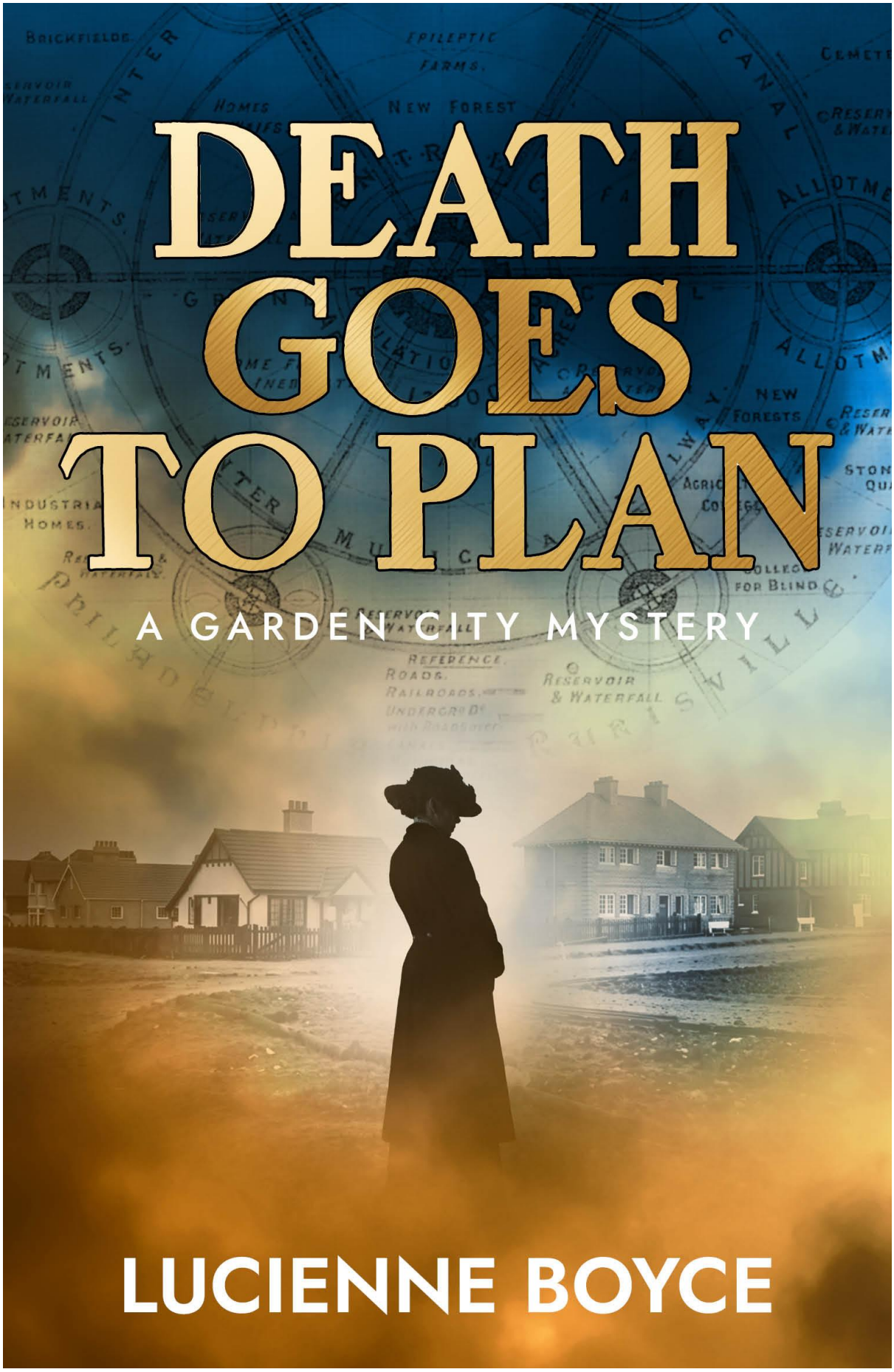
DEATH GOES TO PLAN
A GARDEN CITY MYSTERY
LUCIENNE BOYCE

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About the Author

Lucienne Boyce writes historical fiction, non-fiction and biography**.** Her historical fiction reflects her interest in stories of "ordinary" people, and histories of reform and protest. She has a particular interest in women's history and the women's suffrage movement, and is keen to tell the stories of the lesser-known individuals involved in that movement. She is also a speaker, and blogs about the eighteenth century, women's suffrage and women's history, books, and writing.

Find out more at lucienneboyce.com

Author's Note

Some readers may recognise that "Garden City" in *Death Goes to Plan* is modelled on Letchworth Garden City in Hertfordshire, England, the world's first garden city. However, the characters depicted and the events described exist only in fiction. For this reason I have also fictionalised the setting by leaving out any reference to Letchworth and referring to the new town simply as "Garden City".

