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# **Death of a Valentine**

Written by M C Beaton

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**DEATH** of a  
**VALENTINE**

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*Death of a Gentle Lady*

*Death of a Witch*

*Death of a Valentine*

*Death of a Sweep*

# DEATH of a VALENTINE

A Hamish Macbeth Murder Mystery

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For my husband, Harry Scott Gibbons.  
And my agent, Barbara Lowenstein.  
With love.

To Minerva

*My temples throb, my pulses boil,  
I'm sick of Song and Ode and Ballad –  
So, Thyrisis, take the Midnight Oil  
And pour it on a lobster salad.*

*My brain is dull, my sight is foul,  
I cannot write a verse or read –  
Then, Pallas, take away thine Owl,  
And let us have a lark instead.*

– Thomas Hood

# Prologue

Over the heathery flanks of the mountains, over the lochs, over the vast tracts of land that make up the county of Sutherland in the very north of Scotland, down to the fishing boats bobbing at anchor along the west coast, the amazing news spread.

That most famous of highland bachelors, Police Sergeant Hamish Macbeth, was to be married at last. No, nothing like that mistake he had made before when he had nearly married some Russian. This was love. And he was to be married, right and proper, with a white wedding in the church in his home village of Lochdubh.

He was to marry his constable, Josie McSween, who had helped him solve the Valentine's Day murder. Pretty little thing she was with glossy brown hair and big brown eyes. The whole village of Lochdubh adored Josie. And everyone could see she was in love with Hamish.



On the great day, the church was full to bursting. Some wondered if the former love of Hamish's life, Priscilla Halburton-Smythe, would attend, but others whispered she was in Australia.

The added excitement was that Elspeth Grant, former reporter and now a star television news presenter, had promised to attend. She had many fans, and some had brought along their autograph books.

Josie's father was dead and she appeared not to have any male relatives. She was to be given away by Police Superintendent Peter Daviot.

There was a rustle of excitement as the bride arrived. Hamish stood erect at the altar, flanked by his best man, Detective Sergeant Jimmy Anderson. 'Cheer up!' muttered Jimmy. 'Man, you're as white as a sheet.'

The service began. Then at one point, the minister, Mr Wellington, addressed the congregation. 'If any amongst you know of any reason why this man and this woman should not be joined in holy matrimony, speak now, or forever hold your peace.' His deep highland voice held a note of amusement. For who could protest at such a love match?

Hamish Macbeth raised his eyes to the old beams on the church roof and murmured desperately the soldier's prayer.

'Dear God, if there is a God, get me out of this!'

# Chapter One

*It's hardly in a body's pow'r.  
Tae keep, at times, frae being sour.*  
– Robert Burns

A year earlier

Hamish Macbeth had been promoted to sergeant. Having been promoted before and then reduced to the ranks, he had not even had to sit the necessary exams. Many a constable would have welcomed the promotion and the extra money that came with it, but Hamish was dismayed for two reasons. He was not an ambitious man and saw every rise up the ranks as a move to get him transferred to the city of Strathbane. All he wanted was to be left peacefully alone in his village police station.

He was also dismayed by being told that a constable would be coming to work with him and to clear out his spare room. The spare room was very highland in that it was stuffed with all sorts of rusting odds and ends that

Hamish had picked up from time to time and had stored in the happy thought that they might come in useful one day.

At first he was confident that no one would want the job, but then he was told to expect a police constable, McSween.

He received a visit from his friend Detective Sergeant Jimmy Anderson. Jimmy walked in without knocking and found Hamish gloomily studying the contents of the spare room.

'For heaven's sakes, man,' exclaimed Jimmy. 'Get a move on. The lassie'll be here any minute.'

Hamish Macbeth, all six feet and five inches of him, turned slowly round. 'What lassie?'

'Your new copper. Wee Josie McSween.'

Hamish's hazel eyes looked blank with shock. 'Nobody told me it was a woman.'

'I overheard that curse o' your life, Blair, telling Daviot that the influence of a good woman was just what you need.'

