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Opening Extract from...

A Small Weeping

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Prologue

The feather wafted upwards, a fine wispy curve, and for seconds it sailed the air. Slowly, slowly it began its downward journey, tacking and spinning on the currents; slight, light, hovering and shimmering. The dust motes danced against the sunlight like a cloud of gnats as the white feather passed them by. It sank at last in a curtsey and settled on the bed, still as the body below the sheets.

Chapter One

There was something appropriate about the fog blotting out everything beyond the station, thought Lorimer as he made his way through George Square. It was as if the natural world was trying to obliterate whatever waited for him behind the swirling curtain of mist. The red surface below his feet was darkened to the colour of old blood, statues loomed out of the mist like silent sentinels and even the tops of buildings were obscured by the pall of dankness, giving an impression of walking through some subterranean chamber. He'd be doing that soon enough. The woman's body had been discovered in the lift between the upper and lower platforms of Queen Street station. Who she was and how she came to be there at all were the questions uppermost in the Detective Chief Inspector's mind.

Lorimer had been woken from a fitful sleep around three a.m. After the Transport Police had alerted the Area Control room in Cowcaddens, the call had filtered through to Lorimer as the on-duty DCI. Now he was rounding the corner of George Street, his eyes drawn to the striped scene-of-crime tape cordoning off the station's entrance. No taxis would be plying their trade up here for a while, that was for sure, he thought, seeing the line of official vehicles parked on North Hanover Street. He'd deliberately left his own car across the square, wishing to approach the railway station on foot as a stranger might have done. Perspective, that's what he'd wanted. But all he'd found was this Gothic landscape.

A spiteful little wind blew along the narrow, cob-

bled lane across the road. It caught the back of his neck, reminding him, too late, of his wife Maggie's sleepy advice to put on a scarf. The uniformed officer standing outside was shifting from one foot to another, beating his gloved hands across his arms in an effort to keep himself warm.

"Sir?" The police constable came to immediate attention as he recognised Lorimer.

"Been here long, Constable?"

"About half an hour, sir. We were in the area," the PC explained, making a move to unlock the glass doors into the station. They opened with a sigh and Lorimer stepped into the light.

Inside was not much warmer, fog swirling along the tracks from the black hole beyond the length of a parked train. Lorimer stared out into the void, wondering.

"What about Transport? Wasn't there an officer on duty tonight?"

"Supposed to be, but they don't always stay in the station for the entire shift, sir," the constable replied, not meeting Lorimer's eye. Someone's head was going to roll for this all right, especially if the Press got hold of it. But the DCI didn't seem to be in a hurry to lay the blame at anyone's door. Instead he continued to stare down the track as if his vision could penetrate the tunnel's hidden gloom beyond platform 7.

His eyes wandered back along the length of the platform, coming to rest on blue painted plywood sheeting that surrounded the lift area.

"That was quick. Who rigged that lot up, then?"

"It was like that, sir. The lifts are being renovated at the moment."

"So how do we gain access?"

"It's downstairs, sir," the constable replied. "We've got the area sealed off at platform 8 on the lower level."

"The stairs are over by the other side, aren't they?" Lorimer murmured, looking round but making no immediate move across the forecourt of the station. He wasn't squeamish but part of him had wanted to see the station empty and open like this before the body downstairs took precedence in his immediate thoughts. He walked back along the platform towards the lifts then turned to face the building on the opposite side of the rails, the stationmaster's office. Even standing on tiptoe, Lorimer was unable to see the upper windows for the train parked beside him. He nodded to himself, wondering who could have had access to the lifts during the night. There'd be plenty of questions for the stationmaster to answer.

A scattering of traffic cones surrounded the entrance to the lift, a device on somebody's part, no doubt, to assist the Scene of Crime boys when they turned up. Lorimer approached the blue hoardings and peered in. The concertina doors had been pushed aside and he could see a single line of light from the shaft below. Voices murmured beneath his feet. Looking up into the empty socket of the lift mechanism, Lorimer saw only a tangle of cables. With a sigh he turned and headed for the stairs that would take him to the lower level platforms of Queen Street Station.

By contrast to the violet blue gloominess of the upper level, platforms 8 and 9 dazzled the eyes. The walls were wasp-yellow with a lip for seating and between the two platforms ran a central area sup-

ported by filthy, black pillars.

A huge bear of a man dressed in a British Rail donkey jacket emblazoned with orange fluorescent panels looked up as Lorimer approached the lift doors.

There was something like relief in the railwayman's expression; authority had arrived in the form of this tall figure whose hand took his in a reassuringly firm grip.

"This is Mr Gibson, sir."

"You're the stationmaster?"

"No, sir. But I was in charge tonight. I'm the supervisor," the man shook his head as if somehow he'd been responsible for the whole sorry mess within his station. "I, well…" he tailed off, raising a hand towards the lift. Then, dropping it with a sigh, he stepped back as if to introduce the main character in this early morning drama.

