

Grumpy Bob's Day Off

by

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Music swells and fills the cavernous void of the hall like warm, soothing water. For a moment the people hang around the edges, uncertain or unwilling to commit themselves to the vast expanse of the dance floor. Then, as the tune takes form and the couples come together, so the magic begins.

It is a waltz, slow but rhythmic. In pairs they advance and retreat, whirl and start again, perfect in time and motion like some child's wind-up toy made life-size. No one talks, or if they do it is the quietest of whisper, the sweet nothings meant only for one. Maybe there isn't time for talk. There is the dance, not complicated but demanding a certain concentration. And there is the old couple, the first couple, whose moves are so practised, so perfect they might be one.

He watches them from the sidelines, a wallflower, uncertain. Few are not drawn to the dance floor, but one or two still linger around the edges as if they too do not quite know why they are here. They wait for the right time to join, or the right partner. There are rules here he has not yet divined, the risk of causing unintended offence, but it is not that which holds him back.

'Sleeping on the job again?'

Detective Inspector McLean let the door to the CID room slam shut behind him, trying not to smile as the figure in the far corner struggled upright. Detective Sergeant Laird, Grumpy Bob to most, had his feet up on his desk, a plain brown folder draped across his chest. As it slid to the floor, McLean saw that it was empty.

'Sorry sir. Bit of a late one last night.'

'Last night? I thought you were going straight home at shift end.'

'Aye, well.' Grumpy Bob bent down and picked up the folder, made a show of inspecting it, then tossed it onto his desk. 'Anything you needed?'

McLean knew a change of subject when he saw one; he'd interviewed enough guilty parties in his time. No point pressing the point if Bob didn't want to share though. 'Just had a call from control. Strange case out at Liberton cemetery. Didn't fancy going out there on my own.'

'Liberton?' Grumpy Bob raised a greying eyebrow. He knew as well as McLean did who was buried there. 'Aye, OK. I'll grab my coat.'

They probably could have walked. It would have taken an hour, true, but McLean liked to feel the rhythm of his feet on pavement. He found it easier to think while walking, and Grumpy Bob knew him well enough not to try to indulge in idle conversation. On the other hand, it was a grey, dark day and a cold shower of rain as they stepped out of the back door to the station suggested driving might be a better idea.

'Reckon winter's coming.' Grumpy Bob stifled a yawn with one hand as he pulled shut the car door with the other. As if on cue, an icy squall rattled hailstones off the roof and windscreen. McLean started the engine, cranked the heater up to full. Not that it did much good. Neither did the windscreen wipers as he pulled out of the car park and into the street.

'You're really suffering there, Bob. Sure you didn't get a lock-in at your local last night?'

'Haven't touched a drop all week. Been cutting down a bit lately.' Grumpy Bob slapped his stomach lightly. 'Trying to lose a few.'

McLean stole a glance at his old friend as he navigated the complicated roundabout at Cameron Toll. Grumpy Bob was renowned for his ability to catch forty winks in the most unlikely of places and at the most unlikely of times, but now he looked like a man who hadn't slept in weeks.

'Well, don't overdo it, OK? None of us are getting any younger.'

'Aye, right enough.'

The rest of the short drive was completed in silence. McLean parked as close to the cemetery gates as he could manage, but it was still a cold, miserable walk to the scene. The cemetery sat halfway up Liberton Brae; the best views north across Edinburgh and the Firth of Forth into Fife reserved for those least able to appreciate them. Today wasn't a day for views, anyway. Angry clouds bustled along with unseemly haste, dropping fat raindrops into the arctic wind.

'Jesus, it's brass monkey weather.' McLean hunched into his overcoat, wishing he'd brought a hat as they picked a route through the rows of gravestones to where a scene of crime tent was struggling against the storm. A lone uniform constable stood guard at the perimeter marked out in blue and white police tape, a punishment duty if ever there was one. Even in his heavy fleece and padded fluorescent hi-viz jacket he looked frozen.

'What's the situation, Constable?' McLean showed his warrant card. No that is was strictly necessary. No one other than a copper would be out in this weather voluntarily.

'Not really sure, sir. It's a strange one. Best you see for yourself.' The constable lifted up the tape, letting them in. McLean looked at the nearby grave stones. They were all old, their inscriptions weathered away almost to nothing. Some were still upright, but most leaned at drunken angles as if the dead had been partying hard the night before. He shivered at the thought and then ducked into the tent.

