

Tessa d'Arblay

Chapter 1

NATURAL CAUSES," SAID THE JURY, and 'Natural Causes' was the coroner's verdict. Peter Laird had died of 'Natural Causes.' Tessa left the courtroom before the concluding formalities. The whole business was still so hard to grasp – even now, a month later. Poor old Peter had seemed so well right up until the very day of his death. It was frightening. How could we ever tell?

For early May – indeed, for any time of year – it was hot. The street was like a hob. She stood uncertainly at the top of the broad stone steps and felt the heat radiating up at her. In the courthouse, the heavy old stone walls had kept the place somewhat cool; but here it attacked her like a living thing. She could feel glowing worms of it edging inward at her cuffs and ankles; she could sense its pressure on her shoulders. She spread her parasol.

"Be all right going home will you, Miss d'Arblay?" the sergeant asked.

"Yes thank you, Sergeant Keene. I'll take a cab."

Keene had been one of Peter's friends, too. He had known Tessa since her childhood. On her fourth birthday, in 1870, he had called to the vicarage to see her father in connection with some missing church property; and then he had stayed for the party and had performed a comic recitation from Thomas Hood. But he didn't like to be reminded of it these days.

"You shouldn't have come at all," he added. "I'll escort you to the rank at the corner."

"Oh I don't want to put you to any trouble ..."

"I know you don't, miss. But you already have."

"You're as tactful as ever!" she told him.

"Tact catches no criminals."

They made an odd pair, sauntering along the street, not really knowing what to say to each other; she, tall, angular, lithe in all her movements; he, only slightly taller, powerful as a bear; both restless in each other's company.

"There'll be murders done today," he said with a kind of savage glee.

"I don't suppose that surgeon – Doctor Segal was it? I don't suppose he could have made a mistake?"

He ignored her. "People drink too much, see. Because of the heat. They start remembering old wrongs. Then they want to right 'em."

Sparrows were dipping in the Metropolitan Horse & Cattle Association trough halfway along the street, sprinkling water all around. Some fell cool on her muslin sleeves; but the untouched parts of her merely felt all the hotter. She wanted to talk to Keene but instead her mind seized on a ridiculous fantasy in which she ran naked through a crowd of onlookers and jumped into the trough. She grew angry with herself.

That sort of thing happened so often these days. Important thoughts would be pushed out of her mind by some quite ludicrous (and often scandalous) image. Sometimes it made her wonder if she was entirely right in the head.

"Yes!" Keene barked to fill the silence. "Forsooth!"

Peter used to say *forsooth*.

"You should have stayed at home," Keene went on. "Doing your pretty little paintings."

Tessa contained her annoyance. "Art has nothing to do with prettiness," she said evenly. "Art could make anything beautiful."

"Even murder?" he asked scornfully.

"Of course. What is a crucifixion if it isn't murder? There are beautiful crucifixions all over the world. And just think of the battle scenes and the ..."

"All right, all right. Sorry I spoke. Even so, I don't know why you came. A coroner's inquest is no place for a pretty young girl."

"Peter was a good friend," she reminded him. "Also I found it so hard to believe – this brain-tumour business."

"Oh?"

"You don't?"

His expression was dubious, watchful, provoking her to talk.

She now wished she hadn't started this particular hare. "What strikes me as being so odd," she tried to explain, "is that Peter was so *well*. There never was a man who seemed more fit. It's frightening, don't you think? I mean – *any* of us might have one of these tumours. You or I, this very minute. And we could go out" – she snapped her fingers – "just like that!" She looked at him for some response. Getting none, she added, "We haven't the first idea about what's really going on inside our heads, have we."

"Are you saying you think his death was odd?" Keene sighed and sucked his teeth. Without pausing for her denial he went on: "Funny thing about detective work – my inspector and I often talk about it. You'd think it'd be an ideal job for a woman. It's nearly all drudgery, nearly all dull routine and pure repetition – all the things women are so good at. And even the exciting bits – you'd think they'd be right up a woman's street."

“But I’m not at all implying there’s anything suspicious about his death. It’s just that I can’t see ...”

Again he ignored her. “The exciting bits are all about people, see? Questions about people – what did he look like ... what was she wearing ... were they telling the truth with their eyes but something else with their mouths ... all things like that. And you also need a head for gossip. You’d think women were born detectives, wouldn’t you? You know why they’re not? You know the one fatal weakness your lot’s got?”

“You’re going to tell me, whatever I say.”