Chapter One

"Deadlines have to be met, Miss Allen," the estate manager said, snapping shut his watch and dropping it into his waistcoat pocket. "I thought you had understood that when I engaged you."

"Of course, Mr Dowdeswell. I am simply saying that the later the document comes to me for typing, the harder it will be to meet that deadline."

The October report for the Board members had to be typed today, Monday 26 October 1908, if it was to reach the Garden City Company's London office in Southampton Row in time for their monthly Board meeting. As usual Mr Dowdeswell had left it to the last minute, and as usual it was gone two o'clock before he stopped gossiping with visitors ("business discussions") and running up his expenses account ("working lunch") to shut himself in his room and finally settle to the task. But he had not settled to the task, as a quick glance at his desk told me. There were no pens, paper or notes on it, only the usual muddle of letters unanswered and invoices ignored until I succeeded in wresting them from him and dealing with them myself.

I refrained from pointing out that it was now three o'clock, since he already knew that. I also refrained from pointing out that Miss Brownlow was not there to help me with the typing. He knew that too. Nor did I point out that his working methods were not only inefficient but unfair on his staff. He knew that as well. Instead, I put the tea tray on his desk and went back to my own desk to wait for the pages to trickle out one or two at a time.

In the meantime, I got on with as much of the routine correspondence and filing as I could, the junior typist's as well as my own. Vicki Brownlow had not turned up for work, and there had been no message to explain her absence. If she was ill, it had come on very suddenly. On Friday she had been her usual gay and irreverent self, pulling faces behind Mr Dowdeswell's back and mimicking the numerous callers to the estate office: builders and tradesmen who lacked aitches; prospective residents with complaints about completion dates; factory owners parading the jobs they would bring to Garden City in return for the best plots in the industrial zones. Sometimes, after I had told her off, I had to leave the room to give way to my laughter.

At the end of Friday afternoon, Vicki had been singing and marching on the spot as she put on her hat. *Jolly good luck to the girl who loves a soldier – Girls, have you been there?* I had

frowned her into silence; the song was unsuitable in every way. Vicki had only winked, and when she left was still happily humming the tune.

I gave Mr Dowdeswell another hour and then, using the tea things as an excuse, I went back to his office to clear them away. He was holding his watch in the palm of one hand and tapping the glass face with a finger of the other.

"Perhaps you could give me any pages you've got ready," I suggested.

"What's the time?" he snapped.

I took this as a promising sign that he was beginning to realise that time was running out. "Four o'clock," I said, and added encouragingly, "If I can make a start now, I am sure we won't have any problems getting it done."

He frowned at me over his glasses. "I will give you the report when I am ready to give you the report, Miss Allen."

So it was back to the office I shared with Vicki and an hour sorting building plans and laying them flat in the relevant drawers. I had just closed the cabinet when Mr Dowdeswell hurried into the room, his watch open in his hand.

"Is that thing right?" he demanded, pointing at the wall clock.

"Yes," I answered. "Five o'clock." And because he looked so flushed and harried, I did not mention the obvious. I also kept to myself the remark that he would not be in such a panic if he had started the report in good time. He hurried back to his room and shut the door.

At last, just before six o'clock, he opened his door and bellowed my name. When people say better late than never, I presume it is because they have never been expected to start typing an urgent document at six o'clock. Still, I put on as bright a face as I could and hastened along the short passage.

"I make it six o'clock," he said.

"Yes, that's right," I said. "Is the—"

He backed into his room and slammed the door.

At seven o'clock I heard him pacing up and down. Perhaps, I thought, though hope had not only faded but had been bleached to nothing, he is in the throes of composition.

At half past seven I knocked on his door and told him that if he wanted to have a report to check in the morning, now was really the time to give it to me.

He leaned back in his chair, took off his glasses, and slowly polished them with his handkerchief, all the time without looking at me. Then he raised his eyes to my face and said, with the air of a prince conferring a great favour, "You can go home now, Miss Allen. Tomorrow will do just as well."

Oh, it made my blood boil! What made it more galling was that since starting work at the estate office in January, I had done enough of the monthly reports to have written it myself, and get it done ahead of the deadline too.

There was nothing for it but to tidy the office, gather my things and go. I soon left behind me what there was of Garden City, its scant lights combining in a feeble glow that barely penetrated the inky sky. Ahead of me another, fainter haze hovered above the unseen cluster of new houses on West Green, some of it contributed by the house where I lodged. Between me and the shelter of my room lay a dark track flanked by obscure ditches and the skeletons of houses not yet complete.

