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# **The Rat Stone Serenade**

Written by Denzil Meyrick

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# **THE RAT STONE SERENADE**

**A D.C.I. Daley Thriller**

Denzil Meyrick

*Polygon*

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*At a fixed time of the year they assemble at a holy place  
in their territory.*

Julius Caesar on the Druids

For my late grandfather, Cyril Pinkney, who drove the bus to  
'Blaan' for many years.

## Prologue

*A hundred years ago. Blaauw, near Kinloch*

Torquil Drysdale, lawyer and notary public from Kinloch, arrived on the back of Tam Murray's farm cart. The old farmer stuck out his hand, a knowing look on his face, as Drysdale fumbled in his pocket and fished out a few coins with a sigh.

'Kindly wait here for me to conclude my business, Mr Murray.'

'Aye, that I will, sir. But you know fine, that'll mean mair coin.' He sniffed, then rubbed his nose along the length of a grubby sleeve.

'If you mean more than I've already given you, then yes, I'm well aware, Mr Murray. Just wait here.'

The lawyer brushed dirt and loose straw from his suit as he walked from the cart. He could hear a hammer clanging on metal in the distance, so followed the noise around the corner of the whitewashed house. Before him was a gravel yard, around which three open-ended buildings clustered. In the middle stood a massive Clydesdale horse, chewing on hay, as a large man bent over a plate-sized hoof, hammering in a new horseshoe.

‘Mr Stuart!’ shouted Dryesdale.

Though the blacksmith kept to his task, he raised a hand to show that he had heard. In a few moments, he stopped to examine the job, then stood stiffly, turning to face the lawyer.

‘And jeest who are you?’ he said, wiping his huge hands down the front of his greasy leather apron.

‘I’m Torquil Dryesdale, of Perrit, Dryesdale and McCormack in Kinloch. We’re the lawyers who sent you the letters you’ve been ignoring, Mr Stuart.’ He held out his hand to shake Stuart’s, but the big man didn’t move.

‘If this is anything tae dae with Archibald Shannon, I’m not interested.’

‘It’s nothing to do with whether you’re interested or not,’ replied Dryesdale, eyeing the hammer in Stuart’s meaty fist. ‘The law is the law: you sold this property to Mr Shannon over five years ago and now he wants to use the land for something else. You have to leave, Mr Stuart.’ Dryesdale pulled at the tight collar of his shirt and swallowed, his mouth dry. He was much happier in court, or behind his desk in Kinloch. However, he’d drawn the short straw and the job of serving court papers to Nathaniel Stuart was his responsibility.

‘This is from the Sheriff Court in Kinloch, Mr Stuart. You have exactly one calendar month from today to remove yourself from the premises. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and handed the big youthful blacksmith a folded document, fastened with a red wax seal.

Stuart looked down at the piece of paper and shrugged his broad shoulders, knots of muscle rippling in his thick arm as he lifted his hand to point into the distance.

‘My people have lived here for hundreds of years, maybe thousands. We were here before the Lords of the Isles, who

resided in the castle that used to sit at the top of that rock over there,' he said, pointing down the steep hill and along the beach to a distant promontory of land. 'Before Kinloch was a toon; before the red yins came o'er the sea and called oor country Scotland. Aye, an' I tell you something, right here's where we're going tae stay.'

'That's as may be, Mr Stuart. But you signed the deeds over to Mr Shannon. Surely you must remember doing this. The transaction was witnessed by my own office.'

'I remember fine. But Archie Shannon has reneged on his side o' the agreement.'

'There is nothing at all in the document signed by you and he that mentions anything that has not been taken into consideration by the court. This is a straightforward transaction, Mr Stuart. You sold the land to Mr Shannon and were given leave at his discretion to rent the property back, which you have done these past five years.'

'Aye, and should be able tae the next fifty years and then a further fifty, if those that come after me wanted tae,' growled Stuart, prompting Drysdale to take a step back.

'No, Mr Stuart, that is most certainly not the case. As owner of the land, Mr Shannon has the right to ask you to leave this property after a notice period of one year has elapsed. That year is almost up.'

