

## The Memoirs of Moira

I have followed her for a long time. She has been my friend and my guide, my wicked stepmother and my tormentor. I have loved her and hated her; and now, she has to go.

I met her – how long ago is it now? – when I was still a nobody. I remember it clearly: a warm spring rain was pattering on the conservatory roof, and I was staring out into the garden, imagining how lovely it would be to take off my shoes and walk barefoot in the grass, to feel the wetness of the conifers and the stickiness of the new buds on the trees. I was doing this because my block had struck again. You wouldn't believe it now, but I used to get writer's block so often. In fact this block was more like a brick wall. I was plodding through my fifth novel – *The Forbidden Shore*, it was called, if you must know – and coming to the realisation that I was writing drivel. All my heroines thus far had been feisty businesswomen shaken out of their nine-to-five rat-race lives by chance meetings with hunks who were implausibly virile yet unfailingly kind, or by sons of the earth who taught my Elspeths and my Rebeccas how to really live life. The names were changed – a gypsy became an Italian farmer, a librarian became an advertising executive – but underneath, the plots were the same.

Anyway, there I was staring out at the garden, hating myself and hating Elspeth and Romero even more, when I found Moira standing beside me.

'Hullo there,' she said, in that soft lowlands accent I was to come to know so well.

'Who are you?' I said, staring. 'And how did you get in? Did I leave the front door open?'

'I heard you were a writer,' she said. Intelligent blue eyes regarded me through large, pink spectacles (I disliked the spectacles from the start). Her face, haloed in short, perfectly-coiffured hair, was smooth and unlined; I put her age at about forty-five. Her mouth turned up at the corners, as it always did. I liked her straight away, but I felt strangely embarrassed.

'Um, you could say that,' I said. 'I – I'm not very successful.'

'I'm afraid I heard that, too.'

I felt hot behind my neck. 'Who told you that?'

She gave a wave of an elegant hand. 'That, my dear, does not matter. I came to ask a question. I wonder – how would you like a change?' She nodded at the computer screen where my cursor had stuck. 'Leave this behind you. Come and write my memoirs.'

'Your memoirs?'

She held out her hand. 'Moira Sutherland. Detective.'

'Detective?' I said, shaking it. I felt breathless.

'Yes,' she said with a grin. 'Private, of course. One has so much scope as a private detective. And, of course, I'm quite good.'

'Er, good?'

'Naturally. No-one would want to read my memoirs if I were commonplace.'

I frowned. 'So, it'd be like – I mean, I'd be –'

She nodded. 'You'd be Watson to my Holmes.'

'What sort of cases do you work on?' I said.

She bent low, and whispered in my ear. 'Murders,' she said.

'M – murders?'

'Mm-mm,' she said, nodding.

'I – I couldn't write about murders,' I spluttered.

'I'm a class act, my dear. I offer my services to the rich and powerful. I'm the soul of discretion. I go further and faster than the police. And I'm relatively normal. These days one reads about so many detectives who have some sort of psychological problem. You,' she said, 'pointing a finger, can write about my cases, not my private life.'

'Do you have one?' I said. 'I mean, a private life.'

'Oh, no, my dear. Nasty things. Best avoided.'

I agreed. I have to admit I was apprehensive at first, but as soon as we started on our first case (of course, Moira would point out, in her very precise way, that it was only *my* first case, not really hers). A senior cabinet minister had been killed whilst out grouse-shooting in Inverness-shire. Of gunshot wounds, you might think? No, he was killed with a kitchen-knife, miles from the nearest kitchen. Moira, resplendent in a Harris tweed suit which suited her slim figure beautifully, joined the party, gained their confidence and discovered that the hotel owner and three of the regular guides had all been in it together. It was over money, of course. And I was there, posing as her secretary. Sometimes I'd make useful suggestions, but it was Moira who always came up with the answers. She was very complimentary about my writing, too, and suggested a few places where I could raise the tension by a judicious choice of verb. The book sold well immediately. 'Better than romance, my dear, isn't it?' she said.

