

The Hounds of Hellerby Hall

By Colin Garrow

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Prologue - The Fifth Bowl

It is still dark when he wakes.

Don't open your eyes.

He blinks, takes a breath, opens one eye. Then another.

He breathes out, allows himself a full minute to adjust to the gloom.

Stay in bed. Let the grown-ups deal with it.

Another breath, then he slides out of bed and pads across the floor. Tugging one of the curtains open, he peers out. Across the lawn, the pond lies still and flat in the early morning, the sun barely over the horizon, trees at the water's edge casting long shadows over the grass.

At last, the night is over.

He breathes out, gets dressed swiftly, opens the door and walks quietly down the passage to the top of the stairs. Voices echo upwards from below - Effie, probably, the lilt of her Edinburgh accent carrying easily up the stairwell.

One hand on the banister, he listens again. Still only Effie, giving orders to the kitchen maid, but her voice sounds normal. No suggestion of panic. Nothing out of the ordinary.

A minute later, he is downstairs and heading for the dining room. The door is closed. Another month or so and the maid would have been in there already to light the fire, but it is only September and Georgie knows his father will not tolerate squandering money on fuel.

He takes hold of the polished brass knob and turns it.

Don't go in.

For a moment, he stands there, unwilling, apprehensive, then with a deep breath pushes the door wide and walks to the table.

And there sitting in the centre, as he knew it would be, is the bowl.

Full of blood.

Human blood.

Chapter One - A Meeting

She sighs dramatically and slams the magazine down on the table.

'Not hungry?' says her father, glancing at the untouched breakfast over the top of his newspaper.

Christie pulls a face and says nothing.

The solicitor makes a quick assessment: the downturned mouth, the rather unusual lack of communication and most importantly, this week's issue of a certain periodical thrown aside in disgust. He considers his options and plumps for a supportive role. 'You're a very talented wee girl, darling - witty, imaginative and exceptionally literate.' He pauses, then 'But to be fair, Mr Morrison did say...' He tails off, not wanting to state the obvious. He waits for her to respond.

She glares at him. 'What?'

James McKinnon stifles a sigh, carefully folds the Saturday edition of The Scotsman and places it on the left side of his breakfast plate. 'Well...' he pauses, searching for an appropriately flattering expression. 'You're...'

'It's no' fair. Just cos I'm a girl.' She pushes a strand of dark hair out of her eyes. 'It's a good story. One of my best.'

Her father smiles as much as he dares. 'I know it is, Christie, but...'

'But nothin', it's discrimination.'

He raises an eyebrow. 'Where'd you hear a word like that, lassie?'

Christie rolls her eyes. 'I didnae hear a word like that, I heard that actual word.'

'Aye, well, it may or may not be discrimination, Christie, but there's no good can come of making an issue out of it. You'll just have to...persevere. Show him what you're made of.' He waves a hand in the direction of the bookcase on the wall behind her. 'I'll wager your friend Charlotte didn't get her first story published straight off the bat, either.'

'I dinnae want to be one of the Bronte sisters, thank you very much, I just want to be...' she shrugs. 'Me.'

'And indeed you are you, so what's the problem?'

Christie groans. Picking up a slice of bacon, she stuffs it into her mouth.

'Want to swap?' he says, offering her the newspaper.

She shakes her head, chewing thoughtfully. 'Read all the interesting bits while you were still in your bed. Liked the one about the bowl of blood.' She pushes her chair away from the table. 'I'm away to my room.' And with that, she picks up her magazine and goes out.

Opening up the paper again, James goes back to the article he was reading. It seems that a rather well-to-do family to the west of Queensferry are having a bit of a time of it, with one thing and another. He notes the headline and its play on words - Hellish Times at Hellerby! then skims through the story's highlights: family at their wits end...vile deeds and unspeakable wrongs...servants running amok... The accompanying illustration is obviously an attempt to convey something of the horror of the situation, despite the fact that the artist almost certainly got no further than hearing the headline before creating the bizarre and, in all probability, wholly inaccurate sketch.

'Bizarre indeed,' he mutters to himself, and wonders if the family are in search of legal representation. Except, of course, if there's any truth to the tale, it's more likely they'll be looking for a ghost hunter.

She has to admit, the other stories are pretty good, especially the new adventure by Hugo Skene, which concerns a terrible murder in a cellar and a pair of bloodthirsty ne'er-do-wells who stalk the dark streets of Edinburgh. The illustration next to it shows two repulsive-looking villains about to throw a sack over an unsuspecting beggar woman. Christie feels a shiver run up her spine at the thought of such actions and she quickly looks out of the

window, reminding herself that she's here in her own home, safe and sound, no terrible threat hanging over her. Even so, she muses, it'd be thrilling to be involved in a real life murder mystery.

Glancing down at the story again, her eyes scan the page: Hugo Skene's 'Death in a Dark House' is his fourth or fifth story in as many weeks and he never seems to run out of ideas. However, this latest one also has the same difficulty she's noticed before - something not quite right that was never apparent in his earlier narratives, almost as if she's come across these same scenarios elsewhere. In any case, there's definitely something memorable about them. Still, the stories themselves are good - polished, well crafted and with plenty of gory details.

