

# Three Times Buried

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# Prologue

DECEMBER 1863

## St Cyrus Poor-house

Winter had set in: the bleak, bone-deep chill of a Scottish December.

The old man huddled upon a wooden chair, as far from the door as he could get to escape the draught that was fingering in through the cracks. He'd have liked a pipe, but it was a long time since he'd been able to afford tobacco. He breathed onto his chapped hands. Arthritis and too many winters had stiffened his hands and hips and knees into rusty hinges – just as it had done, decades ago, to his mother's. He tucked his claws into his armpits and thought about his long-dead mother. He assumed she was long dead.

The other men were shuffling about in the deflated way of poor-house folk. They were crooked, toothless, hair-thin, like him. Wheezing, sighing with every movement. They sat together, as if huddling would warm them, but it didn't. He found no pleasure in their company; they were fellow inmates – nothing more. Like him, recipients of the kirk's grudging charity. Forty years in the parish, and he was friendless.

It had been better when he could work. The rhythm of toil had sustained him then. The routines: getting up at dawn, ploughing, cutting hay, singling turnips, yoking the workhorses, feeding the cattle, going to bed with the sun. It was easier to live when the routines of labour had carried him through the hours and days and years. Now – nothing. Too frail to work, and no use on the farm. Nothing to look forward to. Nothing much to look back on either, if he thought about it.

He'd grown querulous with age. He griped about his aching bones, but his companions had troubles enough of their own. His grumbling set off a fit of coughing and his

neighbour told him to cut the racket. He wiped the mucus from his lips with his sleeve and muttered a curse – quietly, so it wouldn't reach the ears of the kirk.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon, and darkness had set in. He struggled to his feet and said to no-one in particular that he'd have an early night. No reaction. He shuffled off to bed. He sat on the edge of his narrow cot, reached into the small cabinet beside it and withdrew a razor. Then he lay down, looked up into the darkness and, with a swipe of the razor, laid open his throat.

# Part One

Chapter 1  
12 November 1826  
FUTTERET DEN

A figure emerged from the morning fog down on the turnpike road: a young woman, strolling as if she had all the time in the world.

Widow Lovie saw her from the door of the cottage, where she stood wheezing, just returned from the well. She grunted as she lowered the buckets of water to the ground, one eye on the girl. Worn out already, and the sun was barely up. The girl waved but did not quicken her step, and the widow tucked frozen hands into her armpits and waited.

The figure came into focus. It was the McKessar girl, poor Henrietta's youngest but one. What did she want?

The girl made her way across the frosty field and stopped at the cottage door.

'I'm Margaret McKessar,' she said, puffing clouds into the bitter morning. The wind had planted roses in her rounded cheeks; they looked as if they would dimple when she smiled.

'I know who you are.'

'Your son John hired me yesterday,' Margaret McKessar said. 'At the feeing market.'

So: the new servant. The tip of her nose was red with the chill, but her eyes were merry.

'Where are your things?'

'My brother will bring my kist this afternoon.'

Margaret McKessar smiled, and the widow saw she was right about the dimples. The girl lived only half a mile away and would, no doubt, be forever running back to her family. A servant from further afield would have been better – a hungry quine without distractions. And a plainer girl, too: that would have been better. Still, she looked strong and healthy, and that counted for a lot.

Widow Lovie nodded. 'All right, then.'

She bent to pick up a bucket, flexing her knuckles painfully. These icy mornings played havoc with the rheumatism. The early days of winter were the worst, when the dense sky heralded months of gloom, and no respite in sight.

Margaret McKessar made no move to help, and so she said, 'Take one, will you?' and the girl hoisted the other bucket from the ground. The water sloshed, and Widow Lovie clenched her teeth to hold back a reproof. The girl's good cheer might be worth a lost drop or two.

They turned to the cottage, each with a bucket in hand. A robin flitted above the door – a gorgeous splash of red against stone. *A sign of ill luck. An omen of trouble with the law.* Widow Lovie raised her free hand and touched the wooden door frame. Best to take precautions. She met Margaret McKessar's eye, and the girl nodded. So: she understood the old ways.

'They call you "Meggy", don't they?'

'Aye.'

They ducked inside, into the short, shallow passage that opened to a room on each side. She shut the door to trap the warmth in, and the two women paused to let their eyes adjust to the gloom.

Meggy glanced towards the room on her right, but Widow Lovie ushered her leftwards to the kitchen. She had already got the fire blazing, and the kitchen smelled warm and peaty. They placed the buckets on the earthen floor, and she watched with satisfaction as the girl gazed with open pleasure at her new surroundings. Seen through a stranger's eyes, she thought, it *was* a charming room: bigger than the neighbours' homes, but still cosy.

Meggy took a step deeper into the dim kitchen, and a wintry ribbon of light fell from the small window onto her patched woollen skirt. She slipped her wrap from her shoulders and slung it onto the seat of the long carved decee under the window. The decee was far finer than the settle in the McKessar home, which the widow knew the gravedigger Brown had knocked up out of driftwood for them. They were charity cases, the McKessars.

Meggy strolled to the hearth and held her hands out to the flames. In the silence, John's clock measured time in sleepy ticks. Meggy turned her head towards the tall mahogany clock on the far wall, and the widow felt another small swelling of pride. She shuffled past Meggy, lifted the lid of the tea kettle on the ledge by the grate and peered inside.

Meggy ambled back towards the decee. The hinge of the folding table creaked as the girl flipped it up flush with the seat's back.

