

MRS. JEFFRIES

SPEAKS HER MIND

EMILY BRIGHTWELL



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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“Emily Brightwell continues to brighten the well-being of her fans with entertaining mysteries.”

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WHAT WOULD SCOTLAND YARD DO WITHOUT DEAR MRS JEFFRIES?

Even Inspector Witherspoon himself doesn't know—because his secret weapon is as ladylike as she is clever. She's Mrs. Jeffries—the charming detective who stars in this unique Victorian mystery series. Enjoy them all . . .

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A doctor is found dead in his own office—and Mrs. Jeffries must scour the premises to find the prescription for murder.

Mrs. Jeffries Dusts for Clues

One case is solved and another is opened when the inspector finds a missing brooch—pinned to a dead woman's gown. But Mrs. Jeffries never cleans a room without dusting under the bed—and never gives up on a case before every loose end is tightly tied.

The Ghost and Mrs. Jeffries

Death is unpredictable . . . but the murder of Mrs. Hodges was foreseen at a spooky séance. The practical-minded Mrs. Jeffries may not be able to see the future—but she can look into the past and put things in order to solve this haunting crime.

Mrs. Jeffries Takes Stock

A businessman has been murdered—and it could be because he cheated his stockholders. The housekeeper's interest is piqued . . . and when it comes to catching killers, the smart money's on Mrs. Jeffries.

Mrs. Jeffries on the Ball

A festive Jubilee celebration turns into a fatal affair—and Mrs. Jeffries must find the guilty party.

Mrs. Jeffries on the Trail

Why was Annie Shields out selling flowers so late on a foggy night? And more importantly, who killed her while she was doing it? It's up to Mrs. Jeffries to sniff out the clues.

Mrs. Jeffries Plays the Cook

Mrs. Jeffries finds herself doing double duty: cooking for the inspector's household and trying to cook a killer's goose.

Mrs. Jeffries and the Missing Alibi

When Inspector Witherspoon becomes the main suspect in a murder, Scotland Yard refuses to let him investigate. But no one said anything about Mrs. Jeffries.

Mrs. Jeffries Stands Corrected

When a local publican is murdered, and Inspector Witherspoon botches the investigation, trouble starts to brew for Mrs. Jeffries.

Mrs. Jeffries Takes the Stage

After a theater critic is murdered, Mrs. Jeffries uncovers the victim's secret past: a real-life drama more compelling than any stage play.

Mrs. Jeffries Questions the Answer

Hannah Cameron was not well liked. But were her friends or family the sort to stab her in the back? Mrs. Jeffries must really tiptoe around this time—or it could be a matter of life and death . . .

Mrs. Jeffries Reveals Her Art

Mrs. Jeffries has to work double time to find a missing model *and* a killer. And she'll have to get her whole staff involved—before someone else becomes the next subject.

Mrs. Jeffries Takes the Cake

The evidence was all there: a dead body, two dessert plates, and a gun. As if Mr. Ashbury had been sharing cake with his own killer. Now Mrs. Jeffries will have to do some snooping around—to dish up clues.

Mrs. Jeffries Rocks the Boat

Mirabelle had traveled by boat all the way from Australia to visit her sister—only to wind up murdered. Now Mrs. Jeffries must solve the case—and it's sink or swim.

Mrs. Jeffries Weeds the Plot

Three attempts have been made on Annabeth Gentry's life. Is it due to her recent inheritance, or is it because her bloodhound dug up the body of a murdered thief? Mrs. Jeffries will have to sniff out some clues before the plot thickens.

Mrs. Jeffries Pinches the Post

Harrison Nye may have had some dubious business dealings, but no one ever expected him to be murdered. Now, Mrs. Jeffries and her staff must root through the sins of his past to discover which one caught up with him.

Mrs. Jeffries Pleads Her Case

Harlan Westover's death was deemed a suicide by the magistrate. But Inspector Witherspoon is willing to risk his career to prove otherwise. And it's up to Mrs. Jeffries to ensure the good inspector remains afloat.