She broods on this for a moment, wishing her own narratives were as imaginative. Perhaps she could pay a visit to Mr Skene? He might be interested in having a protégé, an eager student, someone to do research for him? But then it occurs to her that the only way to find out Hugo Skene's address would be to go and speak to the editor, Mr Morrison. Again. She groans and drops her chin to her chest. If he won't even publish one of her stories, she can hardly expect him to give out the address of his most popular contributor (who probably wouldn't give her the time of day anyway). On the other hand, it's maybe worth a try - after all, the man can only say no, can't he?

The idea excites her and she runs to get her boots from their place by the bedroom door, then hauling them onto her feet, surveys herself in the narrow mirror on the side of the wardrobe. She has her mother's looks that's for certain but no-one would ever call her pretty. She makes a face at herself then catches a small reflected movement behind her. Striding across to the window, she rests her hands on the sill and peers through the trees to the other side of the square. A familiar figure is chasing a small dog along the pavement. From up here on the fourth floor, it's easy to follow the boy's progress until he's almost directly across the road from Christie's own front door.

Throwing up the sash, she picks up one of the small pebbles kept in a large jar by her bed for just such an occasion, and hurls it as hard as she can out of the open window. (It would, of course, be easier to simply yell the boy's name at the top of her voice, but her father generally frowns on such vulgar behaviour). The stone sails through the air in a long arc, clattering onto the pavement a few feet away from the boy with the dog. The lad looks up, a vexed expression on his face. However, on seeing Christie leaning out of the window, his face breaks into a wide grin. He gives her a friendly wave and hurries across the street, dodging round the back of a horse and cart. The small dog stays on the pavement, head cocked to one side, watching its playmate as he runs up the steps to the door.

By the time Clara the maid has hurried downstairs to answer the bell, Christie is already slamming the cloakroom door on the top landing, four storeys above.

Clara opens the door for the visitor and waves a hand for him to come in. 'And a goot mornink to you, Master Padderzon,' she says with a smile.

The boy grins up at her and leans against the door.

Upstairs, Christie is pulling on her hat and coat. She thrusts her copy of McMurdo's Weekly into her deepest pocket and bounds into the living room. 'I'm away out wi' Donal, father,' she shouts, already heading back down the passage.

'What?' James McKinnon puts down his newspaper again, his mouth beginning to form a question, but his daughter is already running down the stairs. He sighs and mutters, 'Don't be late for your tea.'

In the hallway downstairs, Christie stops for a moment to get her breath, then hugs Donal and thumps him on the back.

'Och for pity's sake, Christie,' he coughs, momentarily winded. 'I'm no' a character in one of your stories, ye ken, I'm actually real.'

'Sorry Donal, I'm just excited, that's all. Come on.' And with that, she's out the front door, a startled Clara jumping back out of her way.

Donal bows to the maid, then gazing up at her, 'My thanks for your kindness, madam,' and he too is off out the door, yelling for Christie to hold on.

Clara laughs, closes the door and starts back up the stairs.

The small dog barks a greeting as the boy reaches the pavement again. Donal gives Christie a pleading smile.

'Oh, no, not today, Donal. He'll get in the way.'

Donal's face falls, but he knows it's a waste of time trying to persuade her. He wags a finger at the dog. 'Go on, Hector, away home, now.' The animal sits for a moment gazing up at him, then does an about-turn and trots off round the other side of the square.

Detective Inspector Angus Robertson is tugging at the ends of his handlebar moustache and staring vacantly out of the library window. The distant barking is still quite audible from here. He idly wonders if it keeps the family awake at night. The swoosh of the door behind him announces that Effie has come back into the room.

She stands, one hand on the doorknob and sighs in a 'this-isnae-ma-job' sort of way, jerking her head at him in a manner he assumes is meant to convey that popular phrase 'come with me, please'. He follows her back out into the large entrance hall, past the stairs towards the other side of the house. Effie halts suddenly and whispers something to a dark-haired young man sporting what Robertson assumes is a butler-type outfit. The young man says something about the kitchen maid, then hurries off towards the back of the house.

Standing idly for a few seconds, Robertson glances up at the elaborately carved staircase that winds round in an almost complete circle. His eye tracks the curve of the banister down to the ground until it falls on the strange image painted on the tiles in the middle of the hall floor. He makes a mental note to have a closer look when it's more convenient.

Effie has started forward again and knocks quickly on the large door in front of them. 'Lord Bloomfield's in the morning room,' she says, barely glancing at the Inspector.

'I'll be wantin' to have a wee word with the boy at some point, too,' says Robertson.

The cook shrugs her shoulders. 'You'll hae tae find him first.' She opens the door and mutters 'Hope you're no' expectin' tea?' She says this in a way that seems to demand a polite refusal, so he does, and steps inside the room.

