

CHAPTER ONE

Autumn 1899

That sunny morning, as I stood at my kitchen door in Solomon's Tower, surveying the peaceful little garden, the swallows had left their ancient nesting places and another sound obliterated the raucous cries of corbies, eerie black shapes forever haunting the lofty crown of Arthur's Seat.

The distant strains of a pipe band marching our gallant soldiers, the Black Watch, to Waverley Station on the first stage of that long sea journey to South Africa – ready to fight and die for queen and country.

Britain was at war. There was a lull in the resumption of hostilities while Boers waited for the spring grass to maintain the horses and oxen of their commandos; the British, meanwhile, awaited urgent reinforcements of imperial troops.

This state of affairs did not please everyone. In the initial stages of trouble brewing, William Buller, the brilliant outspoken commander-in-chief in Cape Colony,

had declared British policies were foolish and did what he could to avert an Anglo-Boer war, which he believed would be a calamity. Damned as a pro-Boer and recalled for his efforts, he became in his own words 'the best abused man in England'.

My arrival in Edinburgh four years ago saw constant unrest and bloodshed in the distant outposts of the British Empire, but on a more personal level, concerning the distress of an old school friend, I was plunged into investigating the behaviour of a husband with murderous tendencies. This was my first case; I solved it successfully. Not without considerable danger; it set the pattern for a career as a Lady Investigator, Discretion Guaranteed, my life's secret ambition – to follow in the footsteps of my father, Chief Inspector Jeremy Faro.

The financial status of my career has improved considerably by taking on those anxious to keep their skeletons firmly locked in the family cupboards, afraid that their shameful secrets would be made public by laying them before the prying eyes of the police.

My clients are mostly the well-to-do: the labouring class could not afford the services of a private detective even if they knew such amiable creatures existed to sort out their troubles. Sadly, often in despair they resort to more violent and permanent solutions which result in prison, transportation and even death by hanging.

And thus I have had cause to learn much about the hierarchy of Edinburgh society and have gained a remarkable insight into the sanctity of middle-class life, where the qualities of respectability and law-abidingness are taken for granted. Frauds, thieving servants, sexual

transgressions, husbands (particularly those addicted to the lure of comely housemaids), wives with blackmailing lovers and even, on several occasions, already recorded in my logbooks...

Murder!

Not that my investigations began that way. A distressed client entered with a list of suspicious facts to be investigated. Not until I was enmeshed in the web of intrigue did realisation dawn that this case was more suited to the police than a private detective, a fact which my client, for now obvious and frequently sinister reasons, had been most anxious to conceal, revelations that came too late to avert the looming catastrophe.

I owed my life on more than one occasion to the presence of Thane, the strange deerhound who originates from somewhere in the depths of Edinburgh's extinct volcano, Arthur's Seat (one baffling mystery I have failed to solve). It took the arrival of a very much flesh-and-blood creature, Sergeant Jack Macmerry of the Edinburgh City Police who also saw Thane, to convince me that my sanity was not in doubt.

Jack and I became lovers and would have married, indeed we were on the very threshold two years ago. There was only one impediment. Determined to become a detective inspector of the calibre of my father, a legend in his own lifetime, Jack realised that my chosen career might well inhibit all his chances of promotion.

And so we parted company; my permanent excuse that I was not officially a widow – my husband, Danny McQuinn, merely classed as missing in the

state of Arizona – continued to aggravate Jack.

He guessed it was only an excuse and, to be honest, so did I. I did not want to remarry, but without this commitment, my ambitious lover (who longed to see me in the traditional role of a picture book housewife) finally accepted the truth.

He knew in his heart that I did not love him enough and so he went elsewhere for comfort, and the silence of almost two years suggests that he has found the love of his life and is doubtlessly happily married. Much as I still miss his companionship, his warmth and humour, the sacrifice he demanded was too great, one that could not have made either of us easy in a marital relationship.

A difficult choice but my father's daughter indeed: the dream of a domestic life, of a home with a husband and children, was somehow lost on me. I had become addicted to puzzling evidence, and the search for clues; even personal danger did not deter me from solving a case. Among my clients an occasional attractive and eligible gentleman of means, but a few meetings, dinner and a concert were sufficient pointers to recognise that gleam in the masculine eye and the knowledge of what was on offer. Alas, a position in middle-class society held no temptations to abandon my chosen career.

As well as logbooks of every case, I now have five more extensive accounts of those apparently innocent investigations which had sinister hidden agendas and almost cost me my life. And along with the march of progress I now own a bicycle and, recently, a typewriting machine. A gift from my stepbrother Dr

Vince Laurie, it sits in idle splendour in the great hall, one more challenge I have yet to tackle.

