

## Just Another Murder

Lexie Atkinson

*Weeks. What stubborn fools the police are! How many have I killed now? Sometimes it is hard to keep track; there are so many. Yes, this project is going well, no-one to stop its completion. Except one. But not for much longer.*

‘All right, Patrick?’

‘Yes, thank you, Inspector.’

For a boy of twelve, Patrick was remarkably used to seeing murder victims ‘What’s that you’re writing, Sir?’

‘A few observations, I think this murder is connected to all the others. Same cause of death, and the victim was also investigating the string of murders. I think he got a little close to the truth. And I thought I told you not to call me sir? Horace will do.’ The inspector looked at his notebook, frowning. ‘There’s one thing I don’t understand,’ he mused ‘Why? What does anyone have to gain from this? I think I need to speak with the suspects that the officer here gathered.’

‘What will I be doing, Horace?’ asked Patrick.

‘I’d like you to talk to his wife.’ The inspector, gestured at the dead man. ‘We’ll meet down at that teahouse. You know the one.’

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‘What have you found Patrick?’ Inspector Horace murmured under the bustle of the teahouse.

‘Nothing much, sir,’ replied his assistant. ‘She seems upset, enough to attack me, at least. Anyway, what have you found?’

‘Well, the suspects all have a sound enough motive. Marilyn Stafford is his previous paramour, and Jon Harmon is a police officer,’ the inspector says thoughtfully. ‘Now, you say the recently deceased Howard’s widow attacked you? In what way?’

‘She tried to leap on me, and she was yelling about how we weren’t doing enough. I don’t think she did it though. As if we don’t have enough problems with the police threatening to take us off this case if we’ve not solved it in two days. Anyway, you said a police officer? Why is he a suspect?’

‘Well, he’s a little ambitious and has a side reputation of being a smuggler, nothing concrete, but enough to be suspicious.’

‘And the others? What reason would this Marilyn have to murder him, Sir?’

‘Marilyn was apparently cut up when he jilted her, and she’s terribly angry that he invited her to his wedding just to rub in that he didn’t marry her,’ Horace says, appalled at the officer’s actions, as he takes a pastry. ‘We’ll see what the police found tomorrow.’

They left the teahouse and meandered back to the lodge they had rented. As he prepared for bed, he carefully organised all his equipment in a small square box.

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In the distance, Big Ben chimed the time. Midnight.

It was far colder than it should have been. A draught blew in the window. Inspector Henry turned to light the bedside lamp and frowned. His box was open, and the notebook gone. He frowned and wrote something quickly on a stray scrap of paper, ink spurring everywhere.

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‘There has been another murder, sir.’ The inspector was greeted by the grim news the next morning. ‘And there was a horse and carriage stolen by a drunk who crashed up near the Thames. Both suspects were somewhere else at the time of the murder.’

‘So, it was confirmed? When did he die?’ asked Inspector Henry.

‘About eight of the clock the night before last.’

‘I see.’

‘Were any of the suspects absent last night at all?’

‘Well, sir, Jon went out to respond to that carriage crash, at about 9:30. And Marilyn left a little earlier and came back after about twenty minutes.’

‘Was there anything else?’

‘Yes sir, they found this.’ He had held up an engagement ring and passed it to the inspector. It was large and fairly new but scratched up. ‘Odd thing, sir, it was found at the scene after the body was moved, and the lads are sure it wasn’t there earlier.’

‘Yes. I have a theory about that ring. I’d like to borrow it for a while, unofficially of course. Now, about this case file—’

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‘That’s it. Just the one ring.’ The inspector sighed, walking to the door, less than ten minutes later.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Patrick. ‘But while we’re here, shouldn’t we check who’s it is?’

‘Yes. Yes, we should. Must’ve slipped my mind.’ He slunk through the inner doorway into a corridor. ‘Which room is Marilyn’s?’ he asked Patrick.

‘This one.’ Patrick pointed ‘Do you think it is hers?’

‘It’s possible. We know she was engaged, and still wore the ring.’

As they entered, Marilyn looked up from her book. ‘May I be of help?’ she asked, more than a little surprised.

‘Yes. Have you lost your engagement ring recently?’ the inspector asked without preamble.

‘No, of course not,’ she held up her own hand for confirmation, where there was a ring mark ‘I usually wear it, but I put in this drawer earlier. Here, I’ll show you.’ The wood whispered open, and Marilyn gasped at what she saw. ‘What’s this? She held up the inspector’s missing notebook.

‘That’s mine,’ mused the inspector. When she passed it to him, he flipped through the pages. ‘Someone’s tampered with this. That’s not my writing, is it Patrick? You’re better at these things than me.’

Peering at the book, Patrick nodded. ‘Yes, sir. Someone else has indeed been writing in it.’

‘Why would someone have cause to do that?’ Marilyn smoothed her skirt, eyes fixed on the floor.

‘The question you should be asking is, why would the murderer do that and keep the book?’

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‘Oi! What are you doing! I’m obliged to report this you know. I’m on duty,’ yelled an indignant voice.

‘I’m arresting you for thirty-six counts of first-degree murder, one count of theft. several of police interference,’ announced the police officer as he looked down his nose at Jon. ‘Was that all?’ he added as an aside to Patrick

‘Er— I think so, sir. I’m not really sure.’

‘Right. Well Jon, I’ll let the inspector explain.’

‘It was very well done, I must admit,’ the inspector conceded. ‘Though several things gave you away. First, we knew the ring couldn’t be Marilyn’s, it was too large. Second, it had traces of gunpowder on it, you clearly hadn’t cleaned it recently. Quite clever to hide it at the crime scene. Except only you could have taken it. Next, you stole my notebook, hoping to change what was written in it, and plant it on Marilyn. My only question is how you knew I’m schizophrenic? Though I suppose you looked at my records?’

‘You’re right. I looked through your records for a way to stop you. It said you had a

split personality and I guessed that without your notebook, you'd never be able to solve the case, and I was right wasn't I, if not for your little cub there. It was just another murder—'

'Yes, well, my "little cub" happens to be much smarter than you are.' He turned his attention to Patrick. 'Right, that wraps it up then. I need to go see a widow.'