

THE
SHADOWY
HORSES

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CHAPTER 1

THE BUS HAD NO business stopping where it did. We should have gone straight on across the Coldingham Moor, with Dunbar to the back of us and the English border drawing ever nearer, but instead we stopped, and the shaggy-faced cattle that lifted their heads on the far side of the fence appeared to share my surprise when the driver cut the engine to an idle.

A fierce blast of wind rocked the little ten-seater bus on its tires and drove a splattering of cold spring rain against the driver's windshield, but he took no notice. He shook out a well-thumbed newspaper and settled back, humming tunelessly to himself. Curious, I shifted in my seat to peer out my own fogging window.

There seemed, at first glance, nothing to stop for, only the cattle and a few uninterested sheep, picking their way across a ragged landscape that was turning green reluctantly, as if someone had told it only yesterday that spring had come. Beyond the moor, lost somewhere in the impenetrable mist, rose the wild, romantic Lammermuir Hills I'd read about as a child. And in the opposite direction, although I couldn't see it either, the cold North Sea bit deep into the coastal line of cliffs.

The wind struck again, broadside, and the little bus shuddered. I sighed, and watched my breath condense upon the chattering window glass.

Impulsiveness, my mother always said, was one of my worst flaws, second only to my habit of speaking to strangers. After twenty-nine years I'd grown accustomed to her heavy sighs and shaking head, and to her firm conviction I'd end up a sad statistic on the nightly news. But now, as I squinted out at the bleak, unwelcoming scenery, I grudgingly admitted that my mother had a point.

It had been impulse, after all, that had brought me from my London flat to Scotland in the first place. Impulse, and the slick, persuasive writing style of Adrian Sutton-Clarke. He knew me too well, did Adrian, and he had phrased his summons craftily—his promise of “the perfect job” set like a jewel at the center of a long letter that was so deliciously mysterious, so full of hints of grand adventure, that I couldn't possibly resist it. Adrian, for all his faults, had rarely steered me wrong. And if today was anything to go by, I decided, he hadn't been lying about the adventure.

Not that one could really blame British Rail for what had happened. My train had certainly set out from King's Cross cheerily enough, and even after we'd spent twenty minutes on a siding waiting for a points failure to be corrected, the engine had pushed ahead with vigor, determined to make up the time. It was only after our second delay north of Darlington, because of sheep on the line, that the train had begun to show signs of weariness, creaking and rolling from side to side in a rocking motion that lulled me instantly to sleep.

I had stayed sleeping right through Durham, then Newcastle, and finally Berwick upon Tweed, where I was meant to get off. When the train lurched to a stop at Dunbar, I'd scrambled down onto the platform with the familiar resigned feeling that told me I was lost. Well, not so

much lost, really, as diverted. And the fact that my train had been an hour late coming into Dunbar proved something of a complication.

“You might have taken the 5:24,” the stationmaster had informed me, in an effort to be helpful, “or the 5:51. But they’ve both gone. There’ll not be another train to Berwick now till 7:23.”

“I see.” Nearly an hour and a half to wait. I hated waiting. “I don’t suppose there’s a bus?”

“To Berwick? Aye, there is, at...” he’d searched his clockwork memory for the time, “...6:25. Just round the corner, there, and up the road a ways—that’s where it stops.”

And so I’d wrestled my suitcase round the corner and up the road to the small bus shelter, my spirits lifting somewhat as I read the posted timetable telling me the bus to Berwick traveled via Cockburnspath and Coldingham and Eyemouth.

Eyemouth, Adrian had written in his letter, *pronounced just as it looks, and not like Plymouth, if you please. You’d love it here, I think—I remember how you waxed rhapsodic about the north coast of Cornwall, and this is rather better, a real old-fashioned fishing town with smugglers’ ghosts round every corner and the added lure of... but no, I shan’t give the secret away. You’ll just have to come and find out for yourself.*

I’d have been only too happy to oblige, I thought wryly, but for the fact that I was now stuck in the middle of Coldingham Moor, with the bus idling on and the driver still reading his newspaper.

There seemed little point in questioning the stop; apart from a couple of love-struck kids fondling each other at the rear of the bus, I was the only passenger. And the driver was bigger than me. Still, my curiosity had almost reached breaking point when he finally folded his paper with a

decisive rattle, sat himself upright, and pulled on the lever to open the door.

A man was coming across the moor.

It might have been the fogged window, or the wild weather, or the rough and rolling landscape that, like all the Scottish Borderlands, held traces of the harsh and violent past—the echoed din of charging hooves, of chilling battle-cries and clashing broadswords. Whatever it was, it tricked my senses. The man, to my eyes, looked enormous, a great dark giant who moved over bracken and thorn with an effortless stride. He might have been a specter from a bygone age, a fearless border laird come to challenge our rude intrusion on his lands—but the illusion lasted only a moment.

