

Excerpt from *November Rain*  
A Paradise Café Mystery  
by Maureen Jennings



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## CHAPTER ONE

Sodden yellow leaves clotted the sidewalk; a thin mist had crept up from the lake and was drifting hungrily around the rain blackened trees; damp, brown sparrows lined up on the telephone wire, chirping irritably. All in all, it was a miserable November morning already sliding toward winter.

The fact that I was on my way to the city morgue to investigate a tragic death didn't help my mood.

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As I usually did, I walked to the office from home. It wasn't far, twenty minutes at the most, but I had hardly reached Yonge, the aortic street of the city, when a needle-sharp rain began to fall, stinging my face. I chastised myself for neglecting to bring my umbrella. I'd dressed properly for the weather, but it seems as if nothing can protect you from this kind of November chill that seeps through to the very bones.

I arrived at the Arcade. Our office was on the third floor, but the elevator was engaged. Rather than wait an eternity for it to clank its way down, I decided to use the stairs.

One of the electric lights had burned out and as I trudged up I had to virtually feel my way; my wellies squeaked on the uncarpeted steps. When I reached the hall, I was startled to see two women, standing outside my door, still and black as crows. They were dressed in full mourning garb. Long black coats almost to their ankles, brimmed hats with opaque, dark veils that fell to the chin.

"Good morning," I said.

“We’ve come for a consultation,” said the shorter one. “We’ve been here for at least ten minutes.”

I didn’t think that was a very polite way to greet a stranger, but there was something about her voice that demanded deference. Not to mention the seriousness of her mourning attire. I swallowed my defensive retort. As our sign stated plainly, the office didn’t open until eight o’clock. It was ten to the hour.

“I’m so sorry. Please come in.”

I eased past them, unlocked the door and snapped on the light. More than once, I’d moaned about how small our two rooms were. Not today. The smallness seemed cozy, the lack of windows shut out the bleak weather. My desk was neat and tidy, the typewriter centred and ready for action.

I removed my wet mackintosh and hat quickly and hung them on the coat tree.

“May I take your coats?”

The same woman spoke. “That won’t be necessary, thank you.”

Indeed, they were quite dry. No umbrellas to be seen.

“Please have a seat. I’ll get another chair.”

I pulled forward the single chair that was in front of my desk and quickly grabbed the only other one from Mr. Gilmore’s adjoining office. The two women sat down. It felt a little cramped, but there wasn’t anything I could do about that except return to my own desk. The woman who had spoken was obviously the senior one of the two. She moved carefully as if she had long worried about breaking something, although, closer, I could see she wasn’t really that old. Younger than my Gramps for sure. This time it was the second woman who spoke. Her voice was soft and hesitant, and she gave the impression of somebody who doesn’t want to be noticed if it can be avoided. “We are speaking to Miss Charlotte Frayne, I presume?”

“That is correct.”

She bobbed her head. Underneath the opaque veil, she seemed fair skinned, thin faced. What little showed of her hair was light brown.

“We are Mrs. Gerald Jessop and Mrs. Preston Jessop. We have come on the recommendation of Mrs. Walsingham, whom we understand was a client of yours.”

“That is also correct.”

It didn't surprise me that these two moved in the same circles as Mrs. Walsingham, one of Toronto's wealthier citizens. They had been spared the rain. They'd obviously been able to afford a taxicab to get here. That or they had their own car and chauffeur.

Mrs. Preston Jessop glanced around the office. I was glad Mr. Gilmore had hung up a portrait of our new king. George VI might not be as good-looking as his brother, but he had the advantage of being respectably married with two pretty young daughters and he conveyed dignity and propriety. The portrait was an affirmation of the T. Gilmore and Associates' affiliations.

Her scrutiny seemed so intense and slow that for a moment I wondered if she could in fact see very well. I soon learned poor eyesight was not her problem. She was a woman in such a state of distress she was barely functioning. Virtually every move had to be slow and deliberate to keep at bay her complete collapse. Her daughter-in-law didn't speak, obviously used to the role of silent companion.

I waited.

Mrs. Preston Jessop eventually looked at me. “A few days ago, my son Gerald was found dead. The police have declared him to be a suicide. We do not believe that is the case.”

Her eyes were obscured by her black veil, but I had the feeling they were normally keen and uncompromising. Her nose looked

beaky, her mouth tight.

“Gerald would never have taken his own life. He was not that kind of person. The police say the case is closed. We would like you to do your own investigation. Find out the truth.”