'He told me that we could live here for as long as we wanted – we shook hands on it. All he asked of me was tae pay the due rent, which I have done every quarter, jest like he asked.'

Drysdale shuffled his feet nervously. 'Whatever Mr Shannon may have said to you is not part of the written



agreement, Mr Stuart. We've been through this in our communications. When Mr Shannon allegedly said this to you, who witnessed it?' Dryesdale's voice was croaky now because of his dry mouth.

'Me, I witnessed it!' shouted Stuart, his grip tightening around the handle of the hammer.

'Then I'm afraid that it is of no consequence. Frankly, Mr Stuart, I'm surprised that Mr Shannon has let you run your business from here for so long. Two blacksmiths in the one village can't be good for business.'

'Aye, well, we were here first. And forbye, he's no' a blacksmith. His faither and grandfaither, aye. Not him.'

'That's not important, Mr Stuart. He owns the business – and quite a few others in Kinloch, Glasgow and beyond. You have no choice. You have one month to take your leave or sheriff officers will remove you. Do you understand? Mr Shannon intends to build his new home here.' He gazed out at the scene below. 'And, I for one, don't blame him – despite the climb to get up here.'

Suddenly, Stuart lurched at the smaller man, catching him by the throat. 'Do you know who my people are, Mr Dryesdale?' he said, sending flecks of spittle over the lawyer's face.

'I've . . . I've heard it said you are of the Tinker community. I . . . I don't see what . . .'

'If I'm forced to leave this land, I will curse Archibald Shannon and all of his family, now and for ever more. Every fifty years, to mark the promise broken tae me, calamity will befall his family, aye, until the end o' time. Dae you understand?' He pushed Dryesdale onto the ground and stood over him. 'Go back tae Kinloch an' tell Archibald Shannon that.'

Drysdale scrambled up and ran back around the corner and onto Murray's cart. 'Move, Mr Murray, and don't spare the whip!'

'C'mon, auld girl,' shouted Murray, calmly lifting the reins. 'As for the whip, well, that'd be a lot mair coin,' he added, as the cart moved slowly off, the large figure of Nathaniel Stuart watching it go.

*The beach at Blaauw, near Kinloch*

He loved this beach, even though it was always winter, always cold, when he was here. He watched a gull riding the wind above the green storm-tossed sea – as though dangling from a string like the model planes on the ceiling of his bedroom in London.

Sometimes he could see ships on the horizon, but not today. The sky was slate-grey. At the far end of the stretch of fine yellow sand, the promontory thrust out into the sea like a rocky finger. He always imagined it had the head of a lion, big and bold. His father had told him stories of the castle that had once sat on the cliff-top, facing the cold depths fearlessly from its tall perch. The boy was bewitched by thoughts of the olden days; to think that his ancestors had once lived there, on the high rock, in a time when men had swords and fought battles. Now, there were only a few stones left, an earthly reminder of times past.

When he had asked how many men their ancestor had in his castle – conjuring up in his mind the kings and princes he had read about in books and seen on trips to the big cinema in Kensington – his father had smiled indulgently.

‘We weren’t rich then, Archie. We fought for the clan chief, but we were strong and fierce.’

When Archie looked towards the other end of the beach, up to the high cliff on which the great house stood solid and indomitable, he couldn’t imagine his family having ever been anything else but rich. He’d seen some children begging in the streets near home, just before Christmas. His mother told him they were poor. He’d studied one miserable little boy with a dripping nose and in ragged clothes and decided that he never wanted to be poor.

Up at the big house, he could see his mother on the terrace from time to time; no doubt checking that he hadn’t strayed too near the sea. Like him, she was wrapped up against the cold.

He wanted to play a trick on her. He looked around. There, between two dunes, a small burn trickled over soft sand. As he followed its course backwards, away from the sea, he could no longer see the cliff, the house, or his mother.

His young mother shivered as she looked out from the terrace and to the beach below. She breathed deeply. The cool moist air was so fresh, so different from London. Glancing at her watch and deciding it was time that both she and the boy were out of the cold, she looked for her son.