Donal's face retains its puzzled expression as he hurries after her along the busy street. 'But what's the point of going to see the mannie if he isnae going to give ye what you're wanting?'

Christie stops and turns round, giving her friend a look that tells him he should have listened properly the first time she explained it.

'I'm going to apologise.'

'For what?'

'For nothing, silly, but Mr Morrison will see my apology as a wee triumph to him, see?'

'Not really.'

She sighs. 'Donal, if somebody comes to you and says oh, I'm awfy sorry for not being very nice to you the other day, what would you think?'

'I suppose I'd think they were a bit daft.' He shrugs.

'No you wouldn't,' she chides, 'you'd think,' and holding a finger to the side of her mouth in her 'intellectual' pose, 'oh, perchance I may have misjudged this person, perhaps I should listen to what they have to say.'

Donal considers this for a moment, then shakes his head. 'No, I wouldnae. I'd think they were daft.'

Christie gives up and carries on walking, Donal hurrying along behind. Turning left at the end of Charlotte Street and into Princes Street, they continue for another block then Christie stops abruptly next to a draper's shop.

'It's up here,' she announces, pushing open a large green door just past the entrance to the shop. Donal notices the polished brass sign that reads 'McMurdo and Southey Publishing, Est. 1849'. He follows his friend as she climbs up the narrow staircase. On the first landing, they pass several doors bearing more brass signs relating to printing, photography and another word that's too long to think about, never mind say out loud. Black and white photographs are fixed to the walls, depicting outdoor scenes of shopkeepers and businessmen, as well as several images featuring worthy men and women working studiously at traditional Scottish crafts.

The last door at the top of the stairs stands open, revealing a high wooden counter that runs between the two main walls of the small room. The sign on this door reads: McMurdo's Weekly. Stepping inside, Christie leans on the counter and pings the service bell. Donal gazes around the cramped space - apart from the counter and a chair against the wall by the door, the only furniture is a sort of tall bookshelf filled with the latest copies of the company's publications. Next to the shelves, is a half-glazed door that presumably leads to where the magazine's employees work.

Christie presses the bell again. It tings loudly and a blurred shape moves around on the other side of the glass door. A moment later, a dour-looking woman appears, a smile fixed to her thin face. When she sees Christie, the smile vanishes.

'No' you again? Whitt is it this time?'

Christie smiles her best smile and says in her poshest voice, 'Good morning Miss Watt. I was wondering if I might have a word with Mr Morrison?'

'Not today - he's far too busy.' The woman stares at Christie, unblinking.

'I see,' says Christie in small voice. She drops her head slightly and stares at the floor. 'Oh, well, I only wanted to apologise to Mr Morrison for his having faith in me and how I let him down and...' Her voice trails off and she sniffs once, before turning slowly towards the door.

Miss Watt's mouth drops open and she glances at Donal, who has the good sense to incline his head to one side and gaze up at her with his best 'sad' face.

'Och, well, if it's just an apology, I suppose...'

Christie half turns back and looks up at the woman with what, from Donal's point of view, seem to be genuine tears in her eyes.

'Come away in, then, the pair of yous,' says Miss Watt, her face almost giving in to an actual smile. 'I'll see whitt I can do.' She unfastens a catch on the counter, swings the top half up and pulls the half-door towards her, allowing them to pass through. Then dropping the hinged part back into place, she leads them through into the office.

Miss Watt's office is not much bigger than the room they've just left, but it does contain a desk and three large wooden filing cabinets. At the far end is a small window that looks out onto the rear of the building.

'Sit yourselves down,' she says, then goes through another door and closes it behind her.

Donal is staring at Christie. 'How the heck you do that?'

'What?' she says, gazing back at him, all innocence.

'That. That greetin' an' stuff. I thought you were really crying.'

Christie grins. 'Just a wee trick I picked up from one of my actor friends.'

Donal is about to ask which actor friends she's referring to, when the door opens and Miss Watt pops her head in.

'Come away in.' She steps back to let them through into the next room.

Donal's eyes are like saucers as Miss Watt leads them down the centre of a long wide room, where two young women and eight or nine men in shirtsleeves occupy a maze of odd-shaped desks and tables. The rattle of typewriters and constant murmur of conversation fills the air and a thick haze of smoke hangs above their heads like a dull grey cloud. Donal wonders how these people can smoke cigarettes and type at the same time, let alone breathe amid the stench.

At the end of the room is a low wooden partition, like a sort of fence with a gate in it, separating the editor from his minions. Beyond the fence, they can see the hunched head and shoulders of the editor himself, poring over something on his desk.

Miss Watt pushes the little gate open and nods her head for them to go through. 'And don't the pair of you be taking advantage of his good nature.'

The man sitting in front of them flaunts a long red crayon and is intent on drawing a series of circles on what appears to be the latest copy of McMurdo's Weekly.

'If I've telt them a hun'red times...' the man mutters, drawing another small ring around a word at the foot of the column he's reading. 'Splendatious.' He looks up at Christie, raising a hairy eyebrow. 'Splendatious? Ever heard o' that one? No, course not, 'cause it Does. Not. Exist.' He folds up the magazine and drops it on top of a pile of papers in his out-tray. 'One of these days, we might print a copy without spellin' mistakes...'

