

## THE SCOURGE OF THE SKUA

*The discovery of a murder in a client's family history plunges Esme Quentin back to a time when lawlessness ruled the high seas and piracy was rife.*

### 1

Murder?' Hester Campbell's cup of cappuccino clattered into its saucer, froth slopping over the edge.

Esme Quentin watched the colour fade from her client's face, waiting for the impish smile which usually followed a report about a scandalous family history story. It never came. Hester's eyes remained troubled, blinking as she processed Esme's information. She fiddled with the collar of her shirt, the crisp white edge becoming increasingly crumpled between her well-manicured finger and thumb.

'I'm guessing from your reaction,' Esme said, 'that you weren't aware of the story.'

Hester hesitated before shaking her head, her short bobbed hair flicking against her cheek. 'I knew nothing about it.'

'What about your partner,' Esme asked, 'do you think he knows his grandfather's story?'

Again, the shake of the head and a shrug. 'I have no idea.' She smoothed down the front of her grey pencil skirt, as though it might sooth her evidently fraught nerves.

Esme glanced down at her notes, uncertain how best to continue. Hester had engaged her to compile a family tree as a surprise present for her partner Frank's special birthday. Ordinarily, what she'd discovered would be all part of her final report, but Hester had been keen for an interim update. Did that suggest Hester had some idea of what Esme would find? Had she had a suspicion of something and wanted to establish early on whether there was any substance to that suspicion? But if Hester *did* have some inkling of what Esme might find, she'd have been more prepared, wouldn't she?

Hester's puckered brow and distant expression suggested she was still sifting through what Esme had told her. Perhaps she needed time to gather her thoughts. Esme cast her eye around the café, noticing that it was quickly filling up. Had the April showers threatened earlier finally materialised and visitors to Bideford's Victoria Park been forced inside out of the rain?

Esme pulled her attention away from the bustling café punters and back to Hester. 'Are you OK?' she asked.

Hester didn't give an answer, instead asking a question of her own. 'And you're quite sure about the details?'

'As sure as I can be,' Esme said, referring to the documents in front of her. 'I have a copy of the newspaper report of the trial.' She slid a print-out of the front page of *The Daily Herald* towards Hester across the table. 'As I mentioned, your partner's grandfather, Albert Philips, killed his cousin, Ernest Sanders, on the 3rd of March 1923 following some sort of argument.'

'An argument about what?' Hester said.

'Ah, well, that's just it,' Esme said. 'It seems Philips remained tight-lipped about the alleged dispute between him and Sanders throughout the trial and took his secret with him to the scaffold. He was hanged later that year without revealing any motive.'

Hester stared down at the newspaper image. Esme waited, allowing her time to read it. But after a few seconds, Hester stood up, her chair scraping the floor with a wince-inducing squeal.

'I'm sorry, I have to go.'

'What? No, don't go yet,' Esme said, scrambling to her feet. 'Maddy Henderson's on her way. She'll be here any minute. Can't you hang on for her? She's renovated the old photograph you gave me.'

Hester snatched her jacket off the back of the chair. 'I can't, I'm afraid,' she said, slipping on the jacket and picking up her oversized black leather handbag. 'I'd completely forgotten about another appointment.' She slid the chair back under the table, looping her handbag over her arm, and gave Esme a fleeting smile. 'I'll be in touch,' she said and wheeled away.

Esme stared after her as she weaved between tables and customers, her high heels clicking on the tiled floor, and hurried through the glass doors and out into the park.

## 2

Esme sat in the bubble of the noisy commotion in the café, trying to make sense of Hester's behaviour. There was something incongruous about Hester's response which she couldn't put her finger on. Had it been the expression on Hester's face? She tried to recall the image, but her memory failed her and the vision morphed into the stunned, shocked expression of later.

Esme was jerked out of her deliberations by the arrival of Maddy, a tote bag over her shoulder emblazoned with the words *There is no Planet B*. The colour of the logo matched the jade green and blues of her hooded sweatshirt and leggings.

'Phew,' Maddy said, pulling out a chair. 'I thought I was going to be late.'

'You are,' Esme said, sighing and slumping back in her seat. 'She's been and gone.'

'What? Already?' Maddy pushed up the sleeve of her sweatshirt to look at her watch. 'So what happened? Was she super early or something?' She sat down, dropping her bag on the floor beside her chair.

Esme shook her head and explained what had happened.

'You mean mentioning the murder freaked her out?'

'Looks like it, yes.'

Maddy rested her elbow on the table and tugged at her ponytail. 'People usually like a bit of scandal to spice up their family history. Too close to the bone, maybe?'

'Perhaps. Though it isn't her family. It's her partner's.'

'So who murdered who?'

'His grandfather killed his cousin in 1923. Some sort of dispute.' Esme shrugged. 'I dunno. Maybe it resonated with something she's known about, but hasn't taken seriously? Or maybe...' She rubbed her forehead. 'Or maybe I haven't the faintest idea.' She smiled. 'So, how did you get on with the photograph? I was really disappointed she didn't hang around long enough to see it. Did it come up OK?' The image Hester had given Esme was so faded, it was almost indecipherable. But Maddy's ability to digitally enhance old family photographs had produced some impressive results over recent times and Esme had been confident she'd be able to achieve a similar level of success with Hester's example. Frustrating as it was that Hester had not stayed to see what Maddy had been able to do, maybe her parting comment about getting in touch was genuine and once she'd come to terms with the shock of the revelation, she'd pick up the phone and they could continue from where they'd left off.