Lorimer gave the railwayman an understanding nod and turned towards the light flooding out from the lift.

The woman lay in one corner away from the door, her head resting against the wall. For an instant she looked like a rag doll that had been flung down by some petulant child, her legs splayed awkwardly. Long strands were escaping from a plastic clip that skewered her hair. Lorimer could see the gaping mouth that had opened in protest as her last breath was cut off. But it was her eyes that would disturb his sleep for weeks to come. Their expression of terror made his head resonate with her scream. He could hear it echoing around the damp walls of the station.

Lorimer would be glad when a police surgeon came on the scene to close those eyes.

His gaze dropped to the woman's neck. Two ends of a red chiffon scarf hung like banners either side of her chin. She'd been strangled. It was one of the commonest methods of killing that he'd seen in his career. Sometimes it was a domestic gone wrong, other times a crime of passion, but here? Just what had happened here?

He looked again at the red scarf and hoped to hell there'd be some traces for forensics. Lorimer stood back, taking in the dead woman's clothing in one glance; the soiled white jacket, skimpy top and short skirt were like a badge of her trade. She wasn't the first one on the game to be so brutally murdered in this city and she wouldn't be the last. Lorimer had long since learned to control the surge of pity and anger that threatened to overwhelm him in such cases but anyone observing that clenched jaw might see he wasn't yet inured to either emotion.

Lorimer walked to one side of the body, oblivious to the stares of the two men standing outside, then stopped. He hunkered down closer, considering the woman's hands. At first glance he'd thought they must be tied but now he saw that they had been deliberately arranged in a praying gesture, palm to palm, pointing towards her feet. Lorimer bent forward, his attention caught by the unnatural gesture. Was she holding something? Or was it just a shadow? Lorimer shifted his position so that the overhead light showed the woman's hands more clearly. Fearful of disturbing the corpse before the arrival of the on-duty pathologist and the SOCOs, the DCI peered at the space between the flattened palms. Yes, there was something there. Lorimer drew a pen out of his inside pocket and

gently lifted one white cuff.

There, like a blossom of blood, lay a single carnation, its stem fixed between the dead woman's palms.

He let the sleeve of her jacket fall back into place, wondering what Dr Solomon Brightman might make of this murder. This looked like the hallmark of a ritualistic killing. Under his gaze the woman was being transformed from a flesh and blood creature to a victim whose death had to be solved. Lorimer had long ago learned the need to detach himself from the horror of a killing. The victim, whoever she was, would become real enough in the days to come, but for now he must force himself to see her objectively. He was looking at a new and complicated case and not just a case for forensics, either. They'd be mad not to use Solly's expertise as a criminal profiler.

Voices from the staircase made him look up. Two figures appeared out of the darkness carrying their kitbags. The cavalry had arrived in the shape of Dr Rosie Fergusson and Dr Roy Young, forensic pathologists. Between the two of them there should be some answers to the dead woman's silent cry for help.

Gibson, the railwayman, caught Lorimer's sleeve as he walked out to meet the two medics, "D'you need me for anything else?" The man's face took on a white glow under the fluorescent light making him look as sick as he probably felt.

"Yes," said Lorimer shortly, "but I wouldn't hover around here if I were you. Stay upstairs in the staffroom meantime." He glanced at the PC who had, until his arrival, been in charge. "Any chance of some hot drinks? It's freezing down here."

"We can rustle something up in the manager's

office," Gibson told them both. "I'll show you." He led the constable towards the stairs, his gait quickening. Lorimer smiled wryly. Even the biggest guys were still daunted by the sight of a corpse. Not so this pair, he thought, striding forward to greet them.

"You do pick them, don't you?" Rosie glared at him as if Lorimer had manufactured the murder all by himself. "Here I was all cosy, tucked up with a good book thinking nobody would be daft enough to end it all on a night like this." The diminutive blonde was already delving into her kitbag and pulling out white overalls.

"Don't listen to her," Roy Young laughed. "She'd be out of there like a whippet once the call came in." Lorimer grinned. Rosie's grumbles would stop the minute she set foot inside the locus. Her professionalism was total. Even though she was the senior pathologist she didn't pull rank and always took her fair share of duties. Looking at her now, pulling her hair back into a knot, Lorimer marvelled at how Rosie Fergusson revelled in the business of cadavers and their hidden secrets.

His thoughts were cut off by another voice commanding his attention.

"You beat us to it, then," Alistair Wilson strode across to join him. In the wake of the detective sergeant was a tall young man whose padded jacket made him look like the Michelin Man. Maggie had joked that the boy from Lewis was so new to his role as a detective constable that you could still see the shine. Niall Cameron nodded to Lorimer but immediately looked beyond him, his eyes drawn towards the figures huddled within the open lift.