Detective Chief Inspector Blair loathed Hamish and was always looking for ways to upset him.

'Come into the kitchen,' said Hamish. 'She cannae be staying here.'

'Why not? Got any whisky?'

'Usual place. Help yourself. No, she'll need to find lodgings.'

'It's the twenty-first century, Hamish. Nobody'll think anything of it.'

Jimmy sat down at the kitchen table and poured himself a drink. He was a smaller man than Hamish, with sandy hair and blue eyes in a foxy face.

'The twenty-first century has not arrived in Lochdubh,' said Hamish. 'Chust you sit there and enjoy your drink. I've got calls to make.'

Jimmy smiled and lay back in his chair. Although the month was April, a blizzard was blowing outside, 'the lambing blizzard' as the crofters bitterly called it, that storm which always seemed to hit the Highlands just after the lambs were born. The woodstove glowed with heat. Hamish's dog, Lugs, snored in a corner and his wild cat, Sonsie, lay over Jimmy's feet. He could hear Hamish making urgent phone calls from the police office but could not hear what he was saying.

At last, Hamish came back into the kitchen, looking cheerful. 'That's settled,' he said. 'All the women from the minister's wife down to the Currie sisters are phoning up headquarters to complain. Mrs Wellington has a spare room at the manse, and that's where she's going.'

'Josie's quite a tasty wee thing,' said Jimmy. 'What an old-fashioned dump this place is!'

'Better than that sink of a place, Strathbane,' said Hamish. 'It's snowing like hell. The road'll be blocked.'

\* \* \*

But in the fickle way of April blizzards, the snow abruptly stopped, the dark clouds rolled up the mountains, and soon a hot spring sun was rapidly melting the snow.

Josie set out, her heart beating with excitement. She was fairly small for a policewoman. She had masses of glossy brown hair and wide brown eyes. Her figure was a little on the plump side. Josie had fallen in love with the now legendary Hamish Macbeth some months before. She had read up on all the cases he had solved. The minute she had heard of the vacancy at Lochdubh, she had promptly applied. In the boot of her car, along with her luggage, was a carton of cookery books. Her mother who lived in Perth had always said that the way to a man's heart was through the kitchen door.

The sun shone down on the melting snow in the road in front of her. Mountains soared up to a newly washed blue sky. Perth, where Josie had been brought up, was just south of the highland line, and family visits had always been to the south – to Glasgow or Edinburgh. She found the whole idea of the Highlands romantic.

As her little Toyota cruised down into Lochdubh, she gave a gasp of delight. White-washed eighteenth-century cottages fronted the still waters of the sea loch. The pine forest on the other side of the loch was reflected in

its waters. Melting snow sparkled in the sunlight.

The police station had an old-fashioned blue lamp hanging outside. Josie drew up and parked her car. She could already imagine herself cooking delicious meals for Hamish while he smiled at her fondly and said, 'Whatever did I do without you?'

The front gate was difficult to open. She finally managed and went up the short path to the door and knocked loudly.

A muffled voice from the other side of the door reached her ears. 'Go round to the side door.'

Back out and round the side of the police station went Josie. Hamish Macbeth was standing by the open kitchen door looking down at her quizzically.

'I'm Josie McSween,' said Josie. 'I'll just get my things.'

'You can't move in here,' said Hamish. 'The villagers won't have it. You're to stay with Mrs Wellington, the minister's wife.'

'But -'

'There are no buts about it. The ladies of the village won't thole a lassie living with me at the police station. I'll get my coat and walk ye up there. When you see where it is, you can come back for your car. Wait there, McSween, I'll get my coat.'

McSween! In all her dreams he had called her Josie. Hamish emerged shortly and began

to walk off with long strides in the direction of the manse while Josie scurried behind him.

'Don't I get a choice of where I want to live?' she panted.

'You're a policewoman,' said Hamish over his shoulder. 'You just go where you're put.'

The manse was situated behind the church. It was a Georgian building. Georgian architecture usually conjures a vision of elegance, but Scottish Georgian can be pretty functional and bleak. It was a square three-storey sandstone building, unornamented, and with several windows bricked up dating from the days of the window tax.

