THE Devil Upstairs

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CHAPTER ONE

IF YOU ASKED CAT THOMAS on ten separate occasions why she moved to Edinburgh she would have been able to give you a different answer each time. A yearning for a different climate, after spending most of her life in Florida. A cooling of UK house prices, owing partly to Britain's decision to leave the EU. The strength of the US dollar against the pound sterling. A sudden influx of inheritance money, on top of the savings she had been accruing for nearly twenty years. Family tensions and a legacy of failed relationships. A certain dismay at the intellectual and political climate in her home country. And, on a very practical level, her ability to gain UK residency thanks to her late mother's birth in Inverness.

But three reasons stood out. The first related to her job at a Miami bank and a routine fraud investigation that had evolved into something much larger and more sinister. When her life was repeatedly threatened by an organised crime syndicate – dead animals on her doorstep, spray-painted warnings on her car – Cat had defied the advice of senior management and resolved to remain in Florida until court proceedings were complete. But then, once the guilty parties were sentenced (some with serious jail time), she opted to relocate for her own safety to another country.

The second reason related to her overheated brain and the need to retreat and reassemble in a fresh environment. The chaos of the previous three years – coordinating the investigation, her subsequent legal obligations and the care of her ailing father – cried out for new scenery, new horizons, new minutiae, and the overwhelming distraction of setting herself up a new home.

The third reason – and the one Cat was most willing to share, particularly with Scots themselves – sprang from her long-time fascination with all things Scottish and her particular passion for its capital city. She'd first been taken to Edinburgh, where her mother's uncle was a prestigious civil engineer, at the impressionable age of eight. Already advanced for her tender years, with a field of vision that was unusually discriminating, she instantly fell in love with the sooty sandstone, the crowstepped gables, the cobblestones (actually setts, her uncle explained grandly), the elegant crescents and sloping streets of the New Town, the maze of lanes and bridges in the Old Town, and the general air of perpetual twilight that pervaded at the time of her visit (early December). She boldly declared, to the amusement of all present, that she was going to purchase a home there one day – preferably a Georgian terrace-house like that of her uncle, in some fashionable street like Inverleith Row (where her uncle lived), with a conservatory out back where she could read the morning paper over freshly brewed tea (as her uncle did), before taking a dog (a Border Terrier, like her uncle's) on a bracing walk down one of the tree-flanked bicycle paths that crisscrossed the north of the city (just as her uncle liked to do on his morning constitutionals).

Management in Miami made noises about wanting to retain her in the US, in any city of her choice, but having reached the age of thirty-five Cat was determined to fulfil her dreams while she had a chance. So the bank, 'sad to lose such a fine operator', had duly

arranged her transfer-in-principle to its sister institution, the venerable Alba Banking Company, or ABC, headquartered in Edinburgh.

For three months Cat studied the real estate websites, collated a list of properties that suited her dreams and her means (as it happened, terrace houses in Inverleith Row were at least one zero outside her budget), and commissioned a relocation agent in Edinburgh to check out these places in person and compile a list of her own recommendations. Then she flew into Scotland, in glorious blossom-infused April, to make her all-important decision.

Everything went remarkably smoothly. As soon as she stepped out of the airport Cat was greeted by the relocation agent, a bubbly mother of three called Janine, who over the next two days whisked her around Edinburgh in a battered silver Vauxhall. They visited ten properties altogether, including a spacious duplex apartment in a converted schoolhouse in Danderhall (superb and under budget, though Cat feared it might be prohibitively expensive to heat); three top-floor flats in the New Town (each with its own charms and deficiencies); a tiny pied-à-terre in the Old Town (there wasn't enough room to swing a kitten, let alone a cat); a well-appointed second-floor place, owned by a widowed surveyor, in the charming riverside suburb of Colinton (the relocation agent warned that it was a little far from the nearest supermarket); a sliver-thin terrace house in the eclectic area of Leith (Cat was alarmed by the sight of beer bottles spilling over the top of a neighbour's wheelie-bin); and an eccentric old residence, formerly a potter's studio, that had everything going for it except for openable windows and a functioning bathroom (it was also disturbingly close to a traffic-clogged arterial road).