The first thing he noticed was the smell. The cold wind outside brought nothing, clean air swept down from Siberia quite devoid of any odours. In here it was as if summer had been held back, a warm fug of unwashed bodies and fresh loam. There weren't many people inside the tent, but all eyes turned to McLean as he stood at the entrance. White suits and overshoes, the full forensics. McLean hated having to wear all the gear, important though he knew it was. Somehow it was impossible to find overalls that didn't end up giving him a painful wedgie.

'This a clean site? You want us to suit up?'

'No need, Tony. There's nothing here for you to contaminate.'

McLean turned, expecting to see Grumpy Bob. Instead the much shorter and rounder form of Doctor Jemima Cairns, senior forensic scientist and knot expert pushed into the tent. Unlike her colleagues, she wasn't fully kitted up.

'What's going on? I thought there was supposed to be a crime scene.'

'Aye, well there is. Sort of.' Doctor Cairns pointed to the centre of the tent, where the ground was obscured by a pair of large headstones. 'Come, see.'

McLean followed her around to where the rest of the forensic team were clustered, and as he did, so he saw what all the fuss was about. The headstones were as old and weather-beaten as those surrounding the tent, the words on them impossible to read. This corner of the cemetery was the oldest, no new graves had been dug in a couple of centuries. Instead of mature grass, neatly mown and short now the days had grown cold, there were two perfect rectangular graves dug in the soil, side by side with a half an arm's reach of solid ground between them. At the bottom of each, sitting clean and proud of the soil beneath, were two identical wooden coffins.

'How...?'

'Dog walker found them first thing this morning. At first we thought it was grave robbers, unlikely though that might sound.' One of the paper overalls rolled down his mask to reveal the face of Angus Cadwallader, city pathologist.

'Why on earth would someone want to rob these graves?'

'I think that's your department, Tony.' Cadwallader smiled.

'Have you checked the coffins? Anything missing?' McLean looked around the tent, trying to work out what was wrong with the scene. Or to be more accurate, what was bugging him beyond the obvious.

'Not yet. Health and Safety take a dim view of us guddling around in holes. And beside, we were waiting for someone from CID to show up before we pulled them out.'

Cadwallader nodded, and two of the suited forensic scientists began to construct a lifting frame over the first of the graves. McLean stood and watched for a moment, then realised it was going to take some time.

'Give us a shout when you're ready.' He looked back to the tent entrance and the detective sergeant who was conspicuously not there. 'I'm just going to have a wee look around.'

Grumpy Bob stood with his back to the tent, hands deep in his coat pockets and shoulders hunched against the cold. He'd not brought a hat, and the wind was playing with his thinning grey hair, speckles of icy water sheening his increasingly visible scalp. McLean couldn't remember seeing the detective sergeant look so old.

'Find anything interesting?' he asked, scanning the empty cemetery, the ranks of headstones stretching into the bleak, grey distance.

'What? Oh ... Sorry sir. Miles away.' Grumpy Bob stood upright, a shudder running through him like some degenerative disease.

'Somewhere warm, I hope. Come on. Let's walk around a bit. Get the circulation going.' McLean took a couple of steps before looking back to see whether Grumpy Bob was following. The detective sergeant hesitated a moment, as if he'd forgotten how to use his legs, then lumbered into action.

They walked around the SOC tent, then took a turn around the nearer graves, peering at the names and trying to decipher the dates. It was ten minutes before Grumpy Bob spoke.

'She's ... This is where she's buried, isn't it.' He didn't say the name. Didn't need to.
'Over the far side, yes. The Summers had a family plot.'

'Had?'

'Kirsty's mum was the last one buried there. No more Summers after that.'

'No more Summers.' Grumpy Bob echoed the words in a voice that sent a shiver down McLean's spine. For a long time after his fiancée had died, he had felt that way. No more summers, ever. But he'd come through the depression, helped in no small part by the dour old detective sergeant.

'What's up, Bob? It's not like you to be so ... I don't know ... Glum?'

'Ach, I don't know either. Just tired is all.' Grumpy Bob shook himself like a wet dog. 'Let's get out of this cold, aye? See if they've got anything for us in that wee tent of theirs.'

The second of the two coffins was being lifted out as McLean and Grumpy Bob pushed through the plastic flap and into the SOC tent. The first was already sitting on a pair of trestles. Angus Cadwallader watched its twin as it was lowered alongside.

'You might want to stay back a bit for this,' he said as McLean stepped forward for a closer look.

'Why? Is it dangerous?'