'Mr Morrison...' Christie begins.

The editor holds up a hand. 'No, young lady, I hae nae wish to hear anither one of your ridiculous anecdotes as to why your stories should be published in my magazine. If I've telt ye once, I've telt ye a thousand times - we need conflict!' He thumps a fat fist on the desk to make his point. 'When you've got conflict at the heart of your tale and there's enough meat on the bones to gie ma readers somethin' to chomp on, I'll publish it, but until then...'

Christie is about to launch into her apology routine, but the editor hasn't finished.

'Question - do I want to hear one of the nae doubt innumerable reasons why I should gie you anither single minute o' my time? Answer - no.' He waves a hand in the direction of the door in a dismissive way.

Christie does not move. 'Mr Morrison. I came here to apologise for...'

'No, no, no...' says the man with the bushy eyebrows. 'No, Christie, you're a sweet wee lassie, but whatever you've lined up for me this time, I do not want - '

'I know what the problem is,' she says, butting in.

Mr Morrison stops. He looks at her, his eyes narrowed, then turns his attention to Donal and stares hard, as if noticing him for the first time.

Seeing the chance of an introduction, the boy steps forward and announces, 'Donal Paterson, sir.'

'Ah,' says Morrison. 'Nae doubt a friend o' the accused?' He makes a tutting noise and swivels his large head back to Christie. 'Go on then - which problem might that be?'

Christie flashes a quick glance at Donal, who returns her gaze blankly. Christie studies the desk, the floor and finally faces Mr Morrison. Taking a deep breath, she makes a quick decision - if she's wrong, he's going to kick them out anyway. Breathing out slowly to steady her nerves, she says, 'The problem, sir? Well, obviously I mean the problem with the stories.'

The fat man shakes his head from side to side, his jawls wobbling slightly as he does so. 'If this is one of your crazy...'

'No, Mr Morrison,' she continues. 'It's just that...'

'Give me strength...' The editor looks up at the ceiling as if expecting the Good Lord himself to respond, then slaps a hand down on the desk. 'Just say whit you've to say and then we can all of us get on with our lives, Christie McKinnon.'

'They're not original.'

Morrison is suddenly alert. He stares at her for a moment, then keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the girl, he waves a hand towards two chairs at the side of his desk. The friends pull up the chairs and sit down.

'What exactly do you mean, lassie, not original?'

'Well,' she says, folding her hands together in a pose she hopes will add an air of distinguished self-assurance. 'They're based on stories that have already been printed elsewhere.'

'Oh, my...' Morrison's whole body seems to crumble. His face turns pale, he drops his head into his hands and he falls forward until his ample brow hits the desk. He begins to moan softly.

'Don't worry, Mr Morrison,' says Christie, laying a hand on the editor's arm. 'I shouldnae think anyone else'll have noticed.'

He looks up quickly. 'What? Not noticed? Of course they'll hae noticed, ye daft wee girl. If a simple child can see it, the whole damned city will see it soon enough. There'll be cries of plagiarism and breach of copyright...'

Christie removes her hand. When she speaks again her voice is calm but rather less sympathetic than before. 'I may be a child, Mr Morrison, but I am neither simple, nor daft.' She raises her eyes and gazes at a spot on the wall above the editor's head. 'However, if you want to resort to name-calling, I'd have thought any editor with a brain the size of a pea would've been able to work out why no-one else will have noticed.' She folds her arms and sits down on the chair behind her, satisfied. It has also not escaped her attention that the constant clattering of typewriters in the office has ceased. She does not have to turn round to know that every pair of eyes in the room is focused on her.

Morrison stares at her for a whole minute without speaking, his lips moving slightly as if he's working something out. Even Donal, who (as he'll happily admit himself) isn't the brightest sixpence in the cashbox, can almost hear the man's brain ticking over. Morrison's brow furrows and his eyes begin to wander as he considers her words - he contemplates the desk, the walls, the ceiling, and Donal, before finally turning his eyes back to Christie. He seems to have reached a conclusion.

'Right,' he says, hauling himself to his feet and waving his arms about. 'You lot - get back to yer work. Now.'

The rattle of typewriters immediately starts up again and the editor stands for a moment eying his workforce suspiciously. Then lowering his large frame back into the chair, he leans forward, his voice quiet. 'So, Christie. Let us suppose, for a wee minute, that you're correct.' He nods to himself, then, 'Just for the sake of argument, why ahm, why might people no' have noticed? For instance?'

Christie has to concentrate in order to keep the smile from her face. After a moment, she says 'I think it's generally accepted that readers of The Scotsman are not usually readers of McMurdo's Weekly, wouldn't you agree?'

'Come again?'

She shrugs. 'It's just a wee matter of demographics.'

Morrison's eyes grow wide as she continues her explanation.