In one respect it seems that I have never learnt. Alongside those essential skills for a private detective, of observation and deduction, I was aware of one ingredient in short supply: I was not ruthless enough. Deep-rooted in my personality was a highly developed social sense, with an unfortunate tendency to seek out the goodness in humanity. And that included bloodthirsty renegade Indians in Arizona, and now in South Africa those Boer farmers who refused to give up fighting for suzerainty over the Transvaal while the British retaliated by burning their farms and herding them into concentration camps.

The sound of bagpipes faded to be replaced by the honking of wild geese in steady formation as they flew high over Arthur's Seat to their feeding grounds on St Margaret's Loch, and less distant, the faint babble of voices intermingled with fiddle music, hammering and high activity.

I sniffed the air. A faint jungle-like smell drifting on the breeze whispered 'wild animals'.

The circus had come to town!

This event should have been full of joyous anticipation but its advent heralded a sorrowful anniversary, a reminder that the first time I had heard these sounds coincided with my arrival from Arizona, certain then that I would not be alone for long, confident that Danny McQuinn would come home again.

Alas, gone are the days when I lived in hourly

expectation of a door opening and my missing husband standing on the threshold, smiling, with arms outstretched, ready to clasp me to his heart. I have now accepted that Danny is dead, lost to me for ever, lying in some unmarked grave among the red rocks of the Arizona desert, where he disappeared during his detective activities five long years ago.

Far below in Queen's Park, the sounds of activity gained momentum. At my side the deerhound froze. Thane had sensed something else, well out of my range.

I put my hand on his head. 'What is it?'

I knew he didn't like the circus or the animals and was frowning in that almost human way.

The circus was an annual springtime event. This was an additional visit. Posters advertised it everywhere. Hengels Circus was paying Edinburgh a visit 'for a short season' after a well-publicised command performance for Her Majesty Queen Victoria at Balmoral Castle and before returning to their winter quarters on the outskirts of Glasgow. This extra appearance, with the additional thrills of merry-go-rounds and swingboats, was pleasantly anticipated by the children. And for the more mature in age, in addition to a fortune-teller and a shooting range, there would be daring sideshows, featuring seriously underclad ladies who, according to lurid posters, rashly promised to make 'old men young and young men ambitious'.

The greatest delight, however, for children of all ages, was the clowns. In particular their leader Joey – an unending source of wonder, with his tricks and

nonsense guaranteed to raise a smile on even the sober countenances of the more aged and respectable citizens of Edinburgh. Although I did not class myself among the latter, I must confess to a weakness for the circus. The smoking fires, roast potatoes, the smell of horses and crushed grass all added to a way of life that harked back to pioneering days in Arizona – exhilarating and dangerous in a quite different way to my present existence.

This time the circus was destined to be less innocent, more fraught with sinister happenings. Its arrival coincided with a local bank robbery a mile away, where one of the clerks had been killed and, nearby, two girls had committed suicide within hours of each other.

Were the three deaths linked? Were the suicides also to be classed as murder?

CHAPTER TWO

The facts under investigation by the police were that the girls, unmarried and at present unemployed, had met death by hanging themselves from ropes attached to the drying racks on their kitchen ceilings. This had happened within hours of each other in the same tenement in St Leonard's, just a short distance from the scene of the bank robbery in Newington Road.

These tragic events raised many intriguing questions, sadly far outside my field as a private detective, especially as sensational newspaper reports hinted at foul play, a killer at large, firmly dismissed by more sober editorials as 'base rumours set about to terrorise the good citizens of Edinburgh'.

Nevertheless, my interest deepened. In my experience there was, to quote a well-worn cliché, 'no smoke without fire'. According to the terrified surviving bank clerk interviewed by the police, the man seen running from the tenement in the direction of Queen's Park at the time of the suicides bore a remarkable resemblance to the robber who had brutally killed his senior

colleague, leaving a widow and four young bairns fatherless.

There had also been a series of local burglaries. One at Newington House close by Sheridan Place, my childhood home, long since vacated by my father, who now in his retirement travelled the world with his companion, the Irish writer, Imogen Crowe.

Coincidences maybe, but the possibility of a connection could not be dismissed. Perhaps it was even encouraged as there was little crime in Edinburgh, with headlines devoted to the Boer War, although it seemed too remote except for those with sons, fathers or sweethearts in the Black Watch regiment. Names listed as 'missing' or 'killed in action' made melancholy reading.