In the end it came down to two choices. Cat's favourite was a two-bedroom flat in an incredible keep-like building in so-called Dean Village, a sleepy enclave set in a picturesque gorge half a mile from

the city centre. Built in the late 1700s as a sort of office block for the various millers, skinners and tanners that once operated in the area, the building's sandstone walls were three feet thick. The ivy-covered façade was abutted by a spiral stairway, fully enclosed, that was like something out of a Robin Hood movie. Both bedrooms – large and small – faced onto a leafy quadrangle where traffic was minimal. There was a burbling little river, the Water of Leith, just eighty metres away. A private garden across the road. Even a designated parking space directly outside the front door.

The second property was a basement flat, under a dental surgery, in an elegant Georgian tenement in Dundas Street. Cat enjoyed the idea of living huddled away and out of sight. She especially liked the idea that the dental surgery would (presumably) be unoccupied overnight. And since the owner's asking price was considered 'a real steal' by the relocation agent, Cat was getting ready to pounce when the owner of the flat in Dean Village suddenly announced that she was willing to lower her own price to something not dissimilar – an incredible bargain by any measure.

Scarcely believing her luck, Cat instructed her Scottish solicitor, an easy-going fellow called Stuart, to accept the fresh price immediately.

The sale, however, proved unbearably suspenseful. Stuart put in an offer that was ten thousand pounds lower than the already reduced price. Cat's misgivings – she was a virgin to Scottish real estate protocols but thought it never wise to look a gift horse in the mouth – were only exacerbated when there came news that an eagle-eyed 'other party' had sprung out of the woodwork with a last-minute competing offer. Cat reminded Stuart that she was perfectly willing to pay the full price but the solicitor was adamant: 'Don't worry, this place has been on the market for a year. It's just a ploy, trust me – the "other party" doesn't exist.'

Cat wasn't so sure. She had no patience for financial games. And she hated the prospect of missing out. But, as a stranger in a strange land, she figured it was best to shut up. So she spent three torturous days pacing restlessly around the city, trying to 'keep calm and carry on'. A score of times, just to assure herself it wasn't some sort of Brigadoon-like mirage, she negotiated the steep inclines down into Dean Village, dreading the prospect of finding the FOR SALE – UNIT 5 sign removed from the railings outside 'her' building.

But then, on the afternoon of her fifth day in Edinburgh, while standing pensively atop the Salisbury Crags, she received a call from Stuart: 'Congratulations! You now own a tiny piece of Scotland.'

Cat was incredulous. 'They accepted the offer?'

'I got another three thousand off in the end.'

'Really? It was as easy as that?'

'I told you the other buyer didn't exist. Go get yourself a whisky.'

'I don't drink.'

'An Appletiser, then.'

Poised on the clifftop, with her coat flapping about her, Cat pocketed her phone and stared over the rooftops of the sunlit city, trying to exult, like Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, from the precipice of a momentous and thrilling future. But at just that moment a cloud curtained the sun, Edinburgh fell into deep shadow, and she was lanced by a brief but disorientating feeling of portent.

It was Friday, 28 April.

CHAPTER TWO

For a while, everything seemed to be going splendidly. Cat had allotted two weeks in Edinburgh to formalise the sale of the flat but in the end the whole deal was settled within eight days. She signed a good deal of paperwork, transferred a deposit amount from her bank account, and on a whim purchased a hamper for the owner as a gesture of goodwill or even guilt (she still couldn't believe she'd nabbed a place in Dean Village, so close to the city centre, for such a price). But the owner's solicitor claimed that her client was 'unavailable' and Cat ended up passing the basket to Stuart, who, embarrassed by the largesse, promised to share it with his family.

She spent the rest of her stay roaming around the city, methodically noting the prices of items she'd need to purchase, making reconnoitres of the local stores and supermarkets, and walking repeatedly past her future home with a giddying sense of dominion. Then, in early May, she flew back to Florida to pack up her belongings, dispose of everything not precious enough to ship, and say farewells, sometimes stilted, to family and friends.