The stranger pulled his collar tighter against another punishing blast of wind and rain and jogged the final few steps to the bus door. No border laird, just a rather ordinary-looking man in his mid-thirties, fit and broad-shouldered and thoroughly modern in jeans and a leather jacket. Well, I amended as he smoothed back his curling black hair and grinned at the bus driver, maybe not *exactly* ordinary-looking...

“Heyah,” he greeted the driver, swinging himself up the final step. “Saw me coming, did you?”

“Aye, well, ye do stick out, lad. Thought I might as well wait for ye, save ye the walk back.” The doors swung shut and, joy of joys, the bus sprang forward once again as the new passenger dropped into the seat across from me, planting his feet wide apart on the floor to brace himself.

He and the driver chatted on like old friends, which I supposed they were, about the state of the weather and the latest rebellion of the bus driver’s daughter and the health of the younger man’s mother. It had been some years since I’d spent time in Scotland, and I’d forgotten just how musical the

accent was. This was a thicker accent than I was accustomed to, and I couldn't catch each word as it was spoken, but I did my level best to follow the conversation. Just for practice, I told myself. Not because I was interested.

The bus rattled noisily over the moor, dipped into Coldingham town and stopped for a moment to let off the teenagers. Shifting round in his seat, the bus driver sent me a courteous glance. "You're for Eyemouth, lass, aren't ye?"

"Yes, that's right."

The man from the moor lifted an eyebrow at my accent, and glanced over. For a moment, my mother's face rose sternly in my mind. Never talk to strangers... But I pushed the image back and sent the man a friendly smile.

The bus driver carried on speaking, over his shoulder. "Are ye up here on holiday?"

Having received little response from the man opposite, I turned my smile on the driver instead. "Interviewing for a job, actually."

"Oh, aye?" He'd politely modified his speech, as most Scots did when talking to a non-Scot, and though the accent was still there I found him easier to understand. "What kind of job?"

Well, that was just the question, wasn't it? I didn't really know, myself. "Museum work, of sorts," I hedged. "I'm interviewing with a man just outside Eyemouth—"

The dark man from the moor cut me off. "Not Peter Quinnell, surely?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Christ, you don't mean to say you're Adrian's wee friend from London?" He did smile then, and the simple act transformed his rugged face. "We'd not expected you till

tomorrow. David Fortune,” he held out his hand by way of introduction. “I work with Quinnell as well.”

I shook his hand. “Verity Grey.”

“Aye, I ken fine who you are. I must say,” he confessed, leaning back again, “you’re not at all as I pictured you.”

Everyone said that. Museum workers, I had learned, were supposed to be little old ladies in spectacles, not twenty-nine-year-olds in short skirts. I nodded patiently. “I’m younger, you mean?”

“No. It’s only that, with Adrian recommending you, I’d have thought to find someone... well, someone...”

“Tall, blonde, and beautiful?”

“Something like that.”

I couldn’t help smiling. I was, to my knowledge, the only dark-haired woman who’d ever received so much as a dinner invitation from Adrian Sutton-Clarke, and I’d held his interest only until the next blonde came along. But while our romance had proved temporary, our separate paths, by virtue of our work, kept crossing and re-crossing like some fatalistic web. Truth be told, I probably saw more of Adrian now than I had when we were dating. When one wasn’t actually in love with the man, he could be a quite enjoyable companion. Adrian, at least, understood the restless, independent streak that had made me chuck my British Museum job and strike out on my own to freelance. And he’d learned I never could resist a challenge.

I studied the man across from me with interest, bringing all my powers of deduction to bear. I had already assumed, since Adrian was involved, that the job for which I was being interviewed involved some sort of archaeological dig. Adrian was one of the best surveyors in the business. I glanced at David Fortune’s hands, and ventured to test my theory.

“How large is the excavation, then?” I asked him. “How many field crew members are on site?”

“Just the four of us, at the moment.”

“Oh.” For a moment I was tempted to ask what they were all digging for, and why, but I held my tongue, not eager to let on that I’d come all this way not knowing.

He looked down, at my single suitcase. “You’ve just come up from London, then?”

“Yes. I’m a day early, I know, but the job did sound intriguing and I really couldn’t see the point in waiting down in London when I could be waiting here, if you know what I mean...”

His eyes held understanding. “Aye. I wouldn’t worry. Quinnell’s an impatient man himself.”

The sea was close beside us now. I could see the choppy froth of waves beyond the thinning wall of mist, and the jutting silhouettes of jagged rocks. The rain had stopped. Between the racing clouds a sudden gleam of sunlight flashed, and disappeared, and flashed again, and finally stretched a searching finger out to touch the clustered houses curving round the coast ahead of us.