'As you know, most of the people who read your magazine are working class, with a few, what you might call, lower middle class thrown in. They're mostly folk who use the diversion of popular fiction as a way of escaping their ordinary boring lives. Readers of The Scotsman, on the other hand, are more likely to be fairly literate, politically aware, interested in what's

going on around them and therefore less likely to be readers of McMurdo's Weekly.' She smiles sweetly as Morrison's mouth hangs open, then adds, 'at least, that's what my dad says.'

Morrison regains his composure. 'And The Scotsman...? What does your dad hae tae say about that?'

'The Scotsman is the newspaper that printed the original stories Hugo Skene used as inspiration for at least three of the last five of his latest...fictions.' She pauses. 'And of course, there's this week's edition, which is a pretty obvious variation on a famous case.'

'Which is...?' says the editor, a tremor in his voice.

'Burke and Hare. Obviously.'

Donal has been listening to all of this with a rapt expression on his face. Now he can hold back his surprise no longer. 'You mean yon mannie's been copying stories?'

Morrison pivots in his chair and glares at Donal. 'A wee bit louder, laddie - I dinnae think Miss Watt can hear you.'

Donal mouths an apology.

'So,' the editor starts again, turning back to Christie, 'You were saying..?'

Christie nods. 'Just like Donal says. But you already knew that. I mean, Mr Skene's been doing it for a while, hasn't he?'

Morrison's head moves up and down slowly, then he rubs a hand over his face. 'Aye, I knew, but I was hoping he'd have got back into his stride by now.'

'But he hasn't.'

'I know he hasn't!' Morrison exclaims. 'I just wish...' He holds out his hands in a helpless gesture. 'I thought...'

'So what are yous going to do, then?' puts in Donal, somewhat unhelpfully.

To say that the detective is becoming a little irritated with the response to his line of questioning, would be a bit of an understatement. He has now spent most of his morning interviewing Lord and Lady Bloomfield and has so far not gleaned the slightest inkling as to the motive behind this particularly gory mystery. He wonders, not for the first time, if these people are being deliberately evasive, or if they are just plain thick. He tries another tactic.

'And the bowl itself, sir, was it the same bowl on each occasion?'

Bloomfield nods. 'It was.'

'And where would that bowl normally be kept?'

Bloomfield looks at his wife and Robertson detects a tiny shake of the head before she turns back to her book. He wonders if this is her signalling she doesn't know, or if it's a warning to her husband to keep quiet about some vital, or incriminating piece of information. Or maybe it's just that Robertson's irritation with these people is causing him to read more into this whole thing than is actually there. He waits for the other man to answer.

Bloomfield turns his gaze back to the inspector. 'In the kitchen.'

Robertson clears his throat. It's frustrating when folk insist on answering questions in this piecemeal way, bit by bit, one small detail at a time. Why can't they just give straightforward explanations of the facts?

'And the last time this happened - the bowl of blood on the table, I mean - you didn't think to leave it there until the police arrived?'

Bloomfield sighs. 'As you've already pointed out, Inspector, we have had four previous incidents of this ghastly ritual. I did not deem there to be any mileage in leaving yet another bowl full to the brim of bright red blood on the table for all to see. Particularly as it was found yesterday morning and it was a full twenty-four hours before you arrived to...investigate.' He pronounces this last word as if it is distasteful to him.

Robertson coughs. 'Aye, I understand that, sir, but I was wondering what happened to the...the actual blood?'

'I expect cook poured it down the toilet,' says Bloomfield, with a shrug.

'So, whoever did this, must have gone into the kitchen to get the bowl before filling it with blood and carrying it to the dining room.' Robertson grimaces. 'Could have been a wee bit messy.'

'What's your point, Inspector?'

'Just that whoever it was, would have had to go into the kitchen, then along the passage and into the dining room, opening two doors while holding a bowl full of blood.'

Bloomfield purses his lips. After a moment, he says, 'I should imagine they poured the blood into the bowl after placing it on dining room table.'

Robertson nods sagely, as if accepting this theory. 'Aye. Which begs another question - what did they carry the blood in?'

'Really, Robertson, I can't see that this is getting us anywhere. As far as I'm concerned, it's just some stupid prank and we should forget the whole thing.'

'I'd be happy tae dae that, sir, but it was you that called us in...' Robertson allows himself a slight smile.

'Oh for God's sake, man,' Bloomfield snorts. 'Obviously we are going through the motions for the benefit of the staff - they've got the flaming jitters, scared silly, every last man. I couldn't have got rid of them any quicker if I'd given notice to the lot of them.' He walks around the room, gesticulating wildly. 'In the last week, we've lost the nanny, two gardeners, my valet, my wife's lady's maid and the footman. If the damn press hadn't got hold of it and exaggerated the whole thing out of proportion, we wouldn't have a problem and you, Inspector, would never have heard a single word about this ridiculous affair.'