'Probably not, but just in case, eh?'

McLean nodded, then returned to where Grumpy Bob was waiting. He looked around the tent again, trying to work out what was bothering him about the scene. The holes in the ground were the same, the headstones side on to him, speckled with lichen and pitted by the weather. There were a few more people in the tent now, but that wasn't it either.

'OK gentlemen. Easy does it.' Cadwallader hadn't touched the first coffin himself, instead directing the forensic scientists to do his bidding. Now he leaned forward as the lid was prised gently off. McLean found that he'd been holding his breath, half-expecting some terrible screech or maybe a theatrical gust of wind - it was fast approaching Halloween, after all. Instead there was nothing more dramatic than a creak of protest from the wooden lid.

'Interesting.' Cadwallader peered into the depths of the coffin, but from where he was standing McLean could see nothing.

'What is it?' he asked.

'A corpse, of course. Pretty much what you'd expect to find in one of these things. Exceptionally well preserved though. Let's open up the other one, shall we?'

This time the lid came off with a little more drama, but only because the wood had split down its length and almost came apart.

'Careful there.' The pathologist twisted to one side to avoid being skewered, then bent over the second coffin. 'Oh yes. That would make sense, of course.'

'Can I come and see now, Angus? Or are you hogging it all for yourself?'

'What? Oh.' Cadwallader looked up, startled, as if he'd completely forgotten anyone else was there. 'No. You're fine. Come and meet the lovely couple.'

McLean approached the coffins warily, not sure what to expect. He'd seen plenty of dead bodies in his years as a policeman. Too many, some would say. He'd seen people broken and bloody, people placid and still, as if asleep. He'd seen people die before his eyes and he'd discovered bodies that had lain rotting for months. The corpses lying in the opened coffins were no better or worse than any of them.

They were a man and a woman, most likely a couple given the proximity of their graves. They had not rotted in the ground so much as dried out, skin turned paper thin and grey. She had white, wispy hair, straggly around her head as if it had carried on growing after she'd been buried. He was bald on top, thin grey bands running around the sides of his head from the temples. Both were dressed in what McLean at first took to be wedding finery from an earlier century.

'Do we know who they are?' he asked.

'Headstones are too weathered to read. Either that or they've been defaced.' One of the forensic scientists answered, and McLean followed him around to the side by the open graves. True enough, the stone was worn almost smooth around the carved names, although enough lettering remained on each one to suggest that both had died at the same time. Two other headstones were covered by the tent, their graves undisturbed. Charles Peterson, Beloved Father and Husband, had died on April 14th 1867, a much missed pillar of society. To the other side,

Margaret May Stevens was remembered fondly by her family, even though the gap between her birth and death was only four months. Both gravestones were pitted and worn, but still easy to read. Only the two in the middle were anonymous.

McLean moved closer, peering to try and make out any letters. It wasn't easy to avoid falling in either of the holes, their bottoms black and uninviting in the half light filtering in through the white plastic sides of the tent. And then it hit him, what was wrong with the scene. Apart from everything else, of course.

'Where's all the soil gone?'

'To be honest, I'm not really sure what the crime is, here. Desecrating a graveyard, I guess, but it's not as if any damage was done. And nothing's been taken. Well, apart from a couple of tons of soil.'

The small incident room at the back of the station was blissfully warm, the comfort underlined by splatterings of white snow against the black window panes. McLean sat at one of the tables being pressed into service as a desk as Detective Constable Stuart MacBride brought him up to speed.

'We got an identity for the bodies yet?'

MacBride consulted his ever-present tablet computer, the source of much envy amongst the junior ranking officers. Less so with the older detectives, who hadn't a clue how to use it. 'Not yet. Forensics can't get anything from the gravestones. It's like they've been deliberately rubbed away.'

'What about a cemetery plan?'

'I've got a printout of all the records from the council, but it needs going through. Could take a while.' MacBride hefted a sheaf of paper newly spewed out from the laser printer on the first floor.

'OK. We'll leave that for now. See if anything else comes up from forensics first. It's probably some kind of student prank anyway. Can't waste a lot of time and money on it.'

'It's an odd one though, sir.' MacBride swiped at his tablet screen as he spoke. 'I mean, that's a lot of soil they carted out of there, but there's no sign of any machinery having been used. How did they get it out? Where did it go?'

'Someone's allotment? Let's leave it until we know who the bodies are, OK?' McLean hauled himself out of his seat, tired and sore for no obvious reason. 'You seen Grumpy Bob about this morning? Only he was supposed to be joining us for this briefing.'