In fact, Cat was the last – and by far the youngest – of five children and had always felt like something of a fifth wheel, alienated both by

her age and the nagging suspicion that she was an unwanted financial burden. She had learned not to rely on love – to be constantly suspicious of it, in fact – and to mine her sense of self-worth from within. Anticipating a day when she might shift overseas, she had also maintained a studied distance from family, friends and workmates. Her greatest fear, indeed, was that she might make herself vulnerable to the same overwrought emotions she had observed in them. So there were no tears shed at her farewell dinners and get-togethers, just a lot of laughs, good wishes, and the occasional expression of disbelief: 'I can't believe you're leaving Miami for that cold, cold place at the ends of the earth.'

To which Cat was quick to point out that Edinburgh, despite its latitude, never got as cold as Philadelphia, where her family had lived prior to an unmentionable scandal, and never as uncomfortably hot as Miami, either – so who was the foolish one?

* * *

She expected a transition period of around three months but the owner was quite happy to move out at once – she already had another property, apparently – and Cat, with a new life beckoning, was equally happy not to delay things. She donated most of her clutter to Miami thrift stores, left boxes of her more substantial items with a shipping company and, armed with two large suitcases and a jam-packed carry-on, took a direct flight from Orlando Sanford at the start of June, just before the official moving-in date.

In Edinburgh she booked into a budget hotel near Dean Village and, by some miracle, was allocated a room from which she could see her own building – the windows of her own flat! – amid the cluster of steeply gabled residences in the gorge below. Two mornings later she collected the keys from Stuart – one standard door

key and two impressive Chubb keys, of the sort you'd expect to see opening safes – and, with some difficulty, wheeled her luggage from the hotel down into the village, across the wrought-iron footbridge where tourists were snapping photos of the palatial Wells Court, and up through the cobbled (correction, *setted*) streets to her building. Here she unlocked the black stair door and hefted her luggage up the granite steps to her own flat on the fifth floor. She half-expected to meet the former owner there – Stuart had indicated that the woman would probably greet her in person – but as it happened there was only a Manila envelope taped to the door containing six pages of dog-eared instructions: the location of the stop-cock and gas meter, the proper way to open the casement windows, and extensive details on the stove, the fuse-box, the radiators and the combi-boiler.

The place had been stripped of furniture but for an oversized wardrobe that Cat guessed had been too cumbersome to wangle down the stairs. The splintery floorboards were bare. There was a curious ambience of abandonment. But the views were intoxicating. The tranquillity was profound. The invitation to occupy was palpable.

That evening Cat sobbed herself dry – an occasional purging process whenever she thought of her ill-fated parents and her own failure to fully connect with the world – and afterwards slept on the bedroom floor under a single blanket she'd purchased at a Princes Street department store. The next morning she welcomed the delivery of a double bed (which she had to assemble from the ground up). Then came a mattress. Later a sofa and an armchair. She went out and ordered a flat screen TV. A computer. A kitchen table that had caught her eye in a Heart Foundation store. A funky chest from a Leith Walk auction house. A few bookcases from a closing-down sale at a homeware outlet. A couple of faux-vintage

lamps. Floor rugs, throw rugs, towels, bath and bed linen. Pots and pans and cutlery and crockery for the kitchen; sculptures, trinkets and clocks for the walls and ledges; flowers for the window boxes; and bird feeders to attract the robins, tits, chaffinches and dunnocks that she had seen flitting about the surrounding trees.

She spent a glorious two days shopping for new outfits, headwear and shoes. She bought a SIM, opened a phone account, got herself connected to the Internet, purchased a TV licence, joined the nearby Drumsheugh Baths Club for the swimming pool, and acquired a key to the neighbouring Belgrave Crescent Gardens (an immense private garden across two dramatic levels, featuring river, bridge, weir, church and crescent views). She registered at the Stockbridge Medical Centre, had a basic check-up, and received in the mail a letter informing her that she was now registered with the National Health Service. More of a surprise – since she had done nothing to apply – was the news that she was listed on the Scottish electoral roll (this minor technicality seeming to announce officially that she had been embraced as a Scot).

Early in July her belongings arrived from the US and an overly solicitous delivery guy helped her lug the boxes up the stairs (before lingering disagreeably, like a man who'd watched too many porno movies). When he left, with a surly glance at his £10 tip, Cat was finally able to hang up her most cherished artworks, stock her shelves with her favourite books, crowd her closets with the remainder of her best clothes, and generally unpack and squirrel away a lot of things which she would have done better to leave in America.