Robertson turns away and walks in a small circle, peering at his notebook as if considering his next question. But it's another idea entirely that's ringing a tiny little alarm bell deep in the policeman's brain. Some word or phrase of Bloomfield's seems not to fit, something incongruous, something that should be obvious. Try as he might though, whatever it is remains out of focus, beyond his reach. No doubt it'll come to him later, but for now he turns back to Bloomfield, who is leaning against a bookshelf.

Keeping his face neutral, Robertson says, 'The thing is, sir, this story has already featured in the newspapers two or three times an' it widgeon take a genius to work out that it's likely to continue to be a feature for the next few weeks. Unless you can give me something to go on. I mean, if we had a lead, the press could actually be useful to us.'

Lady Bloomfield looks up from the book of poetry she has been perusing and casts a glance at her husband. 'I believe the policeman is asking for a clue, Reginald.'

Lord Bloomfield closes his eyes (as he has done frequently over the last few minutes) then slowly opens them and returns his wife's baleful stare. 'I am aware of that small fact, Edith.'

'And I'm sure you'll not be wantin' to make things any worse...?' Inspector Robertson puts in. 'I mean, you know what gossip can do...?'

'Yes, Inspector,' says Reginald Bloomfield, his tight English accent creating an odd juxtaposition in a room decorated with the tartans of twelve different clans. 'I am all too well aware of what gossip, as you put it, can do. But the fact remains, we can only tell you what we know, which, as you have obligingly pointed out, is precious little.'

Inspector Robertson stares for a moment, distracted by a slight change in the other man's voice. He looks down at his notebook again, trying to work out what it is. Scribbling down two words, he says 'So far there have been five incidents, including this morning, and in each case you say the bowl has been on the dining room table, and in each case it has been full of blood?'

'Yes, yes, yes,' says Lord Bloomfield with a sigh.

'And you believe it to be human? I mean, it couldn't be from one of the dogs?'

'Dogs?' The shock in Lord Bloomfield's face is so sudden and fleeting that Robertson almost misses it. Almost.

'I meant...the hounds,' the policeman says, carefully.

'The hounds?' Bloomfield's composure is once more intact and Robertson wonders if it was simply a nervous tick.

'They're alright, then? All accounted for?'

Bloomfield nods. 'Of course. Why wouldn't they be?'

From his hiding place, Georgie has been able to hear most of the conversation, but annoyingly, he can't quite see the Inspector's face. Carefully lifting one foot, he moves round until the gap in the panelling allows him a better view. The Inspector is saying something about the newspapers and is showing one to Georgie's father. Pressing his face up against the cool wood, Georgie narrows his eyes and is just able to make out the image on the front page of *The Scotsman* - it depicts an artist's impression of one of the servants (he can't imagine who) finding the bowl of blood and holding a hand to her shocked face. The boy turns his attention back to his father who is talking about the estate staff.

'...Though I should not be surprised if it were one of them, hoping for some sort of revenge for some perceived slight against them. Lord knows how these people's minds work. And as you say, Inspector, if these newspaper people continue to depict such ridiculous variations of the truth, we shall only succeed in fuelling further speculation.'

The police officer nods grimly. 'Indeed, sir, but if you refuse tae allow them an interview, all they've got is speculation, eh?' He pauses, then with a rueful laugh, 'Which is pretty much all I've got myself.'

Lady Bloomfield looks up from her book again. 'Then we must hope you will soon be blessed with inspiration, Sergeant.'

'It's Inspector, madam,' says Robertson, with only the merest hint of annoyance. As he makes eye contact with her, the woman looks away, as if there might be something in her face she doesn't want him to see. He coughs. 'Of course we'll do our best. However, at the moment, apart from that fact of someone having placed a bowl of blood on a table, several bowls of blood in fact, I'd be hard pressed to say that a crime has actually been committed.'

Bloomfield nods slowly. 'Yes, well, unfortunately, that's exactly what your predecessor said.'

Robertson frowns. 'Predecessor, sir?'

'Yes. The chap who came along after the first incident.' Bloomfield sneers faintly. 'I'd assumed your superior had informed you?'

'I don't have a superior, sir,' says Robertson, imitating the other man's expression. 'As I'm sure you're aware, that particular word implies a greater degree of knowledge or skill, and while I have a high regard for my Chief Inspector, I'm sure he'd be the first tae admit, I'm a better detective than he'll ever be. Now if you'll excuse me...' He turns and walks to the door without looking back.

As the door closes, Lady Bloomfield sniffs. 'The man's a fool.'

'You know, Edith,' says her husband with a sigh, 'given the circumstances, it would be useful if you could make a little effort with these people. The sooner this 'fool' as you call him, completes his investigation, the sooner he'll leave us alone.'

Edith looks at her husband for a long moment before speaking. 'I'm sure I can't imagine what you mean,' she says, 'given that you yourself have scarcely been truthful...' She gives him a long, hard stare and returns to her book.

Reginald stretches his fingers as if contemplating strangling his wife. 'You know, Edith, that tongue of yours is so sharp it'd be a miracle if you didn't cut yourself one of these days.'

He smiles in a slightly menacing way, but she does not take the bait. Reginald grunts and casts a glance to the corner of the room. 'I should come out of there if I were you, George.'