MacBride opened his mouth to answer, but was interrupted by the door opening.

'Sorry I'm late, sir. Slept through the alarm. Can't remember the last time that happened.'

Grumpy Bob entered the tiny room in a rush before collapsing into the nearest seat. His face was slick with a sheen of sweat, skin greener than it should have been.

'You OK, Bob?' McLean asked. As questions went, it wasn't perhaps his finest. The detective sergeant took far too long to get his breath back before replying.

'Just a bit under the weather, sir. I'll be fine in a bit.'

'Been getting a bit too up close and personal with someone?' It was meant as a joke, but the haunted look that flashed across Grumpy Bob's face suggested he'd struck a nerve. 'Sorry. None of my business. But if you're not feeling well, go home. Last thing we need is the whole station coming down with flu.'

'I'll be fine. Just don't seem to be getting enough sleep at the moment.'

McLean looked at the old sergeant, slumped in his chair. This was exactly the sort of place Grumpy Bob would normally find for a quick snooze. It looked like he needed a lot more than that though.

'Tell you what, Bob. You stay here and go through that file.' He nodded in the direction of the sheaf of paper. 'The names of our two exhumed bodies are in there. See if you can't dig them out.'

'Just me? On my own?' Grumpy Bob looked hopefully in the direction of DC MacBride and his magic computer.

'Afraid so. We're going to go see a man about a post mortem.'

Down in the depths of the Old Town, hidden away from prying eyes, the city mortuary was a haven of quiet from the bustle all around. McLean spent far too much of his time there; he'd be the first to admit it. There wasn't all that much need to attend PMs, after all. Mostly it was an

excuse to get away from the office for a while. And to chat with his old friend, Angus Cadwallader.

'Really quite remarkable. I've never seen such preservation.' The City Pathologist had both corpses laid out on stainless steel tables, still dressed in their funeral best. It was unusual to see bodies clothed in the examination theatre. Normally this was where intimate secrets were finally revealed.

'Not giving them the full works?' McLean asked.

'Oh, no. These two have been dead a hundred years and more. We're not looking for anyone who might have killed them. No, I'm just giving them somewhere to stay while the coffins are checked for fingerprints and anything else our mysterious diggers might have left behind. Couldn't help myself from having a quick look while they were here though.'

'And what's the verdict? Can you give me a time of death?'

Cadwallader looked up sharply, his frown turning to a smile as he got the joke. 'That'll be one for the archives, I think. Though it would appear they both died at more or less the same time.'

'How can you tell?' McLean stepped up to the tables, taking a closer look at the two bodies. They were small, he realised, shrunken so that their ostentatious clothing seemed too big. As if they were children playing dressing up games. Only the dry, papery skin of their faces and hands gave the lie to that image.

'The clothes, for one thing. I'm not the greatest expert on nineteenth century apparel, but these would appear to be mid-Victorian by the look of things. If one had been buried long after the other, I would have expected them to be more up to date.'

'Unless they were dressed in something special, like a wedding outfit?'

'I see where you're coming from, Tony. But these two aren't dressed for a wedding.' Cadwallader reached out with a gloved hand and deftly unbuttoned the gentleman's jacket, pulling it back slightly to reveal the silk lining within. 'These are show clothes. Something performers would wear.'

'Performers? What sort of performers?' McLean looked again at the two dead bodies, arrayed in their finery. The closer he looked, the more he could see what the pathologist meant. They were costumes, not finery.

'I'm not sure. Not actors, I don't think. Well, maybe Music Hall? Certainly a bit upmarket from the circus. Dressed like this they could well have been ballroom dancers.'

'Ballroom dancers? Was that even a thing back then?'

Cadwallader raised a questioning eyebrow. 'A "thing", Tony?'

'You know what I mean, Angus. Was it something people went to watch? Were there professional Ballroom Dancers, back in those days?'

'You ask that question as if you expect me to have been there.'

'Sorry. Just you seem to know a lot about it.'

'Well, I may have dabbled in my youth.' Cadwallader's gaze lengthened as he stared into the past, then snapped back into focus again. 'Long after Queen Victoria died, before you say anything.'

McLean laughed, slapped his old friend on the arm. 'It's OK, Angus. I believe you. Professional ballroom dancers. Should help us narrow down our search.'