"Want a look?" Lorimer asked. Both men stepped

forward and Lorimer heard Rosie's "tsk" of annoyance as she stood up to make room for the officers.

"Bloody hell, we've got a right one here," Wilson's voice echoed coldly over the deserted platform. "Put to sleep with a flower in its hand. What d'you think, young Niall? Is it Ophelia or what?"

Niall Cameron glowered down at the detective sergeant, his pale cheeks reddening, aware of everybody's scrutiny. Lorimer watched him, glad to note that the boy was wise enough not to rise to the bait.

"*She* hasn't got a name yet, Sergeant," Rosie snapped, "and if you don't mind we'll not find that or much else until you take yourself off!"

"That's me told, then," Alistair Wilson grinned at the pathologist, totally unabashed. He tried to catch Cameron's eye but the Lewisman had already backed out of the confined space and was looking expectantly at Lorimer.

"This your first murder case?" Lorimer murmured, steering Cameron away from the scene of crime, one hand lightly upon his shoulder.

The lad nodded, a frown creasing the space between his thick, straight eyebrows.

"Don't mind Sergeant Wilson. It's just his way."

"I don't mind. I just don't like to think of her as a *thing*, that's all."

Lorimer nodded. "I know, but sometimes it helps to keep a distance between the victim and the investigating team. A murder investigation is unlike any other. Emotions can run high."

Lorimer shrugged then added, "She probably will be named Ophelia just for the record, you know, now that DS Wilson has given her a soubriquet. At least

until there is a positive I.D." Lorimer could see that Wilson's offhand approach had ruffled the lad but despite this Cameron was turning back towards the corpse as if he wanted another moment to see for himself.

"I know Dr Fergusson would be pleased if you attended the post mortem," he told the detective constable. "Only if you want to," he added, watching Cameron's jaw tighten.

"I don't mind," he replied with a diffidence that earned him some points with Lorimer. This one was cool under fire, all right.

"So," Alistair Wilson had caught them up now. "No handbag, no apparent identification. D'you think she was local?"

"Who knows?" Lorimer replied, thinking once more of the railway tracks that disappeared into the mist. "Depends what direction she came from, doesn't it?"

"Want me to ask about?" Wilson persisted. "Try Waterloo Street, maybe?" he suggested, mentioning one of the main haunts of Glasgow's prostitutes. He had thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his raincoat and pulled it tightly across his body against the bitter chill, but his eyes were alight with the desire to be off on the hunt for whoever had put an end to this poor wretch. His detective sergeant might seem flippant at times but Lorimer knew it was just a front. Under the surface Wilson was as angry and disgusted as any of them at the waste of a young life.

"Won't do any harm. If any of them are daft enough to be out in a night like this," he added.

"Oh, they'll be daft enough if they need a hit,"

Wilson laughed mirthlessly.

"Okay. It's worth a try. But make sure you've got an accurate description from Dr Fergusson. We'd certainly be wasting our time waiting for a missing person's report if she was on the game. Meantime, I think DC Cameron should take a statement from Mr Gibson. He was the one who found the body," Lorimer explained, pointing towards a door. "He's upstairs in the staff room," he added.

As if on cue, a constable descended the stairs bearing a tray of polystyrene cups, their contents steaming in the cold air like alchemists' potions. Lorimer retreated to the edge of the platform, observing the tableau around the open lift. An aura seemed to surround the group as though their breaths had clouded together. For an instant he thought about the dead woman's spirit. Then he turned and walked back to the stationmaster's office.

Lorimer was drinking his third hot chocolate of the night as he made his way back to the North Hanover Street entrance. The SOCOs had come and gone, the body was on its way to the mortuary and Frank Gibson had been driven home. His footsteps echoed across the stone floor of Platform 7. It was still as cold as the grave. He'd wandered around the perimeter of the station with DC Cameron, checking out the CCTV cameras. It was most likely the killer had come by car, parking in the car park at the back where no swivelling grey heads recorded the comings and goings of staff vehicles. There was so much to be done. CCTV footage from the area around George Square, North Hanover Street and Cathedral Street

was being carefully checked by the night shift at Cowcaddens. The scene of crime people had gone over the area between the car park and Platform 7. It was the only logical way a stranger could have entered the station unseen. The black cab drivers were being contacted to find out about any late night drops or uplifts from the rank at the station door. And what would DS Wilson find from his questioning of the girls along in Waterloo Street?

Gibson's main concern had been for the minimum disruption to the trains. They'd keep the North Hanover Street entrance cordoned off from the public and Platform 7 was out of commission meantime, but the station would open for business as usual. Lorimer yawned. It wasn't yet daylight and he had hours of work still ahead of him. These nine-to-five commuters didn't know they were living.