One of the wall panels swings open and the boy steps out, a look of pure consternation on his face. 'How'd you know I was there, father?'

'It's a father's duty to know what his offspring is up to. Now, I imagine the Inspector will be looking for you. Better cut along. And mind...' He points an accusatory finger at his son then slowly brings the digit up to his mouth in a silent, but obvious gesture. Then moving to the mantelpiece, he rests a hand on its hard cold edge, slowly caressing the marbled contours.

Georgie heads for the door, huffing at being found out.

'Oh no ye don't, mister policeman,' says Effie hurrying towards him. 'I cannae have folk tramping all over my kitchen, now.' She holds a hand up as if to push him back through the door.

'Just wanted to ask a wee question, that's all,' says Robertson, retracing his steps into the passage.

Effie pulls a face and rests her hands on her hips. 'Don't see how I can tell ye anything his Lordship can't.'

'Ah, but I think you can, now....' He glances along the passage towards the main staircase. Then lowering his voice, 'There was a policeman here before.'

She nods. 'So there was.'

'And...?'

She sighs loudly. 'Sergeant Beck. From away down the village. Don't you lot talk to each other?'

Robertson grins. 'Apparently not.' Then moving closer to her, his voice dropping almost to a whisper, 'And this Sergeant Beck...what happened to him?'

Effie rolls her eyes. 'How should I know? Came a couple of times when the first...you know...happened, and then...'

'And then...what?'

'I don't know, do I? Didn't come back.' She gives him an irritated look, then 'So d'you mind if I get on wi' ma work, then?'

'Not yet. Tell me about this bowl.'

'What? The bowl, ye're meaning?'

'Yes. Can you show me it?'

The woman shakes her head. 'Ye'll need tae ask his Lordship about that.'

Robertson frowns. 'Isn't it in the kitchen?'

Effie laughs harshly. 'No, it is not in my kitchen and I widnae hae it anywhere near my kitchen.' She shivers suddenly. 'Ugh.'

'Didn't you wash it out? The blood, I mean?'

'Aye, I did - poured it down the toilet. Nearly fetched my breakfast up with it, I did. Then I gave it back to his lordship.' When Robertson gives her a blank look, she adds, 'So he could put it away.'

'Away where?'

Effie rolls her eyes. 'In the Morning Room, of course.'

He nods slowly, digesting her words. 'Right. Thanks Effie. Oh and,' as she starts to back into the kitchen, 'Does his Lordship have a telephone?'

She laughs. 'Aye, he certainly does, but he'll no' let the likes of you get anywhere near it.' She smiles and gives him a sly wink. 'Nae offence, Inspector.'

As the cook hurries back to her kitchen, Robertson makes a note in his book.

Back outside, Donal trots along behind her. 'But why can't I come wi' you?' he whines.

Christie stops on the edge of the pavement, looking up and down Princes Street. 'Because, Donal, if Hugo Skene is going to give anyone any clue as to why he stopped writing original stories, he's more likely to do it for a wee innocent girl, don't you think? Especially if he thinks she's full of admiration for his immense talent.' She gives him a wicked smile and a quick peck on the cheek. 'See you back at mine for tea?'

Donal nods glumly and watches her skip across the road. Christie glances again at the scrap of paper Mr Morrison gave her - it shows Hugo Skene's address and a rough sketch of how to find the house.

Eglinton Crescent is a good fifteen minute walk, allowing for her getting lost once and spending a few minutes surreptitiously hiding round corners to see if Donal is following her. He isn't, though a rather odd-looking man is, or at least appears to be going in the same direction. Christie loiters on Palmerston Place where the ends of Eglinton and Glencairn Crescent meet. In-between the long curves of the two roads sits a wide oval of trees, separating the Crescents from each other, as well as providing a helpful natural screen, should anyone wish to conceal him, or herself from someone they might wish to observe. She waits a few minutes, to see what the man is up to (of course, it's probably all quite innocent, but her suspicious nature loves a mystery and she quickly makes up a story about the stranger to pass the time). A minute later, the man has disappeared behind the trees and Christie continues down her side of the Crescent towards number 39.

The house is half way along and has a bright blue front door. Climbing the steps, she looks up at the windows, though from here they tell her nothing about the house, other than the fact it looks exactly like all the others in the street.

Her ring at the bell brings an almost instant response as the door swings open and Christie is gazing up into the eyes of what she assumes must be Mr Skene's mother, maiden aunt, or some other elderly female relative.

'Good morning,' Christie says enthusiastically.

The woman gazes down at her with what Christie correctly judges to be a mixture of contempt and disgust. The long thin chin moves downward, but it takes slightly longer for the old woman's mouth to actually open and another second or two before sounds come out. When she does speak, Christie is taken aback by the unusually deep voice.

'Whatever it is you are seeking, is not here.' The door begins to close, but Christie's foot is already on the threshold.

The woman looks down at the intrusion, then back up at Christie. She sighs, but says nothing.

'Is Mr Skene at home?' Christie says.