Spin and turn, spin and turn. The couples fill the dance floor in regimented perfection. The music echoes off the high ceiling and distant walls, coaxing him with harmony and counter-harmony, the rhythm complex. He is not dancing yet, has not dared take to the floor. The couples here are so well matched, so perfect in their manoeuvres. He is alone, and can only watch them as they dance.

Others cluster at the edges, waiting their turn or for the right partner to appear. He tries to focus on them, but the music makes it hard to think. Truth be told he can't even remember how he got here this evening. Can't even remember if it is evening at all.

'I know you, don't I?'

He turns to see who has spoken, surprised by the clarity of her voice. She is familiar, though he cannot place her. She is young, or at least appears so, but something about her speaks of great age. In the darkness of the dance hall her hair could be white or blonde, but it is full and long nevertheless. Her eyes lock onto his, black circles in a flawless pale surround.

'I don't think we've met, no.' His own voice sounds distant, like someone else speaking the words in another room. The effect is so strange he forgets to introduce himself. Or is that he has forgotten his name?

'It's no matter. We're all friends here. Come. Dance with me.'

She holds out a hand, her arm thin like a skeleton. She wears elbow length silk gloves, and he can see her arm exposed in the gap between their top and the frilled sleeve of her dress. In the half light it is pale and pure, but so thin he fears it might snap at the lightest touch. Once seen, he cannot drag his eyes from it.

'Dance.'

He feels a pressure on his arm, a gloved hand around his wrist. The touch is wrong, somehow. The arm he can see and the arm he can feel two different things.

'I ... I can't. I don't know this tune.'

She frowns at him, not a look of surprise so much as annoyance.

'But you came here to learn, did you not?'

'Wake up, Bob. It's time to go home.' McLean shook the detective sergeant gently by the arm. He'd found Grumpy Bob in the small incident room, slumped across the desk with MacBride's list of burials spread around in front of him. Fast asleep.

'But I don't know ... wh...? Oh. Sorry sir. Must've just dropped off.'

'I had noticed that. The graveyard records not all that stimulating, I take it.'

'Warm in here too, aye?' Grumpy Bob stretched, yawned, then looked around as if missing something.

'What's up Bob?' McLean asked.

'How d'you mean?'

'This. Falling asleep on the job. Coming in late. It's not like you.'

'I'm OK sir. Just a bit tired lately.'

'A bit? Come on Bob. This is me. I know you like to nip off for a quick snooze every now and then, but I also know nine times out of ten you're just looking for somewhere quieter than the CID room so you can concentrate on the job.'

'Aye, you're right.' Grumpy Bob rubbed at his eyes, accentuating the dark bags underneath them.

'So what's up?'

'That's just it. I've no idea. No problem getting to sleep, but I just wake up feeling like I've worked three shifts in a row.'

McLean leaned against the table and stared at the window, the whiteboard with its few preliminary questions marked up, anything but the detective sergeant sitting beside him. 'So what's changed recently? You worried about having to retire soon?'

'Worried? A bit. Maybe. Sure I'll find something to do with my time.'

'You can't go to the pub every night, Bob. Not on a detective sergeant's pension.'

Grumpy Bob grinned, and something of his old self returned. 'Don't you worry about that, sir. I've got other things to keep me busy.'

'New hobby? Anything interesting?'

'Old hobby, actually. Something me and the wife used to do, before ... well.'

McLean said nothing. Grumpy Bob's divorce might have been a while ago, but it hadn't been pleasant.

'Not been easy, mind. Finding a partner after all these years.'

'Partner?' For a minute McLean couldn't work out what his old friend was talking about. There was no way Grumpy Bob could be looking for a new relationship. Could there? Then at about the same time as the detective sergeant's face broke into a mischievous grin, McLean remembered something from way back, when he'd first started working in plain clothes.

'A dance partner? Aren't you ...'

'A bit old?' Grumpy Bob made a play of looking hurt. 'For the swing and jive, maybe. No way I'm going to jitterbug any time soon. But I can still hack my way around a waltz without causing too much harm.'

'And you've found someone with steel capped dancing shoes, I take it.'

'Something like that. Actually they sort of found me. Been going once a week to this old dance hall down in Leith.' Grumpy Bob scratched at his face, a worried look coming to his eyes.

'Here, you won't tell anyone, will you?'

'My lips are sealed, Bob. Truth be told I used to be a bit of a dancer myself.'

Grumpy Bob's look was a perfect picture of disbelief. 'You?'

'Don't look so surprised. Pretty much the only thing I remember from boarding school was the dancing lessons. We'd get split into two groups. One lot would take off their jumpers and be the girls.'

