being one. What I do know is that nothing adds up,' he muttered, barely audibly, as if afraid the walls might hear him.

"Two bodies," replied Fawkes. "One in a locked room, clean wounds; the other, as if a train had run over him ." He looked towards the window, as if expecting to see the silhouette of *the North British Railway* passing through the snow.

'And the one at *the Firth of* Forth…' added Margaret, out of the corner of her eye, pretending to be oblivious to the conversation. 'There was no possible explanation there either.'

Fawkes sighed.

'I've seen a lot of things, Fraser, lad. All sorts. But what you're telling me…' he confessed, staring at the ceiling as if reciting a psalm to the cobwebs, 'but this, lad… this is a different kind of madness.'

Fraser gripped his glass.

'The news won't be long in reaching the right ears. It was someone of high standing. Sir Reginald Hawthorne isn't going to let this pass.'

"The good part—if there is one," replied the Chief Inspector, "is that the most baffling murder involved someone who won't arouse his interest. I doubt Sir

Reginald will worry about good old Buck. The mystery of his death and the strange footprints can run in parallel, if we wish."

'As for the footprints,' Fraser continued, 'I didn't make them up. They weren't boots. Nor hooves. If you want my opinion, whoever left them…' he hesitated, '…was, halfway through, not quite human.'

A silence. Only the solemn *ticking* of the clock, a wooden sentinel filling the room.

"The men you sent to the Burd… er, the *Lily of the* Glen…?" asked Fawkes. "Sorry, darling."

Margaret, who had heard all manner of obscenities from a police inspector in her lifetime, smiled. She found it endearing that he still apologised for them.

"They're going to interview all the girls, except those closest to Sir Baine's death," explained Fraser, shrugging.

"And Buck's body?"

"In the mortuary. Dr MacLintock will let me know when the preliminary examination is finished. I'll go later."

Margaret sat sewing whilst drinking black tea with cloves — "so the devil doesn't cross the threshold," she told them as she poured herself a cup. — Sitting with her needlework in her hands, she was mending the seams of Fawkes' waistcoat. Her needle sewed thoughts.

"And the woman?" she asked, without taking her eyes off the fabric. "The young lady who decided to stay outside when the others locked themselves in."

Fraser didn't hesitate to answer; he handed her a small sugar bowl.

"I have no doubt that Miss Eleanor is…"—he glanced for a moment at the fire in the hearth—"different. What struck me was that she didn't seem as affected as the rest… In fact, perhaps, quite the opposite." He returned to the fire. "Perhaps she knows more than she lets on."

"Well, keep an eye on her, lad," said Fawkes, clicking his tongue with slight concern.

"There was something else about her that…" said Fraser, "frankly, I can't explain it."

"Give it time, I'm sure you'll find out eventually…" Margaret stabbed the needle firmly into the fabric, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Fraser looked at her, bewildered.

Meanwhile, Fawkes refilled their glasses.

"Do you remember that case at St Duthac's asylum?" he broke the silence. "The one where the nurse seemed to be in two places at once."

"It was… the new orderly, wasn't it?" he recalled. "I remember they were identical; they might well have been twins. A perfect double."

"Yes… but at the time it didn't make any sense. In the end, there's always something, Fraser."

"Well…" he shrugged. "We haven't got there yet."

"What are you going to do now?"

Fraser sighed and took his notebook out of his pocket.

"First, find out if anyone hated Buck or Sir Baine enough to cause such a mess. So far, there's nothing substantial at the regarding that," he looked up briefly. "In the meantime, I think I'll go back to the scene of the

first crime and check all the entrances to the building. Maybe I was distracted or something slipped my mind," he closed the notebook. "And then…"

"Yes?"

"Then, Eleanor."

"Ahhh…" Margaret let a smile escape the corners of her mouth. I did think that woman had left more than just a crack in your composure, Inspector… —She set her embroidery aside for a moment and looked at her husband—. Do you remember, dear, what Reverend Black used to say when we still went to St Giles?: 'Women who do not tremble before death have usually danced with her before.'

Fraser lowered his gaze. *What a combination*, he thought, *women and death; just my luck*.