She had seen Archie what seemed only moments before as he skipped and played on the sand, but she was dismayed to note that, so engrossed had she been in her novel, more than twenty minutes had now elapsed since she had last checked on him. Now, there was no sign.

She rushed to the balcony railing, a slight dizziness making her aware of the sheer drop on the other side. Leaning out as far as she dared, she could see nothing of her son on the

beach, or the steep path that snaked up the cliff towards the mansion that loomed behind her.

‘Archie! Archie!’ she called, her heart pounding, face stinging against the cold. Some primeval instinct was pricking her. She craned her neck out further, terrified that she would see her son struggling in the crashing surf. But there was no one there and the cold green sea went about its relentless business.

The boy stopped in his tracks. When he looked back, he could still see the beach between the cleft of the large dunes, but as he made his way along the burn, the grey light seemed to darken and the sound of the waves grew muffled, as though he had his woollen bobble hat pulled over his ears. The smells were different, too; the salty tang of the sea gave way to something earthier, a rotting smell, like on his father’s compost heap. He wrinkled his nose. This was the stench of something old, something decaying.

Startled by a faint rustling noise, he looked ahead.

‘Hello?’ he called, his voice dampened by the rough clumps of machair that clung to the sides of the dunes. ‘Oh!’

There, only a few feet in front of him, stood a figure, still and silent, dressed like the monks he had seen on holiday in Italy. The hood of the man’s dirty white cloak covered his bowed head.

‘Hello. I’m Archie Shannon,’ the boy said, accustomed to meeting strangers and raised to be polite. He turned around, wishing he could see the cliff, the big house and, most of all, his mother. Was this one of the boys from the village he’d played with on holidays? It was too big. But there was something intriguing about the hooded figure, something that compelled him to take a few steps closer . . .

# 1

## *The present day, Kinloch*

The little boy was on the couch, only feet away from Daley.

‘Come on, James,’ he encouraged. ‘Say “Dada”.’

James Daley smiled at his father, gurgling.

Daley gave him an exaggeratedly eager look, leaning further towards him, grinning broadly. ‘Dada,’ he repeated.

The little boy appeared to think about this, gurgled and then burped, laughing. Reflections of the fairy lights on the large Christmas tree twinkled in his bright eyes.

Daley picked him up and stood at the window of the bungalow high on the hill above Kinloch, looking out across the bay. Trees swayed in the strong wind, and despite being sheltered from the storm-tossed sound by the island at its head, the loch simmered with white-tipped waves.

As he bounced his son in his arms, he realised that he would miss this place and its people. He had made friends here, good ones. And there was something cheering about waking up to the beautiful view every day, seeing the seasons change, the mood of the landscape altering to suit the weather. A vista that was cold and forbidding could be transformed by a sudden beam of winter sun shining bright

through the clouds, turning this far-flung part of the west coast of Scotland into a scene reminiscent of an expansive Alpine lake.

He sighed as his gaze caught the line of white crosses that paraded, straight and true, along the hillside opposite. The dead of war were as they had been in life, in rank and file, shining bright above Kinloch's cemetery despite the gloom of the day. He saw the faces of those he had known, the fallen from his own time, but his sudden melancholy was fleeting, as he looked back into the eyes of his son, the image of his mother's, cornflower blue under sleepy, slanting lids.

He was still jiggling the boy on his knee, telling him a meandering tale of kings and princes, when he heard a car crackle on the stone chips of the driveway and stop near the house. He did not bother getting up, he didn't want to. He knew who was coming to call.

The door to the lounge swung open, revealing Liz, brushing away a loose strand of hair from her brow, her hands white with the flour she was baking with – her latest obsession.

'Didn't you hear the door, darling? Honestly. This is Chief Superintendent Symington. You knew she was coming.'

From behind Liz, a shorter woman appeared, resplendent in full uniform, the gold braid on her hat catching the lights in the room and glowing in response.

'Good morning, DCI Daley, I'm sorry to disturb your time off. As I said on the phone, I wanted to introduce myself away from the office. I'm sure you understand,' she said. Though short in stature, even at this brief exposure she exuded self-assurance. Liz grabbed James Daley junior, made her excuses and left them to it.