'No. You've lost me, sir.'

'All boy school, Bob. Old country house in the middle of nowhere. There was a distinct lack of real girls to dance with, so we had to improvise. You'd be surprised how much more you can learn about ballroom dancing if you have to practice both sides of it.'

'You got a moment, sir? Only I think I might have found them.'

McLean stopped mid-stride. He'd been on his way to the canteen, ever hopeful of finding coffee and a bacon buttie. Detective Constable MacBride bustled up to him in the corridor.

'Found who?'

'The dead people. The couple. You know?'

'Oh. Right.'

'I know Grumpy ... DS Laird's been going through the parish records, but I thought I'd do a wider search, based on Doctor Cadwallader's report. Reckon he was right about the clothes and the age matches.' MacBride held out his tablet computer, the screen dense with text. It gave McLean a headache just looking at the tiny characters, let alone trying to read them.

'Executive summary?'

MacBride looked hurt, then shrugged. 'Edward and Hermione Wemyss. They were quite the thing back in the 1880s and 90s. Started off in Music Hall, then went upmarket. Professional Ballroom Dancers, apparently. They were the talk of the city. Toured Scotland and England. They even spent some time in the US. For a while they were much in demand as private dance tutors.'

'I'm sensing a but here,' McLean said.

'Aye, well it all went a bit sour. According to the papers, Hermione found out that Edward was doing a bit more than just teaching his young students to dance.'

'So she killed him?'

'Oh no. He killed her. Arsenic, apparently. He was charged, but he died before he could stand trial. No one's quite sure what killed him. Found him in his cell, eyes wide open, stone cold dead.' MacBride shuddered as he spoke.

'And he was buried alongside her? Even after he'd killed her?'

'It was only a matter of days between her dying and him. I guess he didn't have time to change whatever arrangements he'd made.'

'And they ended up in Liberton Cemetery. Any news from forensics about the grave site?'

'They couldn't find anything, sir. Nothing on the coffins either. It's as if an invisible hand came and scooped all the earth away.'

'Well, we've wasted enough time on it already. Nobody's been harmed. I guess there's nothing for it but to put Mr and Mrs Wemyss back in their graves and hope nobody tries to dig them up again.'

'You want me to get that organised, sir?'

'No. I'll get Bob to sort it. He in the CID room?'

'Actually I've not seen him all day.' MacBride looked a little worried to be admitting it, as if he didn't want to get the detective sergeant into trouble.

'He phone in sick?'

'Not that I've heard.'

McLean pulled out his phone, thumbed at the screen until he found the right number. The call went straight to message. Ah well. Coffee and a bacon buttie would have to wait.

The dance is in full swing now, the dance floor filled with bodies. They spin and turn and whirl and gyre, all in time to a tune so alluring he can hardly keep his feet still. No one else is left at the edges now. Just him, and for a moment he worries that there will be no partner. No dance.

She appears from the flow, the slim young lady with a winning smile. He remembers her from before, that face so hauntingly familiar, those arms so thin they should surely snap. Did he dance with her the last time? He can't remember. Can't even remember how he came to be here.

'I've seen you watching from the sidelines.' Her voice is like her smile, soft and gentle. Welcoming. It washes away his confusion and takes him back to an earlier time. When he was young and strong. And foolish.

'I'm not really sure how -'

'Don't worry. I'll teach you. That's what you're here for, isn't it?'

She reaches out, takes him by the hand. Her touch is like her smile and her voice, and suddenly it doesn't matter that he has two left feet. The music washes over him and he is swept up into the throng.

Tucked in a little side street around the back of Sciennes, Grumpy Bob's one-bed top floor tenement flat wasn't much to show for a life in the police force. But then Mrs Bob had won the lion's share a decade earlier when she'd divorced him. McLean had a certain amount of sympathy for the ex Mrs Laird; Grumpy Bob wasn't the easiest of people to live with. And the old detective sergeant seemed happy enough in his bachelor pad. He even kept the place clean, unlike the students who lived in the rest of the block. He usually remembered to close the front door, too. So it was a surprise to find it hanging open.

'Bob? You in there?' McLean nudged the door to reveal a hallway too small to bend and pick up a cat, let alone swing it. There was more clutter around than he remembered from his last visit, and the place smelled stale.

'I'll just wait here sir, will I?' DC MacBride hung in the doorway, unsure whether he should be privy to such secrets.