I knew all about danger and violent death, having had first-hand experience sharing the hazards of Danny McQuinn's daily life with Pinkerton's and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Ten years of encounters with Apache raiders, Mexican bandits, and lawless white men, witnessing sudden death at close quarters, and though it grieves me to say, often enough with my own hand on the rifle. I was in a better position to understand the dreadful reality of Her Majesty Queen Victoria's war against the Boers, to be followed at a safe distance by eager readers, where murder at home seemed almost a novelty.

According to newspaper reports, based on somewhat reluctant interviews with neighbours, the girls' last brief employment was at a laundry, locally known as 'the steamie' in Newington. They appeared to be happy,

cheerful lasses; indeed, Amy was courting and expecting to be married as soon as her fiancé's ship returned to Britain.

As for the other suicide, Belle was devoted to a disabled grandfather, a veteran of the Crimean wars. She would never have abandoned him. This was duly confirmed in yet another painful newspaper interview, which at least aroused the public concern and beseeched a subscription to ensure the bereaved grandfather's future care.

Studying these reports, the closest I could hope to get in such matters, one fact emerged strongly. There had been no reason for suicide in either case apart from the identical manner the two friends had chosen within hours of each other.

A sinister alternative to a strange suicide pact was the man seen rushing from the scene, which suggested that the Newington bank robber had claimed two other victims.

The search for a killer had no immediate result which was hardly surprising in such baffling circumstances. A scapegoat was urgently needed while the police made their initial investigations and rumour was swift to point to the newly arrived circus with its motley crew of humanity. And this included the inevitable gravitation of the tinker clans to the site, as they moved nearer towns to set up their settlements away from the harsh snows of the Highland winters.

And so the evening performances at the circus were destined to be overshadowed by fear. One of Joey the Clown's comic antics which always raised howls

of laughter was a pursuing clown in the guise of a policeman, at whom Joey points a gun, yelling: 'Bang, bang!' The policeman obligingly falls down dead but the gun, instead of emitting a shot, throws out a string of sausages. The scene continues with more police clowns milling round, then a weeping Joey takes out an enormous loop of rope and pretends to hang himself.

This did not raise quite as many laughs as usual; the applause was thinner for Joey's antics, tainted with the whisper of true events, of real life beyond the canvas walls of the tent, where the safety of lights ceased to penetrate. Above the circus loomed the heavy mass of Arthur's Seat with its hidden caves and lost hiding places, and uneasy thoughts drifted inevitably to what lurked beyond the darkness, a killer with a lust for blood waiting, perhaps already stalking his next victim.

The night held unseen dangers to be faced and young females unaccompanied would cling together, giggling nervously as they left the safety of the crowds behind them and hurried through the night to their destinations. The servant girls took extra care to make sure that they locked and bolted the master's kitchen door securely, the flame of their flickering candles casting scary shadows as they crept up to their attic rooms.

As for the killer, he could have come from any stratum of society. From the fetid ill-smelling closes, the ghettos of the High Street with their poverty, their often criminal humanity, or – dare one whisper such sacrilege – from the upper classes. Some monstrous creature hiding terrible evil behind a mask of respectability and affluence, of the kind Mr RL Stevenson had brought to

life in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, a story, with sensational success, of a killer not for gain but to satisfy some hideous impulse to destroy.

Such was the reasoned apprehension, and rumour persisted that all three deaths – the bank robbery and suicides – had coincided with the arrival of the circus. The work of setting up the arena had begun two days before the show opened. The canvas structure of the tent had been erected, and within it, the trapezes and high wires were hoisted into position. And the most hazardous of all preparations for the townfolk; the cages of the wild animals – including the lions and leopards – were moved into place.

Thoughtful minds now leant heavily towards another link and the finger of suspicion pointed in the direction of the tinkers, always a likely target for any misdeeds. They swarmed like flies upon fairs and circuses. As well as women telling fortunes, selling clothes pegs and occasionally lifting washing from the drying greens (for their more unscrupulous menfolk), there was opportunity for clever tricksters adept at extracting money from the unwary, as well as wallets and pocket watches. Until the tinkers and circus left, it followed that any burglary in the south side of Edinburgh, Newington, the Grange and Morningside would be laid at their caravan doors.

This supposition provided unexpected benefits for the killer. It gave him the advantage of gaining time, covering his tracks, and irritated the police by diverting their attention to lesser evils, petty crimes at the Queen's Park encampment.

Murder investigations involving the police were not for me. As an outsider I must remain content to watch events regardless of my own suspicions and conclusions.

Such was the situation shortly after my new friend, Elma Miles Rice, and I had become acquainted.