Daley studied his new, if very temporary, boss as she sat on the chair opposite. She had removed her hat to reveal short, dark hair. A sallow complexion framed her keen dark eyes, thin nose and full mouth. Despite her Mediterranean looks, she spoke with a soft English accent, which, though he didn't know why, surprised him. She was slim, straight-backed and immaculately turned out, in a uniform that spoke more of Hugo Boss than it did of the police service's tailor. Daley reckoned that she was probably in her mid thirties, though he had always found it difficult to put an age on policewomen in uniform, strange for one who had spent so much time around them. There was something about a uniform that aged people – especially the fairer sex, in his opinion. He reasoned though, given her exalted position, she could hardly be any younger.

'I trust you had a nice Christmas,' she said, sitting forwards in her chair.

'Yes, yes I did, thanks,' Daley replied, suddenly conscious of the fact that he hadn't said anything so far. He stood and held out his hand, which she shook, her grip surprisingly strong.

Daley sat back down. 'The wee man's first Christmas – always special.'

'Yes, I'm sure. Not something I know much about.'

Daley could hear Brian Scott's 'married tae the job' maxim echo in his head.

'Well, you know why I'm here, DCI Daley, I won't try to dress it up.'

'No point.'

'Indeed. You have, what, three weeks of your notice left to work, am I right?'



‘Correct. Well, twenty-three days, to be exact.’

‘I must tell you that our senior executive officers are still most unhappy with your decision to quit the job. In fact, the chief constable himself has urged me to personally ask you to stay. That’s why I’m here, in fact.’

‘Really?’ Daley thought for a moment. ‘But, what do you think?’

She paused and pursed her lips. ‘In all honesty, from a personal point of view, I’m of the opinion that if an officer becomes so disenchanted with the police service that he or she contemplates taking early retirement, with all that entails, it’s unlikely that they have the correct mindset to contribute effectively. However, I know that this is not an opinion shared by my superiors.’

‘Thank you for your candour,’ he said, noticing her take a quick look at her watch. She’d done what she came to do, now she wanted to be on to the next job.

‘Do you have anything lined up? For the future, I mean.’

It was his turn to hesitate. He and Liz had argued long and hard about the future. She couldn’t understand why her husband, having attained a reasonably high rank with prospects of further promotion, had decided to quit his job. For his part, despite being convinced that life as a police officer was no longer for him, he was at a loss to think of anything else he wanted – or was qualified – to do, save the usual options of security consultant or suchlike. In any event, the best and most lucrative of these roles were normally the preserve of retirees from the top of the tree, not its middle branches.

‘Oh, I have a few irons in the fire,’ he replied, less than convincingly.

‘I would have thought that a man who has just started a

family, albeit late in life, would have been looking for security of employment. But there you are, nowt so funny as folks,' she continued, revealing more of her accent, probably from Yorkshire, Daley surmised. 'All this aside, however, it is my task to inform you that you would be in line for a permanent appointment as sub-divisional commander should you decide to stay. No immediate advancement in rank, but certainly a greater prospect of such in the very near future.'

Despite the offer, Daley had the feeling that Chief Superintendent Symington was merely going through the motions.

'Are you Donald's direct replacement?'

'If you are referring to the late Chief Superintendent John Donald then yes, I am.'

'Congratulations.'

'Thank you.' She looked about the room. 'Your wife has good taste.'

'How do you know I'm not responsible for the décor?'

'I've read your file DCI Daley, that's how I know. Anyway, I've imparted the information as requested. I'll leave you to the rest of your festivities. You're back at work tomorrow, I'm right in saying?'

'Yes, Hogmanay.'

'Good. I'll see you then.'

Symington shook his hand again as he showed her out of the front door. She didn't look back as she got into her waiting car, which took her back down Daley's drive towards Kinloch.

'Darling, I so wish you would change your mind,' said Liz, her son on her hip.

'So, you were listening?'

‘Of course,’ she replied, handing him the child. ‘We’d better hope I get better at this baking lark – looks like I might end up doing it full time.’ She looked down, then smoothed the front of her jeans. Daley’s heart sank as thoughts of another woman filled his head.