'Don't think he's in.' McLean ducked a head quickly into bedroom, living room and bathroom, then finally the tiny galley kitchen. It wasn't a mess, exactly. The plates were neatly stacked waiting by the sink and the tiny table had only an empty cafetiere and mug on it, but there was no way Grumpy Bob would have left his place without doing the washing up first, never mind letting it stack up for days. And there was the matter of the open door. Something was wrong, but how long had it been that way?

One last look around the hall, and he saw it pinned to the cork board beside the phone hanging on the wall. A simple card. McLean unpinned it, peered at the words printed in flowing script from a bygone age.

Ballroom Dancing Lessons
Learn from the best
Waltz, Polka, Gavotte, Formal Reels

Curiously there was no address, no contact number. He flipped the card over, but the back of it was clear. McLean slipped it into his pocket, then joined MacBride on the narrow landing, letting the door close behind him. 'You got your tablet thing with you, constable?'

'Always. Can't leave it lying around the station. Never know who might nick it.' MacBride pulled the slim computer out of a pocket he must have had specially enlarged. 'What were you wanting to know?'

'That couple whose graves were dug up. Edward and Hermione. Do you know where they used to live?'

MacBride looked at him as if he'd grown a second head, but tapped and swiped at the font of all wisdom, craning his neck to peer at the screen in the poor light of the landing. It took a long time, and McLean was beginning to doubt his own thoughts when the detective constable finally spoke.

'The article about Edward Wemyss gives an address in Baltic Street, down in Leith.'

'Is there a dance hall down there?'

More swiping and tapping at the screen and McLean wondered how it was they ever did policing before the internet. Walked the streets and talked to people, of course.

'Actually don't worry too much about it. You can look while I drive.'

There was no doubt that Leith had changed in the past hundred and twenty years, but there were parts of it that a traveller from a couple of centuries earlier would have recognised still. Tucked into a side street of three story terraced houses, the hall might have been a Methodist chapel were it not for the slightly over-ornate decoration to the outside. Stone steps led up to heavy wooden doors that didn't look like they'd been opened in decades and the narrow windows were boarded with shuttering turned grey by the endless sea air and Edinburgh weather.

'Reckon anyone's in?' McLean asked as he tried the heavy door handle. It was warm to the touch and felt like it was resisting him. Not locked, not stiff with little use, but reluctant to let him in nonetheless.

'I've no idea sir.' DC MacBride looked up and down the street nervously, as if expecting a gang of Neds to leap out from some secret hiding place and beat him up for his tablet computer. 'Umm ... Why are we here?'

'Because I don't believe in coincidence. Stay here, and call for back up if I'm not out in five minutes.'

McLean put his full strength into twisting the brass handle. It gave a little, as if weakening, then finally released, tumbling him in through the door as it swung open. A dark emptiness swallowed the sound of his fall like some hungry beast. Spears of mote-laden light pinpointed a few details, painting everything else in deeper shadow. The dance floor was matted with dust, scuffed where he could see it by the recent passage of feet.

'Hello? Anyone here?' McLean caught movement through the corner of his eye, something indistinct in the almost total darkness across the floor. He took a step forward, his foot touching the dance floor.

Music sprang up from nowhere. Or perhaps it was the memory of music. The hall was still dark and formless, but now he thought he could see figures twirling and gyring in time. Couples dancing.

Another foot onto the dance floor and the images firmed up. Not spotlit, but glowing as if lit from within. Each pair of dancers moved as a single entity, joined at shoulder and waist by spindly arms that merged seamlessly into their bodies. The men were all dressed in black, long tailcoats only emphasising how tall and thin they looked. The women wore dresses that billowed out around their feet, sweeping the floor behind them as they went. Their heads were veiled as if in mourning.

McLean stood transfixed. He should have been terrified, but all he felt was a deep sadness. Whether it was in himself or coming from the ghostly dancers he couldn't tell.

And then another couple swung into view, something about them both familiar and utterly alien. Closer they came, swinging round so that the man's back was to him. The woman was young, her face painted with excitement, but her gaze shifted away, the briefest of flickers in his

direction. As she did, her partner stumbled, one foot moving out of time and narrowly missing hers, and at that moment, McLean recognised them both. One he'd seen the day before, sleeping in the small incident room. He moved stiffly, as if he was sleeping still, his eyes fixed on nothing. Glazed.

The other had until recently been lying in a grave in Liberton Cemetery. Only there she had been old, poisoned, dead. Here she was young, vibrant and full of borrowed energy.

'You cannot have him. The dance must not be disturbed.'