I stopped to search my bag and found that I had not got my electric torch with me. At the same time it started to rain. Luckily I did have my umbrella. Beyond its protective circle the rain fell in sharp diagonals. I moved into the swimming darkness, discovering icy puddles by stepping into them, heaps of grit by stumbling over them, and broken bricks by stubbing my toes on them.

I squelched to the end of the rough track that in some town planner's wild dreams would one day be a residential street. The half-built walls of a corner house loomed in front of me. The road curved round them to run beside another construction site on the left, a cratered expanse intended for a building much larger than any of the homes that would eventually surround its landscaped grounds. I had seen the plans for Slade Hall at the estate office when the famous London architect Anthony Combermere submitted them for approval. In her Hall, Miss Constance Slade intended to impart esoteric wisdom to anyone enlightened enough to hear her message.

Until the completion of the Hall, she hosted meetings in her house. The mansion was the grandest so far built in Garden City, designed unusually for the new town in a neo-Georgian rather than Arts and Crafts style. It was set back from the road and stood on a slight rise above the building plot, from where she could keep an eye on her development.

The openness of the Slade Hall site, which had been cleared and dug but was still empty, always made me feel more exposed to whatever it was that was fearful about the dark. I nerved myself to turn the corner and whatever lay beyond it, usually nothing but more dismal mud and the wind scouring the open ground, and stepped into a quagmire. This time the mud came over the top of my boot. It oozed icily around my ankle and seeped along the bottom of my foot.

"Damn," I said, and because there was no one to hear me but the rain-lashed trees, I repeated it again, loudly. "Damn, damn, damn."

Hampered by my heavy, wet skirt I began to work my foot out of one of the deep ruts gouged by builders' carts. A voice cried "Who's there?" Nearly unbalanced by the shock, I looked up from my struggles and met the unexpected sight of lights twinkling on the site, not far from the boundary of the road.

It was the nightwatchman, I told my lurching stomach; theft from building sites was a major problem. Then I realised that one man could not be shining a light in several places at once.

A bulky figure turned his lantern in my direction and called, "Is that Miss Allen? Come and lend a hand here, will you?"

I recognised Police Sergeant Frank Storr and though I had no idea what hand I could lend him, I was so relieved I agreed at once. I broke free from the sludge, and with what felt like most of it clinging to my boot, moved towards him and his companions.

Miss Slade stood next to the sergeant. They were familiar figures from their frequent visits to the estate office with their different concerns. Miss Slade carried her stick as usual, a heavy affair topped with a silver head of the Egyptian god Anubis. Adeline Warren stood beside her, swathed in a cloak. Not having any interest in spiritualism, I knew the medium only by sight.

Sergeant Storr was accompanied by a police constable whose name I could not remember. There was also a woman I had not seen before, her slender body hunched, her face in her hands. Uglow, the nightwatchman, stood opposite the others as if still on army parade, back stiff, chest out, holding his lantern low and steady. He was coated in mud from his boots to his streaked and spattered face, and his trousers were soaked through up to the knees.

The constable swung his bull's eye lamp towards me, casting its beam along the ground. He thrust one arm protectively from his cape. "Careful, miss. We don't want another one in it."

Storr frowned at the young officer. Warned by the constable's gesture, I looked down and realised that they were clustered around an oblong trench. I took a couple of cautious steps towards it. By the light of Uglow's lantern, I saw what had drawn them all to the spot. There was a man lying face down at the bottom of the trench, his dark head almost completely submerged in water. Soil had slid down on top of him from one side of the excavation, where the ground was trampled.

I stepped back in alarm. Storr's face turned towards me in silent appeal; he was relying on me to stay calm. After the initial surprise, I was calm. There was nothing anyone could do for the poor man, but a glance told me that there was a great deal that could be done for the distressed stranger. If ever a woman needed another woman's support, she did, and as Storr had realised, it was not going to come from Constance Slade or Adeline Warren.

The rain had stopped. I closed my umbrella, dug a clean handkerchief out of my shoulder bag and offered it to the woman.

"I'm Theodora Allen."

She lowered her hands. She was young and, even with her face straining white in the gloom and her eyes unnaturally large and dark, I could tell she was pretty.

"Thank you," she whispered, taking the handkerchief.

She was shivering inside her fur-collared coat. I put my arm around her, as much in an effort to warm as steady her. She was hardly any weight at all.

Storr, meanwhile, turned to Miss Slade. "You were saying, Miss Slade."

"I had said," she answered. "I heard shouting, looked out of my window, saw the light, and came to see who was on my property. Why aren't you writing it down?"

"There's time for writing down later," Storr said. "For now I just want to get an idea of what happened."

"Isn't it obvious? He tripped in the dark and fell into the trench. Knocked himself out and drowned down there."

The young woman moaned and clutched my arm.

"But didn't you say you saw a light?" said Storr. "If he had a light, how did he come to fall?" He turned to the constable. "Make a note to look for a light tomorrow, Creevy."