But when I did include some romance, things really took off. That is to say, Moira found herself invited to a Mediterranean island, and of course a film star (Amber Delelli – surely you've heard of her?) was found drowned in the swimming-pool. An accident? Only Moira was suspicious, and when she discovered that Amber had been having an affair with the swimming instructor it wasn't long before suspicion fell on her estranged husband. I was particularly proud of the scene where Moira struggled with the killer on a cliff edge, and only by giving him a head-butt was she able to escape. 'A trifle too dramatic for my liking, my dear,' she remarked a few days later as we visited the opticians. This time I made sure the glasses weren't pink.

That one sold six times as many copies as all of my novels put together. 'Aren't you glad I came along?' said Moira. 'Where would you be without me?'

I said nothing.

One evening, when I'd just been putting the finishing touches to my account of the Case of the Dutch Tulip – involving a member of the royal family – Moira, who was sitting swirling her whisky (the family brand, by the way), said:

'You don't have much of a social life, do you, my dear?'

The great log fire was making me hot. 'Well, it's hardly surprising, is it?' I said. 'It's nearly three years, now. You've had case after case after case, and there's no sign of a let up. I have to get every case written up before the next one

comes along. This is the twenty-third, and I don't remember having a holiday since Gibraltar. And *then* there was a murder on the way back.'

'You don't *have* to come along, dear.' But she said it in the same tone of voice – with a slight sandpapery edge to it – that she regularly used on Culprits. I had no choice, and she knew it.

'You're ruining my life,' I muttered.

She pretended not to hear.

Then it happened. Case twenty-four was a murder in a Gentleman's Club. They couldn't invite a man in to investigate, they said, in case he was a member of a rival club, as indeed was the chief constable for the area. So it was Moira and I who had to work with Jeremy, the young secretary who'd discovered the body. Jeremy was lovely – brown eyes like a big teddy bear's, great rippling shoulders and teeth that really did sparkle. And so gentle! It was love at first sight. I followed him everywhere, and he began to notice. One night he came to my bedroom; but before I could even tell him to be gentle with me, Moira came in – without knocking – and said she'd discovered a Clue. She gave a glance at Jeremy, then her mouth turned up at the corners.

We solved the case. The murderer was arrested and taken away (gambling debts, *again*), but as I lay alone in bed that night, I knew what Moira and Jeremy were up to.

That was when I decided. She'd taken over my life, and now she'd taken a boyfriend from me. She'd have to go.

I did think about it for a long time. But she'd made me rich, and now I could do without her. It would be a wrench, it was true; we'd been through a lot together. But Jeremy was the last straw. So, the murder was planned. It would be me, in the conservatory, with the keyboard. I laid my hands on the murder weapon and began to type.

*Sir Jasper gasped. He stood, clutching his throat. 'But – but how could you know?'*

*Moira Sutherland pointed a long manicured finger at his heart. 'Because,' she said complacently, 'only you knew where the revolver was kept. Only you knew that Smithers went to bed early on Tuesday.'* She strode into the centre of the room, and her voice was cold. *'And only you, Sir Jasper, stood to inherit. Yes, you are Lady Catherine's long-lost –'*

*A grinding, tearing sound came from above. Sutherland's head flicked back in time to see the huge glass chandelier hurtling towards her; she had no time to react before, in a hail of shattering glass, she was pinned to the ground, pierced by a dozen shards and crushed by the brazen boss. A pool of blood spread slowly over the floorboards . . .*

And that was that. At first Clarence (that's my publisher) didn't like it. But when he thought of how well this one would sell, and that there were other Moira Sutherlands out there, he wasn't too worried. And it *did* sell, by the way – more than any of her other cases. So right now, I'm sitting by the fire with a G-and-T

(never did like whisky) and thinking of Moira. I miss her, it's true, but at least I get holidays now. And Nigel is real, and nearly as nice as Jeremy . . .

The phone rings.

'Hi. It's Clarence.' He sounds worried, strained. 'The police have just been on. It's about Moira.'

My stomach tightens. 'What? What is it?'

'The chandelier. The bolts that held it to the ceiling – they say they were sawn through. They're treating it as murder.'