



# A Clear-Cut Case

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**P**LEASE, YE MUST HELP ME. I DO NA HAVE ANYWHERE ELSE TO turn,” said the young woman on the doorstep.

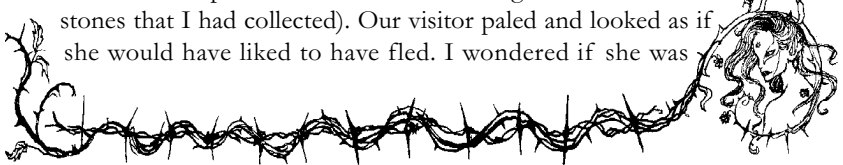
She was a ragged little thing, thin and dressed in clothing worn from a thousand washings. Soot smudged her face, as it did everything in Gloachamuir, and her tears made bright tracks through the grime. The iron collar of a factory slave encircled her neck, and I suppressed an instinctive shudder at the sight, even though I knew that the metal was no threat to the purely-human woman who wore it.

“I take it you are looking for Miss Barrow?” I asked. “I am her roommate, Elizabeth DaTarn. Please, follow me.”

I led the factory slave up the steep stair to the second-floor flat that I shared with Sorcha Barrow. The stair opened onto our small sitting room, which was crowded with a number of oddities that belonged mainly to me. Medical journals spilled from every table and were piled on the floor. A human skull served as a paperweight on the writing desk, and was accompanied by the bronze knife I used as a letter-opener. The skeleton of a dog, strung on copper wire, crouched watchfully on the mantelpiece.

Sorcha stood with her back to us, staring out the window at the night. Tall and whippet-thin, she cut a spare figure in her dressing gown. Despite her youth, her hair was pure white, and drifted about her shoulders like cobwebs.

She turned when I shut the door, and crossed the room (forced as she did so to step around an old medical bag filled with colorful stones that I had collected). Our visitor paled and looked as if she would have liked to have fled. I wondered if she was



intimidated by Sorcha's height and severe appearance, or if she had a touch of the Sight and discerned something of our fae blood.

"A-are ye Miss Barrow?" she asked hesitantly. "The private detective?"

Sorcha nodded. "I am. You have come late for a client; most of my business is conducted during the day."

"And sorry for it I am, ma'am, but me shift at the mill just ended an hour ago, and I dinna have the money for a cab."

"Quite all right," Sorcha said abruptly, and dropped into a chair. "Sit down, Miss....?"

"Adaira DaNair."

"Miss DaNair. Do you mind if Dr. DaTarn joins us? I have found her help to be most invaluable on other cases, and being a doctor at the charity hospital, she is used to maintaining discretion."

The praise warmed my heart, and I sat down at Miss DaNair's assent. "Why have you come?" I asked kindly.

Adaira swallowed, her hands twisting nervously in the lap of her skirt. "It's me man, Donal, ye see."

"Dead or missing?" Sorcha inquired, with what I thought a profound lack of either tact or sensitivity.

Tears welled in Adaira's eyes. "Murdered! But how did ye know?"

Sorcha settled back, watching Adaira thoughtfully. "There are few reasons that women come to me with cases concerning men. By your attire, I could guess that you do not have the means to simply investigate a philandering lover. Blackmail also seems unlikely. Therefore, it must be something desperate, which leaves death or the possibility of death the only logical choices."

"Ye're right. He...I identified his body this morning, before me shift started. I do na have the money to bury him, and what I'm to do I'm sure I do na know...."

Sorcha held up a hand, cutting off her client's tale of woe. "Please, Miss DaNair, begin at the beginning. When did you see Donal last?"

"Last night." Adaira wiped at her eyes, smearing soot across her young face. "We had a bit of a row, ye see. Donal is—was—a good man, but he had his weaknesses like us all. Had a fondness for the bottle, and he did na like it when I'd scold him for it. Stormed out of the flat he did, saying he was on his way to the pub, and he'd be damned if I'd stop him. And that was the last time I saw him alive."

I perceived that the woman held herself somewhat to blame for the death of her man, no doubt wondering what might have happened if she hadn't complained of his drinking. As for Donal himself, I privately wondered just how good a man he had been. I'd seen some of the effects of heavy drinking far too often at the hospital, in the form of black eyes and broken limbs.

"About what time did Donal leave your presence?" Sorcha asked, steeping her fingers before her and peering at her client with strangely colorless eyes.

"About nine o'clock, I'm thinking. We live down by the railroad, where it crosses over the With, and I'd heard the train go by just before."