I hesitated for a moment not sure how to respond. She said. “I will pay whatever you ask. Double your usual fee if need be.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

I don’t like dealing with people who think that they can throw their money at you and you will say whatever they want you to say.

“We have a competent police department. I assume they investigated thoroughly. What if I come to the same conclusion?”

“That is highly unlikely. They are wrong.”

The younger woman’s eyes flickered over at her, but I couldn’t tell if she agreed with her or not.

“Will you take the case or not, Miss, er ...?”

“Frayne.” In spite of the woman’s obvious state of upset, her tone was getting my back up. “I will need to have more details before I can say yes or no. I don’t want to waste your money and my time if I think there is nothing to be gained from a further investigation.”

I could almost feel Mr. Gilmore wincing. “They are clients after all, Miss Frayne. We can’t afford to turn away business.”

Mrs. Jessop nodded in the direction of her daughter-in-law. “Ellen, show her the coroner’s report.”

On cue, Ellen Jessop fished in her handbag. Like the women themselves, the purse, which was black velvet with jet beads, seemed frozen in a time when women were expected to display mourning very seriously indeed.

She took out an envelope and handed it to me.

They both watched as I opened it.

*OFFICE OF THE CORONER OF THE CITY OF TORONTO.*

REPORT ON THE DEATH OF GERALD SOMERSET JESSOP  
AGE 42

*I was called to view the body of Gerald Somerset Jessop at 7 a.m. on Friday October 30, 1936. He resided at 31 Pembroke Street with his mother and his wife. The body as presented to me was submerged in the water of his bathtub. It was in an advanced state of rigor mortis.*

*He was dressed in his nightclothes which consisted of a purple silk jacket top and trousers. His feet were bare. He had four medals around his neck (exhibit #1) and there were coins in all his pockets (exhibit #2). They are all British coins and of one-penny denomination. On a table beside the bathtub was an empty ceramic. On examination, it proved to have contained the residue of 80% proof rum. There was an ordinary household cup which contained rum residue in the amount of one ounce. (exhibits #3 & #4).*

*Although I did not conduct an extensive search of the site, I did enter the adjoining bedroom. On the bedside table, I found a syringe and seven ampoules of morphine all empty (exhibit #5). Beside the bed was an empty bottle, labelled RUM. In addition, there was a folded note on the table (exhibit #6). It was addressed to the mother and wife of the deceased. It indicated he was quite despondent and intended to take his own life.*

*I estimate death to have occurred sometime between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. the previous night. A more precise estimation is difficult as the body was immersed in water until it was discovered at 6 a.m. The body was transferred by ambulance to the morgue. When rigor had receded, I conducted a post-mortem examination. This was at 9 a.m. on Friday, October 30. As follows.*

*The body is that of a male, six feet one inch tall, weighing 170*

pounds. There was a considerable amount of alcohol in the blood stream and an additional amount of morphia in the stomach. The combination of these two substances in this amount would have engendered complete shut down of the central nervous system and subsequently brought about death. The surrounding tissue indicated the deceased had used this drug on a regular basis. Although the body was discovered immersed in water, there was no water in the lungs which indicates he was not breathing when he sank below the surface.

There is no evidence of a pre-existing disease except for liver damage which is described below. The face is quite severely mutilated. The nasal bones are absent as is most of the right lower mandible. There has been extensive reconstruction of both nose and jaw, including six upper teeth. There is considerable scarring on the right side of the face. Given the nature of the wounds I assume they were incurred in the war. Three of the fingers of the right hand have been amputated at the first joint. Again, no doubt from a wound suffered in war time.

*The liver is enlarged and showing signs of early cirrhosis.*

*Given the circumstances of the body and the note, I conclude that Gerald Jessop met his death by his own hand, committed while the balance of his mind was disturbed.*

*Yours truly,*

*J.M. Rogers. MD. Dated this 30th day of October in the year of our Lord, 1936*

The verdict seemed pretty unequivocal. I said as much. Mrs. Jessop answered.

“What is unequivocal is that my son died. But that is not sufficient. He had much to contend with in his life, but he was not suicidal.”

Abruptly she turned to her daughter-in-law. "Isn't that so, Ellen?"

"Yes, Mamma. That is so."

I could hardly hear her.

"You say he had much to contend with. I assume you are referring to the fact that he was a former soldier and suffered significant wounds?"

Mrs. Preston Jessop's stiff body grew even straighter. She, too, was carrying a black handbag and she clutched it hard.