'Will I sleep on the decee?' she asked, testing the table's mechanism, up and down, up and down.

Widow Lovie shook her head. 'Nay.' She nodded towards the closet set into the corner, against the partition between the two rooms. 'You'll sleep in there with me.'

Meggy strode to the closet and pulled the door open to study the box bed. When she turned back, she was smiling. 'Am I the only servant?'

'For now,' Widow Lovie said. 'But my grandson helps out with the cattle at times. John says he'll take him on and a farmhand as well at Whitsunday.'

The girl wandered back to the passage by the front door and peered into the other room, but Widow Lovie said sharply, 'That's John's room.'

Meggy took the hint and turned back to dimple at her. 'Where *is* John?'

'Your master? He's out threshing the corn.'

John had slept late that morning and woken with a sore head. Too much carousing after yesterday's feeing market, she supposed. John wasn't much of a drinker, God bless him; a dram or two before bed was enough for him. Unlike his father – now there was a slave to the bottle, George. He'd been a strong man, for all that, could drink the farmhands unconscious and still get behind his plough at dawn with all the power of a pair of workhorses. John wasn't like that. Still, he *had* staggered home late last night, noisy, and with the stink of whisky on him. *Oh, John*. Her heart shifted, thinking of him.

The girl was filling the room, touching things, prodding, sniffing.

Lucky girl, she thought, though Meggy showed no sign of awareness of her good fortune. The widow wondered if the new servant had taken part in the post-fair revelry. She seemed too bright-eyed to have spent the night drinking and flirting. Then again, she was young. But she was fit for work today, and that was all that mattered.

The widow waved a hand at the wooden armchair. 'Sit, then. Have some tea.'

The girl drew a chair closer to the fire. Widow Lovie placed her shawl on the small round table – it was warm in the cottage – and picked the tea kettle up from the ledge. It was still hot from John's breakfast. She poured a mug for the girl and another for herself. There was much to do, but the girl's lightness made her feel reckless. She put a mug in Meggy's hands and sank with a sigh into the other armchair, facing the fire. She took a gulp of tea, closed her eyes to savour it all: the tea, the warmth, the stillness.



When she opened her eyes, Meggy was smiling at her. She had straight teeth and neat crinkles around her eyes. She'd thought the girl might be a chatterer, but – thank God – she wasn't. They sat and slurped in silence. There were things she could have said – pleasantries, instructions, rules – but they could wait. She was too tired for small talk.

'My son will give you your instructions later,' she said. 'Today you can help me clean the kitchen and settle yourself in.' She rested her head against the back of the chair. There would be rules ... but what *were* they? She would have to make some, she supposed. She peered sideways at the girl through slitted eyes. Would Meggy follow rules anyway? She didn't seem the submissive type. She'd be trouble; young women always were. But the widow was too tired to worry about that.

There was a knock, and before she could creak to her feet, a slanted rectangle of pallid light gusted into the cottage. Meggy started and spun around, alert, bright-eyed, dimpling. *Expecting John*. Widow Lovie exhaled slowly. *So that's how it is*.

But instead of John, in marched his sister Elspet in a whirl of briny ice-wind.

'Och!' Elspet said, thrusting her jaw at her mother. 'You've got company.'

Elspet was ten years younger than John, but you'd never guess it from her face; she already sported deep lines from nose to jaw. She'd put on weight lately, and it didn't suit her.

'You know Meggy McKessar,' the widow said, tilting a cheek for her daughter to kiss.

'Aye,' Elspet said, not looking at the girl.

Elspet stomped to the fire and poured herself a mug of tea. She frowned at Meggy, waiting for the girl to vacate the armchair for her. Meggy smiled behind a cupped hand and remained seated. Widow Lovie felt a twitching at the corners of her mouth.

'How's William?' Widow Lovie said, with a pointed glance at Elspet's swollen breasts.

'William is well,' Elspet replied coldly, still standing, her back to the fire. Elspet was due to wed in two weeks; she really ought to be livelier. If a woman couldn't be cheerful on the eve of her wedding, then whenever could she be? But jauntiness wasn't Elspet's way. She had the knack of turning autumn to winter.

Elspet looked down her nose at Meggy and said sharply, 'I thought Mr Scott wanted you on *his* farm.'

'Oh, aye,' Meggy said. 'He did.'

'Your mither said she favoured *him*.'

The widow's stomach dropped at that. So the rumours were still going about, then? The whispers about that awful business with the Chessor girl, the liar?

Meggy shrugged and laughed. 'Cranky old Scott? *I* favoured John Lovie's offer.'

The widow gave a short, sharp laugh. Let mothers warn their daughters all they liked. Mothers wanted their daughters to work for old, worn-out men who would keep themselves to themselves – but would daughters ever listen to their mothers?

Elspet reddened. Meggy rose lazily and took her mug to the dresser, her hips swaying. The maid was showing off! No wonder Elspet hadn't taken to her.

'Meggy,' Widow Lovie said, smiling. 'Go and look about the farm. Acquaint yourself with the dairy.'

Meggy nodded and sashayed to the door. A blast of cold air and light washed in, and then the widow was alone with her daughter in the gloom again.

Elspet flung her a dark look as she lowered herself into the vacated armchair. 'She'll be trouble.'

'Phhht,' she said, with a flick of the wrist. She was feeling – unusually – playful. 'Don't fret yourself.'

'Don't say I never warned you.'