The town of Eyemouth looked to me like a postcard view of a fishing village, its buildings tumbling in a tight cascade down to the sea wall while a gathering of gulls wheeled and dipped above the rooftops, marking the place where the harbor, yet unseen, cut back into the greening cliffs.

The sunbeam, I decided, held a pleasant sort of promise. And somewhere, not too far away, the mysterious Peter Quinnell was looking forward to meeting me. I leaned forward as the bus dived in among the houses. “Where would you recommend I stay?” I asked my new acquaintance. “Is there a guest house, or a nice hotel?”

“You’ll not be staying in the town?” He raised his eyebrows, clearly shocked. “Christ, Quinnell wouldn’t hear of it. He’s had a room made up for you at Rosehill, at the house.”

I stared at him. “Oh, but I couldn’t...”

“You want the job?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t offend the management,” was his advice. He softened it with a smile. “Don’t worry. They’re all nice people, out at Rosehill. They’ll make you feel at home.”

The bus driver flicked a glance up at his mirror, met my eyes, but didn’t say anything.

I frowned. “It’s just that I prefer to stay on my own, that’s all. I don’t like to impose...”

“You’ll not be imposing. Quinnell loves his company.”

“I’m sure he does. But if he doesn’t hire me, it might prove awkward.”

“Oh, he’ll hire you,” said David Fortune, with a nod of certainty. “That is, he’ll offer you the job, make no mistake. Whether you accept or not, well... that’s for you to say.”

Something in the offhand way he said that made me tilt my head, suspicious. “Why wouldn’t I accept?”

“Have you eaten, yet?” he asked, as if I hadn’t spoken. “You haven’t, have you? And it’s Thursday night, this—Jeannie’s night off. There’ll be no supper on at the house.” He turned to the bus driver, who was following our exchange with interest. “Danny, do us a favor, will you, and drop us at the harbor road?”

“The Ship Hotel?” the driver checked, and glanced again at me. “Aye, it’d be no trouble. It widnae do for the lass to face old Quinnell on an empty stomach.”

My suspicions growing, I slowly turned to look at David Fortune, but his expression was charmingly innocent. So

charming, in fact, that I scarcely noticed when the bus stopped moving. It wasn't until I felt the sudden blast of chill from the open door that I finally stirred in my seat. Gathering up my suitcase, I tossed a word of thanks to the driver and clambered down the steps to solid ground.

The wind had grown colder. It struck me like a body blow and might have knocked me over if the man at my side hadn't taken the suitcase from me, placing a large hand at my back to guide me up along the harbor's edge. The tide was very high, and the fishing boats creaked at their moorings, masts and rigging swaying with the motion of the water.

If my mother saw me now she'd have a heart attack, I thought. She'd always had a thing about the seamy side of harbor life—a half-imagined paranoid world of smugglers, cutthroats, pirates, and white-slavers. I took another look up at the great dark figure walking at my shoulder.

David Fortune did look a shade piratical, come to think of it, with his black unruly hair curling in the wind and the flat gray light of early evening sharpening the line of his stubborn jaw. His nose, in profile, was not quite straight, as though it had been broken in a fight. And I had only his word for it, after all, that he had anything to do with Peter Quinnell, or with Adrian Sutton-Clarke, or with...

"Here we are," he told me, as a sprawling white pub rose at the next corner to welcome us. He had leaned down so that his voice would carry through the wind, and I caught the swift warmth of his cheek close by my face. Oh, well, I thought. Pirate or no, he was easy to look at, and I was, to be honest, in need of a drink and a plate of hot food.

There were two doorways into the Ship Hotel—one that led into the main public bar, and the other to the dining lounge. David Fortune steered me through the latter.

I felt instantly warmer, out of the wind, with the light bursting clear and inviting from rose-tinted fixtures hung high on the cream stuccoed walls. Round wooden tables hugged the wainscoting and nestled in padded alcoves that enticed one to sit and relax. Through an open door behind the bar I could just glimpse a larger, less fancified room where coarse cheerful voices competed with piped-in music, but on this side of the door even the bar held a touch of elegance, its gleaming rows of bottles artistically illumined by a line of recessed lights.

A few of the tables were already occupied. David Fortune plucked a menu from the bar and chose a table for us in a window alcove. Leaning back against the padded bench, he stretched his legs out so his feet disappeared under the bench on my side. "Take a look at that, then," he offered, handing the menu over. "And order what you like; the bill's on Quinnell. He'd not want to see you starve."

The mention of Peter Quinnell's name brought my earlier misgivings sharply into focus. "Listen," I began, frowning slightly, "there isn't anything *wrong* with the job, is there?"

He raised his eyebrows, but before he could respond the barmaid came through from the other side and sent us a welcoming smile. "Heyah, Davy. How's your mum?"