"He went to war on August 8, 1917 as a handsome young man of twenty-four. His future was before him and there is little doubt he would have had a happy and prosperous life. He was wounded at the battle of Valenciennes in 1918. He was an officer, a Captain, and disregarding any risk to himself, he led his men into battle to capture an enemy machine gun that was decimating his platoon. The operation was successful, thereby saving many lives, but during the attack, Gerald was struck in the face by a piece of shrapnel. A second piece cut off three of his fingers."

The way she recounted this tale, she could have been reciting verbatim the report in the *London Gazette*.

"The tragedy, the dreadful tragedy, Miss Frayne is that, as you no doubt know, this battle was one of the last of the war. Armistice was declared a mere ten days later. By then of course, it was too late for my son."

Ellen said, "He was awarded the Military Cross."

"He should have received the Victoria Cross," said Mrs. Jessop. "He was very brave."

Unfortunately, bravery in battle was one thing, returning to a civilian life when completely disfigured required a different kind of courage.

"Ellen and Gerald were married in June 1917, two months be-



fore he went overseas,” interjected Mrs. Jessop.

The bald statement was so loaded with possibilities that I was at a loss as to how to respond.

She saved me the trouble. “You asked why we are so convinced Gerald did not take his own life. Ellen has just informed me she is likely with child.”

Even through the concealing veil I could tell the younger woman had blushed. If she could have dropped through the floor she would have.

She muttered, “Not quite confirmed as yet, Mamma.”

As gently as I could, I asked, “Did your husband know this?”

“Of course, he did,” answered the senior Mrs. Jessop.

I addressed Ellen. “How did he respond?”

The senior Mrs. Jessop wouldn’t let her daughter-in-law get a word in edgewise.

“How would you expect? It has been a cause of great disappointment to all of us that there has been no heir to carry on our name.”

Okay. Got it.

“He would have been very happy,” whispered Ellen.

“No reason to be despondent then?”

“None.” This, again, was from Gerald Jessop’s mother. She was a woman on a mission, which might be why she was blinding herself to the fact that her daughter-in-law, however submissive she might appear, was not telling the truth.

More to gain a little time than anything, I stood up.

“May I offer you a cup of coffee? It can be ready in a minute.”

“Do you have tea?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Neither Mr. Gilmore nor I drank tea and I’d forgotten to stock up on anything except coffee.

“Nothing then, thank you.”

I sat down again.

“The coroner mentions a letter that your son left behind. Do you have it?”

She inhaled deeply. “It is currently in the possession of the police. They confiscated numerous items, including the supposed letter.”

I didn’t take her up on her use of the word “supposed.”

“Did you read it?”

“I was not allowed to see it, but it was read aloud to us.”

“And what was the content?” I kept my voice as gentle as I could. I felt like a surgeon probing a very painful, infected wound.

She looked away. “Perhaps Ellen could answer better than I. I was too shocked to take in very much.”

“Naturally.”

The younger woman had shrunk more deeply into the chair.

“He said he was sorry to cause us distress ...” her voice, already soft, tailed off. Impatiently, her mother-in-law took up the tale.

“He said his life was unbearable and he could not continue. He asked that we get on with the kind of life we deserved. Whatever that is supposed to mean.”

Ellen muttered something I didn’t hear.

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. Jessop?”

She spoke up. “The last words were ‘Forgive me.’”

Would they? Could they forgive? It was hard to tell at this point. Perhaps his wife, but his mother wasn’t so soft.

“Who was the officer in charge of the case?”

I had dealt with the local police before. It was helpful to have connections with them.

“Who was it, Ellen?” Mrs. Jessop asked.

“His name was Murdoch. Detective Murdoch.”

Good. I knew Jack well and trusted him totally. I was glad he was on the case. I also knew that meant he would have done a thorough investigation.

It was my turn to inhale. "Mrs. Jessop. I am truly sorry for your loss, but I really don't think there is much I can do. The report is quite explicit. It is obvious Gerald intended to end his own life."

She interrupted me. "Every man has his darker moments, Miss Frayne. Given his war experience, my son was not immune to morbid thoughts. But that is not the same as actually committing such an act. It could have been an accident."

"True. But I'm afraid that might be something we will never know."

It did, however, look as if Gerald Jessop had made sure there would be no mistake. I hesitated. "I can understand how painful it must be to think someone you love has deliberately taken his own life. There may be some comfort in believing it was an accident; but, as presented, the facts do indicate Gerald committed suicide."

She started to cough. "I beg your pardon. My throat is dry."