In all these actions she found an invigorating sense of reconstruction.

Four weeks into her residence – just as she was beginning to have too much time to reflect on things – she started work in ABC's

headquarters in Lauriston Place. She was guided around the building (a block of green-tinted glass known locally as 'the Aquarium'), met her new colleagues in the Internal Fraud Department (Ross, Fergus, Jenny, Skye, Isla and Agnes), was shown to her closet-sized office, and handed the keys to her company car, a VW Golf, in which she would soon be visiting branches across Scotland.

'You and I are gonna get along fine,' declared Agnes, a fearsome Goth who'd taken up the task of showing her the ropes.

This now, for Cat, was the time for routine: awake at six-thirty, twenty laps at the pool, a hot shower, granola and black coffee, a quick drive to work, home at six, dinner, chores, some down-time, a five-mile run, bed just before eleven, rinse and repeat, every movement from the flick of the kettle switch to the return of her trainers to the shoe rack an integral component in a reassuring daily ritual. This also was the time for Edinburgh to assume its new role of a comforting backdrop, for her flat to become a cosily familiar sanctuary, and for Cat to consider how idyllic it was, to be living in such an enchanting building in such a remarkable city.

And Cat did that – all that – for another two blissful weeks.

And then, on Friday, 28 July, she became aware of the problem.

CHAPTER THREE

'When I bought the place,' Cat admitted, 'I didn't even realise there was an apartment upstairs. You can't really see it from the street – the roof slopes in dramatically – and I just assumed it was a storage space or an empty loft or something.'

Agnes grunted. 'Lots of buildings in Scotland have old nooks and crannies that've been converted into living spaces. You should've been more careful.'

'Uh-huh. And then, for my first five or six weeks in Edinburgh, the flat was empty. The guy who lives there was away somewhere. I think he was away when I inspected the place, too, or just super quiet. But now he's back. And suddenly I get why the previous owner was so eager to sell.'

'He's some sort of maniac?'

'He's a musician.'

'Same thing.'

'And he makes noise. Lots of noise.'

'All musicians do.'

'But it's not just the music – though that's bad enough. It's all sorts of things. Dropping stuff. Stamping around. Banging doors.'

'All through the night?'

'Day and night. Every night. He never seems to sleep.'

'Just kill the cunt.'

'I wish I could,' Cat said, grimacing. 'I wish I could.'

It was an unusually humid early August evening and, with Agnes at the wheel, the two women were hurtling down the A91 towards Edinburgh after interviewing staff at the ABC branch in Montrose. It had only been Cat's third such expedition since reviving her career in Scotland, so she had let Agnes take charge while familiarising herself with the local idioms and procedures. In fact, Agnes, though wildly different in most ways – as plump as Cat was slim, as loud and impulsive as Cat was prudent and methodical – had become her closest colleague in the department, and the nearest thing to a friend outside office hours, for all her fondness for booze, deep-fried food and the c-word.

'Is the cunt renting?'

Cat grimaced again. 'I don't know . . . I don't know.'

'Complain to the landlord, if he is. Tenants need to maintain good records, you know – especially in a compact city like Edinburgh.'

'The previous owner surely would have done that, if it was going to do any good.'

'Complain to the factor, then.'

'I don't know what a factor is,' Cat admitted.

'The building superintendent.'

'I don't think there is one.'

'How many flats in the building?'

'Six, one atop the other.'

'Maybe the place is too small.'

Honking the horn at a motorist who swung into her lane, Agnes mouthed the c-word again.

Cat shook her head. 'In Florida I lived for a while in a condo, and

there were strict rules in place. Anyone with floorboards had to cover at least seventy per cent of them to reduce noise.'

'Got bare floorboards, has he?'

'They creak like ship timbers. And – I swear to God – I think he deliberately leans on them, at their weakest points, just to make a racket.'

'It's an existential thing,' Agnes said. 'Some people are like toddlers – they only feel alive if they're making noise.' She honked the horn again.