Hamish led the way round to the kitchen door where Mrs Wellington was already waiting, the highland bush telegraph having noticed and relayed every moment of Josie's arrival.

Josie's heart sank even lower. Mrs Wellington was a vast tweedy woman with a booming voice.

'Where are your things?' she asked.

'I left them in my car at the police station,' said Josie.

'Shouldn't you be in uniform?'

'It's my day off.'

'Off you go, Mr Macbeth,' said Mrs Wellington. 'I'll just show Miss McSween her room and give her the rules of the house and then she can bring her luggage.'

Josie followed Mrs Wellington into the manse kitchen. It was vast, dating from the days when ministers had servants and large families. It was stone-flagged, and the double sinks by the window were deep and made of stone with old-fashioned brass taps. A long dresser lining one wall contained blue and white plates. The newest item was a scarlet fuel-burning Raeburn stove. High up in the ceiling by a wooden pulley burned a dim single lightbulb. On the pulley hung a row of Mrs Wellington's knickers: large, cotton, and fastened at the knee with elastic. Where on earth did one get knickers like that these days, wondered Josie. People didn't often talk about knickers any more, preferring the American *panties*. But *panties* suggested something naughty and feminine. In one corner stood a large fridge and, wonder of wonders in this antique place, a dishwasher.

'Come along,' ordered Mrs Wellington. 'The washing machine is in the laundry room over there to your left. Washing is on Thursdays.'

Josie followed her out of the kitchen, which led into a dark hall where a few dim, badly painted portraits of previous ministers stared down at her. There was a hallstand of the kind that looked like an altar and a Benares brass bowl full of dusty pampas grass.

The staircase was of stone, the steps worn smooth and polished by the long years of feet pounding up and down. At the first landing,



Mrs Wellington led the way along a corridor painted acid green on the top half, the bottom half being made of strips of brown-painted wood.

The wind had risen, and it moaned about the old manse like a banshee. Mrs Wellington pushed open a door at the end. 'This is where you'll stay. The arrangement is for bed and breakfast. Any other meals you want you will cook yourself, but not between five and six which is when I prepare tea for Mr Wellington.'

To Josie's relief the room was light and cheerful. The window looked out over the roofs of the waterfront houses to the loch. There was a large double bed with a splendid patchwork quilt covering it. A peat fire was burning in the hearth.

'We are fortunate to have a large supply of the peat so you can burn as much as you like,' said Mrs Wellington. 'Now, once you are settled in, you will have your tea with us, seeing as it is your first day, and in the evening I will take you to a meeting of the Mothers' Union in the church hall to introduce you to the other ladies of Lochdubh.'

'But Hamish –' began Josie weakly.

'I have told him of the arrangements and he has agreed. You are to report to the police station tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. When you drive up, you can leave your car outside the front door for easy access, but after

that, use the kitchen door. Here are the keys. The only one you need to use is the kitchen door key.'

The key was a large one, no doubt dating from when the manse had been built.

Josie thanked her and scurried off down the stairs. The mercurial weather had changed and a squall of sleet struck her in the face. She had been to the hairdresser only that morning. On her way back to the police station, the malicious wind whipped her hair this way and that, and gusts of icy sleet punched her in the face.

She knocked at the police station door but there was no answer. Josie got into her car and drove up to the manse.

She struggled up the stairs with two large suitcases. The manse was silent except for the moan of the wind.

In her room, there was a huge Victorian wardrobe straight out of Narnia. She hung away her clothes. Josie wanted a long hot bath. She walked along the corridor, nervously pushing open door after door until she found a large bathroom at the end. There was a claw-footed bath with a gas heater over it. The heater looked ancient but the meter down on the floor looked new. She crouched down and read the instructions. 'Place a one-pound coin in the meter and turn the dial to the left and then to the right. Light the geyser and stand

back.' On a shelf beside the bath was a box of long matches.