I jumped up. "Let me get you some water."

She flapped her hand. Although the cough was subsiding, she still had difficulty speaking. "Thank you ... not necessary. Ellen will explain."

I sat down. I was starting to feel like a jack-in-the-box.

Mrs. Gerald Jessop took up the narrative. As soon as a word was out of her mouth, she ducked her head and swallowed it right back in. Her voice was so soft that at times I almost lost her. Her mother-in-law focussed on the floor as if she were listening to a pupil reciting a written text that she was ready to correct at any moment.

"When he returned from war, Gerald was in constant pain. His doctor prescribed morphia, but even that was not always sufficient. Gerald started to imbibe alcohol."

“He wasn’t used to it,” interrupted Mrs. Jessop, her dry throat now apparently eased. “We have always been a temperate family. My late husband enjoyed the occasional glass of port, but never to excess.”

I didn’t need to ask about her own habits. It was obvious what her position was. The nostrils were a dead giveaway.

“Was your son’s use of alcohol problematic, Mrs. Jessop?”

She inhaled deeply again, nostrils pinching. It was her signal that she was navigating choppy waters.

“It became so. As I said, he could never quite escape the pain from his wounds.” She halted. Another cough. She waved her hand again. This time, Ellen promptly took up the tale.

“He struggled with this dependency for some time. We tried sending him to special clinics, but the effects were temporary. However, last year we were able to find a place in America where he could get help. He has been maintaining sobriety ever since. Eight months now.”

“I’m afraid that is not what the coroner concluded. He said there was a considerable amount of alcohol in Gerald’s system.”

“That is what I don’t understand,” rasped Mrs. Jessop. “On the advice of the clinic, we allow no liquor whatsoever in the house.”

“Then he must have been drinking somewhere else.”

She shook her head. Her veil swung with the motion like black water. “He rarely left the house during the daytime. He was self-conscious about his appearance.”

“It really wasn’t that bad,” interjected Ellen. “We’d become accustomed to it.”

She said it so emphatically that I had the feeling it had become almost rote.

You may have got used to him, I thought, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a fright to strangers.

“And there was no sign that he had been drinking when you had dinner together?”

“None at all. Absolutely not. I would have remarked on it at once if it were the case. The clinic advised us to confront him if he reneged on his commitment.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“He came down for dinner at six o'clock.”

“Did he seem in good spirits?”

The senior Mrs. Jessop didn't reply immediately. She turned her head away from me and shifted in her chair.

“This was a particularly difficult time of the year for him. Armistice Day always brings back memories of his service.” She was gripped by the raspy cough.

This time I didn't ask. I jumped up, went into our pocket-handkerchief-sized kitchen and poured her a glass of water. I came back and handed it to her. She accepted meekly and took a sip.

“I had ordered the cook to make one of his favourite meals, braised beef, but he hardly touched it. He said he had a headache and he needed some fresh air. He went out.” Another sip. “That was the last I saw him.”

My heart ached for the woman whose only resort to reach her despairing and damaged son was to order their cook to make his favourite meal.

I turned to her daughter-in-law. “And you, Mrs. Jessop? When did you last see Mr. Jessop?”

“Earlier. I left before dinner to attend my Zonta Club meeting,” said Ellen. “When I came home, shortly after ten, I could see a light in Gerald's room. He had not yet gone to bed.”

“Did you speak to him?”

She dropped her head. “No, he didn't like to be disturbed when retired for the night.”

I assumed they had separate rooms but before I could ask her, she volunteered the information.

“My room is across the hall from Gerald’s. He was a restless sleeper and he never wanted to keep me awake as well.”

Except on the occasion when he had come to her bed and impregnated her. If that was in fact the case.

“Can we just get back to the question of the alcohol for a moment? Could somebody in the household have brought your son alcohol?”

My question seemed to jolt Mrs. Jessop. “Absolutely not,” she snapped. “We keep only a small number of servants and we have had them for many years. Not only are they utterly loyal, they know that any violation of our rules would result in immediate dismissal. Without a character.”

I hadn’t heard that term for a while, but even with today’s high level of unemployment, a domestic servant might find it hard to get another position unless they had a good reference.

“And was he still on prescription morphia?”

“Yes.”

I regarded the two women, sitting in front of me. I felt terribly sorry for all of them.

Ellen was studying the pattern on my little wool rug as if she might copy it later.

The senior Mrs. Jessop placed the empty glass on the floor. “There is another possibility. Gerald might have been murdered.”