The woman makes a face. 'Who?'

'Mr Skene. Hugo Skene. The writer.' Christie smiles her best smile. 'He lives here.'

'Mr Skene, the writer, does not accommodate visitors.' The door pushes against Christie's foot.

'But I have a message for him,' she tries. 'From Mr Morrison, at McMurdo's Weekly.'

'Then you had better give it to me.' The woman holds out a long thin hand.

'Mr Morrison particularly asked that I pass on the message to Mr Skene in person.' She smiles again.

The old woman considers this for a moment then emitting a loud sigh, opens the door. Christie steps into a wide hallway, revealing arched doorways leading off on both sides and a highly polished staircase directly in front of her. Everything she can see - the walls, the deep

plush carpets and the swirling patterned wallpaper are decorated in a wonderfully dark red. The colour of blood, Christie thinks. She gazes round at the ornamental figures and statues that fill every available space, and takes in the paintings and lithographic prints that hang from the walls.

'Crivvens,' she murmurs, before her brain has the opportunity to curtail her mouth.

The tall woman turns and stares at her, eyes wide, as if she's never encountered such coarse language before. 'Wait there, please, and do not touch anything.' And she sets off up the stairs, leaving Christie standing on the hall rug, her second-best boots suddenly seeming rather dowdy in such opulent surroundings.

After a minute or two, the woman reappears on the landing and beckons Christie to follow her.

On the landing, the woman walks along to a door at the end and pushes it open. Standing aside, she allows Christie to pass through then closes it behind her, leaving Christie alone. The room is quite large and contains several well-stocked bookshelves, a desk by the window and a rather comfy-looking green leather-upholstered swivel chair. Behind her to the left, is a tall concertinaed screen, decorated in the Mackintosh style. Christie has the impression the partition is concealing something - possibly another room or cupboard. She is about to investigate when a man steps out from behind it.

'Oh, hello,' says Christie, grinning to hide her surprise.

The man is quite old, early sixties, she thinks and wearing a rather garish striped purple waistcoat and matching necktie. His eyes flick around the room as if unwilling to alight on Christie's face. Eventually they seem to settle on a spot just above her head and he cautiously returns her smile, as if a cheerful outlook is one of those modern trends he hasn't tried yet. When he speaks, his voice sounds a little strained. 'Ah, yes.'

They stand like that for a moment, eyeing each other nervously until the man seems to realise he should take charge.

'Well, well, now then, young lady.'

'It's Christie, sir. Christie McKinnon.'

'Indeed. Yes.' He indicates the swivel chair and that she should sit.

The swivel chair is as comfortable as she imagined - her feet easily reach the floor and it feels as if it were made especially for her. She resists the urge to swing round on it.

The man shuffles from foot to foot. 'So, Christie.'

'You're older than I thought,' she says, before he can continue. 'Expected you'd be young'. She coughs. 'I mean, younger.'

'Indeed?' He nods. Looks out of the window. Taps his fingers idly on a bookcase, his fingernails clacking sharply against the shiny wood. He takes a step towards her, then returns to where he was. 'So, what, er, what is this erm...message..?'

'I really like your stories.'

The man opens his mouth quickly as if about to attempt an enthusiastic reply, then seems to change his mind. 'Ah. Yes.'

A slight frown creeps across her brow, and she struggles to conceal her disappointment at the author's apparent lack of interest in his admirer. 'Is this your writing desk?' She asks, running her fingers along its bevelled edge.

'Ah. Yes.' He looks at the desk. 'Yes.'

'Where you do all your writing?'

He half nods. 'That would certainly seem to be the case.' His eyes briefly meet hers but flick away again as if such familiarity might be painful.

'Don't you want to know which one's my favourite?' she says. 'Of your stories, I mean?'

'Of course,' he says, then, 'What are you... Er, that is, which one is your favourite?'

She watches him carefully. 'It's The House on Devil's Corner.'

He nods, attempts the smile again. Fails. Says nothing.

'I really liked the ending.'

He nods again.

'And how the murderer used poisoned bananas.'

'Ah.'

Christie sighs. 'You're not Hugo Skene, are you?' she says with an apologetic smile.

The man with the purple waistcoat gasps slightly and a hand flutters to his face, the embarrassment at his inability to fool a mere child causing him to blush scarlet.

'Oh for goodness sake,' says a voice from behind the screen. 'I may as well have dressed up as a man myself.' A young woman steps into the room and glares at the man. His already bright red face changes colour to match that of his waistcoat.

'Harriet, I...!' He stands awkwardly, glancing around, avoiding their eyes. 'I said it wouldn't work...'

'Why don't you go and organise some tea, Uncle?' The woman pats him on the shoulder, then with a wink at Christie, 'I expect you'd like tea, wouldn't you?'

Christie nods and the man aims a sheepish smile at the top of her head. He goes out, closing the door behind him.

'I'm Harriet,' she says, leaning rather mannishly against one of the bookshelves. 'And as you've probably guessed, I'm also Hugo Skene.'