Josie returned to her room and changed into her dressing gown, found a pound coin, and went back to the bathroom. She put the coin in the meter and twisted the dial, then turned on the water. There was a hiss of gas. She fumbled anxiously with the box of matches, lit one, and poked it into the meter. There was a terrifying bang as the gas lit but the stream of water became hot.

The bath was old and deep and took about half an hour to fill. At last, she sank into it and wondered what she was going to do about Hamish Macbeth. Perhaps the village women at the church hall could fill her in with some details.

Hamish Macbeth crowed over the phone to Jimmy Anderson. 'I'm telling you, I give that lassie two days at the most. By the time Mrs Wellington's finished with her, she'll be crying for a transfer back to Strathbane.'

Josie decided that evening to dress in her uniform to give herself a bit of gravitas. She still felt hungry. She was used to dinner in the evening, not the high tea served in homes in Lochdubh. She had eaten a small piece of fish

with a portion of canned peas and one boiled potato followed by two very hard tea cakes.

To her relief, there were cakes, sandwiches, and tea on offer at the village hall. Mrs Wellington introduced her all round. Josie wondered if she would ever remember all the names. One woman with a gentle face and wispy hair stood out – Angela Brodie, the doctor’s wife – and two fussy old twins called Nessie and Jessie Currie.

Over the teacups, Nessie and Jessie warned her that Hamish Macbeth was a philanderer and to stick to her job but Angela rescued her and said, mildly, that usually the trouble started because of women pursuing Hamish, not the other way around.

Josie tossed her newly washed hair. She had carried her cap under her arm so as not to spoil the hairstyle. She was angry with Hamish for billeting her at the manse and spoiling her dreams. ‘I can’t see what anyone would see in the man,’ said Josie. ‘He’s just a long drip with that funny-looking red hair.’

‘Hamish Macbeth is a friend of mine and, may I add, your boss,’ said Angela and walked away.

Josie bit her lip in vexation. This was no way to go about making friends. She hurried after Angela. ‘Look here, that was a stupid thing to say. The fact is I don’t really want to stay at the manse. It’s a bit like being in boarding school.

I'm angry with Hamish for not finding me somewhere a bit more congenial.'

'Oh, you'll get used to it,' said Angela. 'Hamish covers a huge beat. You'll be out all day.'

The next morning, Hamish presented Josie with ordnance survey maps and a long list of names and addresses. 'These are elderly people who live alone in the remoter areas,' he said. 'It's part of our duties to periodically check up on them. You won't be able to do it all in one day or maybe two. We only have the one vehicle so you'll need to use your own. Give me any petrol receipts and I'll get the money back for you.'

Josie longed to ask him what he was going to do, but had decided her best plan was to be quiet and willing until he cracked. And she was sure he would crack and realize what wife potential he had under his highland nose.

She gave him her mobile phone number and set out, deciding to try some of the faraway addresses first. Josie drove along, up and down the single-track roads of Sutherland, lost in a happy dream.

The hard fact was that she should never have joined the police force. But a television drama, *The Bill*, had fired her imagination. By fantasizing herself into the character of a strong and competent policewoman, she had

passed through her training fairly easily. Her sunny nature made her popular. She had not been in Strathbane long enough for any really nasty cases to wake her up to the realities of her job. She baked cakes for the other constables, asked about their wives and families, and generally made herself well liked. She was given easy assignments.

Then one day after she had been in Strathbane only a few weeks, Hamish Macbeth strolled into police headquarters. Josie took one look at his tall figure, flaming red hair, and hazel eyes and decided she was in love. And since she was already in love with some sort of Brigadoon idea of the Highlands, she felt that Hamish Macbeth was a romantic figure.

Hamish Macbeth began to receive telephone calls from people in the outlying crofts praising Josie McSween. She was described as 'a ray of sunshine', 'a ministering angel', and 'a fine wee lassie'.

As there was no crime on his beat and Josie was covering what would normally be his duties, Hamish found himself at liberty to mooch around the village and go fishing.

During the late afternoon, with his dog and cat at his heels, he strolled around to see his friend Angela Brodie, the doctor's wife. Angela was a writer, always in the throes of

trying to produce another book. She typed on her laptop at the kitchen table where the cats prowled amongst the lunch debris which Angela had forgotten to clear away.