'Maybe that's why he's a musician.'

'Does he shag?'

'Sorry?'

'I used to live beside a couple that shagged like rabbits. Round the clock like newlyweds. I had to thump on the walls to get some peace. That's what you should do, you know. Bang on the ceiling and shout at the top of your lungs: "Oi! What are you playing at?"'

'I didn't come here to make enemies.'

'You didn't come here to tolerate cunts, either.'

'Do you have to say that word?'

'Which word?' Agnes thought about it and sniggered. 'Hey, you're in the wrong country if you blush at a bit of swearing.'

'Isn't there anything else—'

'Prick?'

'Not that, either.'

'Fud?'

'Like Elmer Fudd? That'll do.'

Agnes chuckled. 'OK, then.'

'And, in answer to your question,' Cat said, 'I haven't heard him shag. Not yet, anyway. I have heard him on the toilet, though.'

'Ha! Seriously?'

'I set up an inflatable mattress in my second bedroom – I use it as a study mainly – and tried to sleep there. But it must be directly

below his bathroom. I swear, he pees directly into the water, this great thunderous stream, just for the hell of it. Then he slams the lid down.'

'He puts the lid down? You sure he doesn't have a girl?'

'I've never seen one, if he has.'

'What's he look like?'

'No idea,' said Cat. 'The building has a common mailbox, though, so I've seen his name on envelopes. Mr Dylan Moyle.'

'Dylan Moyle . . .' said Agnes, nodding. 'Sounds tasty.' She roared past two lorries carrying freshly sawed logs. 'Maybe he's hung.'

'I can't imagine why you'd say that.'

'Said he pissed "thunderously", didn't you?'

'I don't think that signifies anything.'

'You never know,' said Agnes. 'Go up and introduce yourself. You might be sharing his bed before long.'

'I assure you I won't be doing that.'

'Why not? It's one way to solve your noise problem.'

'It's one way to *make* problems, if you ask me.'

'Not frigid, are you?'

Cat, who in general could shrug off insults and even enjoy them, made a disapproving noise. 'Abrasiveness can be another "existential thing", you know.'

Agnes laughed. 'Well, we've all been wondering about you. Coming all this way, all by yourself, living alone. Either a prude or burned out, we figure.'

'The truth, as usual, is in the middle.'

'That makes not a jot of sense.'

'Whatever,' said Cat. It was too difficult to explain how much she enjoyed being alone. How she had learned the hard way not to trust people. How she had not even contacted her surviving relatives in Scotland, including the sons of her mother's uncle, for fear of needing to socialise with them. 'No,' she said, 'I wouldn't care if

he looked like George Clooney. He's inconsiderate, I know that for a fact, and that's a deal-breaker for me.'

'If you have a quiet word with him, maybe he'll change his ways.'

'If he doesn't already know he's making too much noise, then he's dumb as well as inconsiderate. I mean, as soon as I moved in, I bought rugs and carpets for the floors. And every night I creep around to make sure I don't disturb anyone downstairs. And I've never even *met* the people downstairs.'

Agnes shook her head. 'You'll go mad judging people by your own standards. Time to play by his rules, I say. Play loud music, bang on the walls, see how *he* likes it.'

'No . . .' Cat stared out at the heather-dotted pastures of Fife.

'You *really* don't want to confront him, do you?'

'I doubt it will do any good. It might even make him worse.'

'So, what are you gonna do?'

'I dunno . . . Pray.'

Agnes glanced at her. 'Not religious, are you?'

'Don't think so.'

'You don't *think* so?'

'Well, my parents were. And I'm American. So it'd be silly to suggest I hadn't taken on some influences.'

Agnes, who had a pentagram swinging from her rear-view mirror, nodded approvingly. 'Wise answer,' she said. 'Wise answer.'

Shortly afterwards they whisked across the Firth of Forth via the Queensferry Crossing – one of three majestic bridges linking Fife to Edinburgh – and Agnes made a sceptical sound. 'George Clooney's a bit long in the tooth for you now, isn't he?'

But Cat was too distracted to answer. The heat, the waves, the sun-seared evening sky: she had been impaled, briefly but disturbingly, by a totally unexpected feeling of homesickness.