"As much of a witch as she ever was." His tone was indulgent. "Is Adrian about?"

"Upstairs, I think. Do you want me to fetch him?"

"Aye, if you would. But first, give us a..." He paused, looked at me, eyes enquiring. "What'll you have?"

"Dry white wine, please."

"And a pint of Deuchers for me, there's a love."

As the barmaid departed, I gave in to my curiosity. "Adrian's upstairs?"

"Oh, aye. We both have rooms here. There's just the one

spare room at Rosehill, and Quinnell wanted to save that for you, so he's put us both up here instead."

Our drinks arrived. I watched him down a mouthful of the dark foaming beer, and frowned again. "Isn't that rather inconvenient?"

He shook his head. "It's only a mile out to the house. I like the walk."

I tried to imagine Adrian Sutton-Clarke walking a country mile to work each morning, and failed. Adrian, I knew, would use his car.

A door from the corridor opened and closed and a tall, lean-faced man with mahogany hair shook his head and came, smiling, toward us. "Verity, my dear, you really must learn some respect for schedules," he teased me, bending down to brush my cheek with an affectionate kiss of greeting. "Friday, last time I checked, comes after Thursday, and you did say Friday."

"Hello, Adrian." It always took me a moment to adjust to the sheer impact of his handsome face, even now. Each time I met up with him I kept hoping, rather foolishly, that he'd have chipped one of his teeth, or that his dark, long-lashed eyes would be puffy and bloodshot, but each time he turned up just as perfect as ever, a six-foot-two package of pure sex appeal, and invariably knocked me off center. Only for a moment, and then memory reasserted itself and I was fine.

David Fortune had misinterpreted the involuntary change in my expression. He drained his pint and rose politely. "Look, I'll leave you to it, shall I? I could do with a shower and a lie-down, myself. See you both tomorrow." Slanting a brief look down at me, he stabbed the menu with a knowing finger. "Try the lemon sole, it's magic."

Adrian slid into the vacant seat opposite and favored me

with a curious stare. “Just how,” he asked me, when we were alone, “did you come to meet Fortune? Or do I want to know?”

“We were on the same bus. We got talking.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “The bus from Berwick.”

“Dunbar, actually.”

The waitress came. I closed my menu, and ordered the lemon sole.

Adrian leaned back, contentedly. “I know I’m going to regret asking this,” he said. “But how, if you came up from London, presumably on the train, did you end up on a Berwickshire bus from Dunbar?”

I explained. It took some time, and I was nearly finished with my meal by the time I’d told him everything, beginning with the sheep on the line at Darlington. Adrian shook his head in disbelief and reached for his cup of coffee. “You see? If you’d waited until tomorrow, like you were supposed to, none of that would have happened.”

I shrugged. “Something worse might have happened. You never know.”

“True. Confusion does rather seem to follow you around, doesn’t it?”

“So tell me,” I changed the subject, balancing my knife and fork on my empty plate, “what exactly is this job you’ve recommended me for?”

Adrian folded his arms and smiled like the devil. “As I recall, I told you I’d explain everything on Friday.”

“When I arrived, you said.”

“On Friday. And today’s only Thursday.”

“Oh, give it up...”

“But I’m sure Quinnell will be happy to tell you anything you want to know, when you meet him.”

“That’s hardly fair,” I pointed out. “I’m meeting him tonight.”

“So you are. Finished with that, have you? Good. Then let’s get you out to Rosehill so you can settle in.”

“Rat,” I called him, holding back my smile.

Ten minutes later, seated in his car and speeding inland from the harbor, I tried again. “The least you can do,” I said evenly, “is tell me what’s wrong with the job.”

“Wrong with the job?” He flashed me a quick sideways glance, eyebrows raised. “Nothing’s wrong with the job. It’s a great opportunity, wonderful benefits—Quinnell’s a disgustingly wealthy man, so the pay is obscene. And you get room and board with it, holidays, travel allowances... it’s a marvelous job.”

“You’re certain of that?”

“Lord, yes. You don’t think I’d have lured you up here otherwise, do you?” Again the rapid glance. “Why the sudden lack of trust?”

I shrugged. “Just something your Mr. Fortune said, in passing.”

“Oh, yes?”

“He was sure that I’d be offered the job,” I explained. “He wasn’t so sure I’d accept.”

Adrian digested this thoughtfully. We were well out of town, now, and the road was dark. I couldn’t see his eyes. “I suppose,” he said slowly, “that he might have been thinking of Quinnell himself. Of how you’d react.”

“React to what?”

“To Quinnell.”

I sighed, tight-lipped. “Adrian...”

“Peter Quinnell,” he told me, “is a fascinating old character—well-read, intelligent, one of a kind.” He turned

his head so I could see the half-apologetic smile. “But I’m afraid that he’s also quite mad.”