Her voice was like the scraping of fingernails on a coffin lid, the echo of a scream from a hundred years ago. McLean ignored the shiver it sent through him, reached out for the shuffling dancer, touched him on the shoulder as passed.

'You must not!'

Something like static electricity arced between his fingers. The room whirled around like a drunken teenager, and then it was him dancing, not Grumpy Bob. The young woman's hand was warm in his as he steered her round and round. His feet moved in perfect time with the music, knowing by themselves exactly what they were supposed to do, where they were supposed to go. But it wasn't real. He knew that. This young woman wasn't anything of the sort.

'The last waltz finished a long time ago, Hermione,' he said. 'It's time for the dancing to end.'

She faltered at her name. The music quietened and the strange ethereal light dimmed.

'The dance ... The dance can never end.'

Now her face was no longer young. Her skin turned dry and leathery, her arms wasted to no more than brittle bone clothed in wax paper. The music was almost gone, just a dry rustling as of sticks in a paper bag. The woman's grip was tight around his hand, but he could no longer feel her other hand around his waist. All around the other dancers were fading, their footsteps losing time to the fast dissipating tune.

'Let it end, Hermione. Let them go.'

She looked at him more in fear now than anger. Her face aged by a century and more in the cold, dark ground.

'I don't want to go back.'

'Then don't.' McLean took control of his feet. He knew what they should do, and what hers should too. He'd danced both parts many times before. Ending was as easy as beginning. Just twirl and release.

Everything stopped.

For a heartbeat, McLean thought he had been mistaken. He'd followed his gut instinct, certain that whatever echo, whatever strange memory was haunting this place, the important thing was to end the dance. Now he stood in silence, feet planted to the centre of the wooden dance floor. Around him all the other dancers had stopped too, though they remained paired as if time had welded them together. Only Hermione moved, and that only slightly. She had taken a step back as the dance demanded, bowed her head and now she raised it slowly.

'You cannot end the dance,' she said and there was anger in her voice. But there was uncertainty too and it reflected in her eyes. Except that she had no eyes now, just sockets in a skull clad in cracked, decaying skin. Her once-lustrous hair turned wiry, white mixed with earth and insects. That smell of loam, the unmistakable aroma of freshly-dug grave. She reached up a hand towards him, stick thin, little more than bones. Her fingers clawed with arthritis, nails long and sharp like talons, and as she opened her mouth to speak again, something dark and scuttling moved around in her mouth.

'You must not end the dance.'

'The dance is already over. It's time to go now.'

'I ... I don't know where to go.' And now the fury was gone, just bewilderment left.

It happened slowly, the light coming up like a slow fade in reverse. And as it brightened, so the dancers began to slip away, from solid to ghost to nothing at all. One by one, pair by pair, they dissolved into the air with sighs of relief until there was just the lone figure left. She stood transfixed for a moment, then without warning leapt at McLean, claw-like talons reaching for his face. A howling screech like the flaying of innocents filled his ears, kept him rooted to the spot, helpless.

And then a spear of light cut across the apparition. The scream ended as abruptly as it had started. The creature that had once been Hermione Wemyss exploded into dust.

McLean held himself perfectly still as the echo of that scream died to nothing. He was standing in the middle of a dusty dance floor. A few paces in front of him, Grumpy Bob lay crumpled in a heap, groaning quietly to himself. It took a long while to work out what had happened, and then McLean realised that the hall was flooded with light. He looked around and saw tall windows on either side, black-out curtains drawn open to reveal grimy glass and the winter sky outside.

'Five minutes is up sir.' DC MacBride stood by the nearest window, hand still gripping the corner of one curtain. 'Thought it might be easier if we could see what we were doing. Umm... What are we doing?'

'Good plan, Constable.' McLean tried moving, and was surprised to find it was no more difficult than before. His feet weren't bonded to the wooden floor at all. He stepped forward as the Grumpy Bob struggled to his knees, opened his eyes and looked around like a man
confused.

'Sir? What on earth are you doing here?' He paused a moment, glanced at his watch. 'Come to that matter, what am I doing here? Lessons don't start until seven.'

'It's OK, Bob.' McLean reached out a hand, helped the detective constable up onto unsteady feet. 'It's all over now.'

'It is?' Grumpy Bob swayed, placed a hand on McLean's arm for support. 'What is?'

'Your career as a ballroom dancer.' McLean led him off the dance floor like a debutante. 'Best you stick to the Lindy Hop from now on, eh?'