“This is what the inspector and I have decided. The thing that will always stop you lot being good detectives is the thing you’re exhibiting now: *intuition!*”

“You’re putting words into my mouth!” Her voice sounded querulous in that somnolent backwater of a street. “I’m not questioning Doctor Segal’s competence. In fact, I’d very much like to talk to him – about the mind, you know. Things like that.”

“Things like that,” he repeated flatly.

“Behaviour – you know. People always said my mother was eccentric when she was alive. And my Aunt Bo ... well, she is a *bit* odd, isn’t she? Wouldn’t you say?”

Keene snorted. “The whole of your family’s behaved oddly as long as I’ve known them. And that’s an ungallant number of years by now.”

She suspected that her question had made him uncomfortable, and that his jocularly was a way of saying he didn’t really wish to discuss it with her. She felt snubbed. “The fact that you’ve known me ever since you dandled me on your knee, Sergeant Keene, and recited *The Drowning Ducks*, doesn’t give you the right to ...” Again she heard how petulant she was beginning to sound. Her complaint shrivelled in the heat.

“Does your father know you’re here?” he asked conversationally.

She knew he was only trying to change the subject, but she was annoyed with him now. “Is that a question or a music-hall song?” she asked. “If it’s a question, I consider it rather impertinent. I am twenty-four years old, you know.”

Keene stopped and stared at her. “I consider it raahther pertinent, Miss d’Arblay,” he said at last, mimicking her accent. “If you were to fall down in a swoon, what with this heat and all, and if I wasn’t here, no one’d know where to send you home, would they! I call that pertinent, don’t you?”

“It may be pertinent to him. But it’s very impertinent of you. Anyway, you *are* here. Lord, what a stupid conversation!”

He sniffed. “If you say so, miss.”

“I know *you* don’t think so.”

“I do not.”

She could see he was actually half-amused. She smiled at him and the atmosphere at once grew more cordial. Because they both wanted it so. "I'm sorry," she said. "You must forgive me if I'm a little on edge. I certainly don't want to fall out with you. Quite the opposite." She smiled to humour him and then asked swiftly, "What's Doctor Segal's address, d'you know? Is it buried somewhere in that encyclopedic mind of yours? I think I will go and see him."

He grinned and shook his head. "I couldn't divulge that, Miss d'Arblay."

"I expect he's in the register."

"Very likely."

There were three cabs at the rank. The sergeant held open the door of the first. "I wish you luck, miss."

She folded her parasol and deftly prodded his instep with the ferrule. "Humbug, Keene – forsooth! And I'm not getting into that cab. The poor horse is a bag of bones. I'll leave you to take the driver in charge. He really deserves to be prosecuted." She looked at the next cab in the rank, challenging Keene to lead her to it and hold its door open, too.

He turned abruptly on his heel and began walking back the way they had come.

She went alone to the next cab, whose driver had nodded off to sleep in the heat. She rapped her parasol against its side. He came awake, blinked rapidly, and screwed up his eyes against the pain of the light. Then he became aware he was still second in the rank. "Take the cab in front, lady," he said, his voice rasping with phlegm.

"Come down at once and hand me in," she commanded.

"No, you don't understand," he began – but then he stared toward a point somewhere behind her. A moving point. From the look on his face she knew Sergeant Keene was coming back. The man's next words confirmed it: "Where was you wanting, lady?"

She heard the sergeant's bootfall on the paving stones immediately behind her. "Twenty-three Finsbury Close," he commanded. His voice, deep and gravelly, and so near, made her eardrum click.

Without turning around to look at him she said, "The very *pertinent* address! But I shan't go there today, thank you. Doctor Segal can wait until tomorrow. Or some other day." She looked back at the cabby. "Shepherdess Walk, if you please."

"Down Shoreditch?" the cabby asked in disbelief. It was one of the poor areas of London, next door to Whitechapel, the poorest of all; and though elegant females were not unknown in those parts, their elegance was of a rather brassy kind, far removed from the demure and modest appearance of the young lady who now proposed to enter his cab.

"The Old Vicarage," the sergeant added.

“Ah!” Light dawned.

“And anyway,” she insisted, “it’s not Shoreditch. It’s Islington.” Strictly speaking, that wasn’t true; but the vicarage was in the better end of Shoreditch – the end that *counted* as Islington.

The sergeant opened the little half doors and handed her up. She saw he was troubled. She raised her eyebrows, to prompt him.

“The mind’s a funny thing, you know.” He shook his head and pulled a face. “Some inquiries are best left alone. I wouldn’t worry about your family. Things have a way of sorting themselves out.”

“We’ll see,” she answered evasively. But when the cab was bowling along, she said to herself, as if she might otherwise forget it: “Twenty-three Finsbury Close.”