"The light was Uglow's," Miss Slade said. "I found him and the constable standing beside the trench."

Storr turned to the nightwatchman. "So it was you who found the body?"

"Yes," Uglow answered.

"What were you doing here?"

Uglow cast a bitter glance at Miss Slade. "I was doing my rounds as demanded, rain or shine. I knew the 'ole was there so I was keeping a lookout for it. Saw him down there and jumped in. Saw it was too late. Young feller too. Had a hard time getting out of it meself. Luckily Creevy came along. I called out to him and he giv me a hand. Then Miss Slade arrived."

"And I sent the constable to fetch you, Sergeant," she said, "instead of uselessly dithering about. Uglow and I stayed to keep an eye on things."

"And you came along shortly after, Miss Warren?" asked Storr. "What were you doing out here on a night such as this, might I ask?"

"I had been visiting one of my clients, Mrs Dalrymple, on Meadow Lane," said Adeline Warren. The medium had a rich, deep voice which, coming out of the darkness, struck me like a voice from the Sybil's cave. "Her husband joined us."

PC Creevy started. “But I thought—”

Adeline gave the constable a pitying look. “You thought Colonel Dalrymple was dead?”

“All right, Miss Warren,” said Storr. “But this isn’t your direct way home, is it?”

“I would not usually take this route, no. There is a quicker way to Coven Road. But I sensed a spirit presence.” A sob caught in her throat. “There was distress, very deep distress.”

“What, you heard or saw something, did you?”

“Not in the way you think, Sergeant. The recently passed remain near their earthly shells for some time after their going, especially if the transition has been a traumatic one. The suffering, though usually only temporary, is keenly felt while it lasts. It is painful to witness. I felt it and came to his aid.”

“And then you saw Uglow and Miss Slade?” persisted the sergeant, determined to pin his witness down to tangibles.

“Yes.”

“What time would you say you discovered the body, Mr Uglow?”

“Seven o’clock, as near as,” the nightwatchman answered.

“And PC Creevy was the next to arrive. That would be—”

Sergeant Storr looked to the constable to confirm the time. Before the young man could speak, Miss Slade said, “The constable passes along this road at seven fifteen every evening, a fact which I am sure is as well known to burglars and thieves as it is to me.”

Storr made no attempt to defend police routine, but since Miss Slade had re-entered the conversation, he stayed with her. “And what time did the – er – deceased leave your house this afternoon?”

“He left, abruptly, at a quarter to five. Rudely, even. I had not said all I had to say. There were still two more issues to raise.”

“And he was your architect on this site?”

Surely the dead man was not the great Sir Anthony Combermere, the renowned master of Arts and Crafts design, who had known William Morris, and was an early member of the Art Workers’ Guild? I had met many architects to whom he had been an inspiration, and who would feel his death as a great loss. But hadn’t Uglow said he was a “young feller”?

Miss Slade corrected the sergeant. “Assistant architect.”

But that was even more unlikely. The assistant architect on the Slade project was Jasper Harcourt; he had told me so himself. The dead man could not be Jasper. It was impossible, preposterous. Yet I felt my knees buckle, and for a dizzy moment I could not tell whether the weeping woman was leaning on me, or I on her.

Then I saw what had happened. Sir Anthony must have more than one assistant. His office must be full of them. He must have sent another member of staff to the site, a draughtsman or surveyor perhaps. Or perhaps Jasper had his own assistant. An assistant's assistant.

The sergeant's next question demolished any doubt of the dead man's identity. He nodded and turned to the young woman. "And when did you last see your husband, Mrs Harcourt?"

"We had lunch in a funny little vegetarian restaurant in the town," she answered weakly, "and he walked to Ursula's – Mrs Siborne's – with me. We spent the afternoon there, and then he went to meet Miss Slade at four. He hoped to be back in time for us to catch the seven o'clock to King's Cross, and in any case by a quarter to seven at the latest, for the seven thirty. When he didn't come, I thought he had lost track of the time and came to meet him. There was still time to catch the later train. Ursula said I shouldn't, but I…"

Her voice trailed off. Storr waited a respectful moment. Miss Slade shifted impatiently, and Adeline gazed at the widow in the same condescending manner with which she had eyed Constable Creevy.

Mrs Harcourt resumed. "I knocked on Miss Slade's door, but there was no one there. I saw the lights out here and thought he must still be with her on the site. They were all standing here. They said there had been an accident. And then I saw – I saw it was Jasper."

There must be plenty of Mr Harcourts in the world, but there could not be many whose Christian name was Jasper. And now he was lying dead in a ditch.

-END OF THIS PREVIEW OF *DEATH GOES TO PLAN: A GARDEN CITY MYSTERY*-