Maddy pulled her bag on to her lap and delved inside. She took out a small buff envelope and laid it on the table. 'It's a pretty early one – 1850s, I'd say. And you were

right about it being of an old lady.’ She took a printed copy of an image out of the envelope and slid it across the table to Esme.

‘Oh, great job, Maddy – as always.’ Esme picked up the photograph before glancing across at the counter. ‘Did you want to get yourself a coffee while there’s no queue?’

Maddy stood up. ‘Yeah, sure. Good idea.’

Maddy made her way across the café while Esme turned her attention to the photograph. Maddy had worked her magic, transforming the image from the grainy, hard-to-decipher picture it had been previously into one with much greater definition.

The elderly woman was wearing a heavy Victorian dress, the folds of the skirt beautifully sewn into the waistband. Her hands rested in her lap. She wore a lace bonnet, its ties hanging from her chin over the bodice of the dress and hiding the detail.

When Maddy returned with her latte a few minutes later, Esme couldn’t wait to express her admiration for her work. ‘Wow, this is fabulous, Maddy,’ she said. ‘She’s great. How old d’you reckon she is?’

‘Got to be in her eighties, hasn’t she?’ Maddy said, picking up her coffee and taking a sip.

‘Meaning she was born in the 1760s. Incredible.’ Esme continued to stare at the photograph. There was something puzzling her about it, but she couldn’t immediately work out what. Then she realised. ‘Her eyes,’ she said, almost to herself. ‘They’re a bit odd.’

‘Well spotted,’ Maddy said, folding her arms and leaning on the table. ‘Probably painted on after it was developed.’

Esme looked up and blinked. ‘You mean...?’

Maddy nodded. ‘It’s a mortuary photograph. Taken after death.’

Esme grimaced. ‘Oh, creepy,’ she said with a shudder. ‘But then, Victorian society did have a fascination for death. Which was hardly surprising, I guess, given how common it was, what with TB, cholera, diphtheria and typhoid, and no antibiotics. I guess this was one way of coping with it.’

‘*Memento mori*,’ Maddy said. ‘Literally, *remember you will die*. Mortuary photos gave a family a way to remember their loved ones. Something to display on the mantelpiece.’

‘I’m not sure I’d want a mortuary photo of my nearest and dearest on the mantelpiece,’ Esme said. ‘But then we have the luxury of being able to take plenty of photos while they’re alive.’

‘Oh, nearly forgot,’ Maddy said. ‘There’s a faint pencil mark on the back of the original, with what looks like a capital A. I’m guessing a name. Maybe Agnes? Have you come across an Agnes?’

‘No, not yet, but I’d hardly got started. I sort of got sidetracked by the murder, if I’m honest.’

Maddy nodded at the envelope on the table. 'The original is in there, by the way. You might want to have a look for yourself before you give it back to Hester.'

Esme picked up the envelope and slid the restored photograph print back inside. 'That's assuming I ever see her again.'

'Oh, you will, won't you, surely? Once she's got over the shock.'

'Well, I'd like to think so.' Esme rested her elbow on the table and rubbed a thumb along the puckered scar on her cheek. 'You should have seen her face, Madds. It's like she'd opened up a Pandora's box and she was wishing she hadn't. I wish I knew what spooked her. Any ideas?'

'Don't ask me. Like I said before, it's usually the opposite. People want to find something scandalous or they reckon their family history is boring.' She frowned. 'You worried about getting paid?'

'No, that's not a problem,' Esme said, shaking her head. 'She paid a deposit which covers what I've done. But I'm intrigued now.'

Maddy laughed. 'Yes, I bet. Well, if I know you, you'll be taking a sneaky peep anyway.'

'No I won't,' Esme said. 'I've got far too much to do. You haven't seen the inside of my outhouse. The builders are due to start work to convert it to my office, and it's full of junk from the previous owners. That's my next assignment.' She stood up, collecting the envelope from the table and looking down on it. 'I'll give her a call later and if she decides she doesn't want me to go any further with the research, I can drop this off at her house.'

'Oh, she's local, then?'

Esme slipped the envelope into her bag. 'Yes, she lives in Appledore. We had been going to meet there, but then she phoned to change it and suggested here instead. I think she said she was in town for another reason and it was easier than going back home.' As she slung her bag over her shoulder, something flitted into her head about that particular conversation, but she couldn't catch it before it fizzled out.

'Everything OK?' Maddy said.

Esme gave her head a shake. 'Yeah, fine.'

They walked out of the café and into the park. Esme pulled her coat around her as the chilled spring breeze came around the corner of the building. She glanced left and right, instinctively looking for Hester, though why she thought Hester would be waiting outside when she could easily have returned to the café had she wanted, Esme had no idea. She pushed the bizarre notion out of her head and turned to Maddy.

'See you at the market on Saturday, then,' she said.

'Sure. I'll bring those little snuff boxes I got in that sale. They've come up a treat. Should bring in the punters. They're always popular.' Maddy had recently taken over the business of her late father, restoring small wooden items of furniture or paraphernalia

and selling it on a stall at Bideford market. Esme helped out, covering the stall on days when Maddy was away at trade fairs to buy in new supplies for restoration, or as an additional pair of hands at busy times.

As Esme hurried back to her car, she wondered when she'd hear from Hester and how long she should leave it before getting in touch herself. What would Hester make of Maddy's assessment of the photograph? Given her reaction to the murder, perhaps the idea that the photograph had been taken after the old woman's death might be the final indignity.