'You'll need to lock your beasts in the living room,' said Angela. 'Sonsie frightens my cats.'

'I'll let them run outside,' said Hamish, shooing his pets out the door. 'They'll be fine. How's it going?'

'Not very well. I had a visit from a French writer. One of my books has been translated into French. She spoke excellent English, which is just as well because I have only school French. I think I upset her.'

'How?'

'Pour yourself some coffee. It's like this. She talked about the glories of being a writer. She said it was a spiritual experience. She said this must be a marvellous place for inspiration. Well, you know, writers who wait for inspiration get mental block. One just slogs on. I said so. She got very high and mighty and said I could not be a real writer. She said, "Pouf!"'

'Meaning?'

'It's that sort of sound that escapes the French mouth when they make a *moue* of contempt.'

'I haven't seen a tourist here in ages,' said Hamish, sitting down opposite her. 'The Americans can't afford to come this far and the French are tied up in the credit crunch.'

'By the way she was dressed, she had private means. I bet she published her books herself,' said Angela. 'How's your new copper?'

'Rapidly on her way to becoming the saint o' Sutherland. I sent her off to check on the isolated folks and they've been phoning me up to say how marvellous she is. Every time I go back to the police station, there's another one ringing in wi' an accolade.'

Angela leaned back in her chair. 'What's she after?'

'What do you mean?'

'A pretty little girl like that doesn't want to be buried up here in the wilds unless she has some sort of agenda.'

'I don't think she has. I think she was simply told to go. Jimmy said she had volunteered but I find that hard to believe.'

'Had she met you before?'

'No. First I saw of her was when she landed on my doorstep.' Hamish had not even noticed Josie that time when she had first seen him at police headquarters. 'Anyway, as long as she keeps out o' ma hair, we'll get along just fine.'

By the time the days dragged on until the end of June, Josie was bored. There was no way of getting to him. She could not tempt him with beautiful meals because Mrs Wellington had decided not to let her use the kitchen, saying if she wanted an evening meal she would cook



it and bill headquarters for the extra expense, and when, one evening, Josie plucked up courage and suggested to Hamish that she would cook a meal for them both, he had said, 'Don't worry, McSween. I'm going out.'

It wasn't that Hamish did not like his constable, it was simply that he valued his privacy and thought that letting any woman work in his kitchen was a bad idea. Look what had happened when he had been briefly engaged to Priscilla Halburton-Smythe. Without consulting him, she'd had his beloved stove removed and a nasty electric cooker put in instead. No, you just couldn't let a woman in the kitchen.

Josie had three weeks' holiday owing. She decided to spend it with her mother in Perth. Her mother always knew what to do.

Josie was an only child, and Mrs Flora McSween had brought her daughter up on a diet of romantic fiction. Just before she arrived, Flora had been absorbed in the latest issue of *The People's Friend*. *The People's Friend* magazine had grown and prospered by sticking to the same formula of publishing romantic stories. While other women's magazines had stopped publishing fiction and preferred hard-hitting articles such as 'I Had My Father's Baby' and other exposés, *People's Friend* went its own sweet way, adding more and more stories as its circulation rose. It also contained

articles on Scotland, recipes, poetry, knitting patterns, notes from a minister, and advice from an agony aunt.

The arrival of her copy was the highlight of Flora's week. When her daughter burst in the door, saying, 'It's no good, Ma. He's barely aware of my existence,' Flora knew exactly who she was talking about, her daughter having shared her romantic dreams about Hamish over the phone.

'Now, pet,' said Flora, 'sit down and take your coat off and I'll make us a nice cup of tea. Faint heart never won a gentleman. Maybe you've been trying too hard.'

'He calls me McSween, he sends me off hundreds of miles to check on boring old people and make sure they're all right. I'm so tired of smiling and drinking tea and eating scones, I could scream.'

'You know what would bring you together? A nice juicy crime.'

'So what if there isn't one in that backwater? What do I do? Murder someone?'