Mrs. Jeffries Sweeps the Chimney

A dead vicar has been found, propped against a church wall. And Inspector Witherspoon's only prayer is to seek the divinations of Mrs. Jeffries.

Mrs. Jeffries Stalks the Hunter

Puppy love turns to obsession which leads to murder. Who better to get to the heart of the matter than Inspector Witherspoon's indomitable companion, Mrs. Jeffries.

Mrs. Jeffries and the Silent Knight

The yuletide murder of an elderly man is complicated by several suspects—none of whom were in the Christmas spirit.

Mrs. Jeffries Appeals the Verdict

Mrs. Jeffries and her downstairs cohorts have their work cut out for them if they want to save an innocent man from the gallows.

Mrs. Jeffries and the Best Laid Plans

Banker Lawrence Boyd didn't waste his time making friends, which is why hardly anyone mourns his death. With a list of enemies including just about everyone the miser's ever met, it will take Mrs. Jeffries' shrewd eye to find the killer.

Mrs. Jeffries and the Feast of St. Stephen

'Tis the season for sleuthing when wealthy Stephen Whitfield is murdered during his holiday dinner party. It's up to Mrs. Jeffries to solve the case in time for Christmas.

Mrs. Jeffries Holds the Trump

A very well-liked but very dead magnate is found floating down the river. Now Mrs. Jeffries and her company will have to dive into a mystery that only grows more complex.

Mrs. Jeffries in the Nick of Time

Mrs. Jeffries lends her downstairs common sense to this upstairs murder mystery—and hopes that she and the inspector don't get derailed in the case of a rich uncle cum model train enthusiast.

Mrs. Jeffries and the Yuletide Weddings

Wedding bells will make this season all the more jolly. Until one humbug sings a carol of murder . . .

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MRS. JEFFRIES LEARNS THE TRADE

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*This book is dedicated to
the Reverend Dr. Paul Tellström
and the delightful Mr. Carl Whidden,
two wonderful people who have
enriched my life greatly.*

CHAPTER 1



Olive Kettering looked over her shoulder as she hurried toward the staircase. She didn't see anyone in the long, gloomy hallway, but that didn't mean no one was there. It was broad daylight, almost nine o'clock in the morning, and she should have been safe, but she knew she wasn't. They'd been waiting for this, for her to be alone in the house. From behind her, she heard a heavy banging noise, like someone thumping along the upper corridor. She'd been a fool to let all the servants take the day off—that's what came of being a good Christian soul—her own generosity would be her undoing. She ought to have made at least one of them stay here today; all of them hadn't needed to go to Cook's funeral. It wasn't as if most of them had even liked the woman.

Rain slashed at the panes of the tall window at the end of the corridor, masking any telltale sound of her pursuers, but she knew they were gaining on her. She could feel them. Just as she reached the top of the stairs, she heard a door open behind her.

Olive knew she had to get out of the house. She hitched up her brown wool skirt, grabbed the banister, and charged down the stairs toward the first-floor landing.

From behind her, she could hear footsteps pounding over the thick hall rug as they came after her. They weren't even trying to be discreet now. There was no need; she was all alone. She picked up her pace, her hands skimming along the smooth wood as she rushed down the staircase, flew across the landing, and continued on toward the foyer. Oh, God, if she could just get outside, just get to the street, maybe she could find someone to help her.

When she reached the bottom, she didn't waste time looking around to see if they were close. She simply ran toward the huge double front door. She skidded on the black and white tiles, found her footing, and flung herself forward.

The footsteps were on the stairs now, thumping down them like a horde of devils uncaring of how much noise they made. Her hands reached for the brass doorknob and, for a split second, she couldn't remember which way to turn the wretched thing—the housekeeper always opened the door—but finally, she gave it a mighty twist and the lock clicked. She pulled it open and rushed outside.

Overhead, the portico protected her from an immediate soaking, but the wind had blown water onto the gray marble slabs of the terrace floor. Her only hope was to get to the street. Even in a storm, there would be people. There were always plenty of people in this part of London.

Olive turned her head sharply as she heard a thud coming from behind her. The door was half-opened, but she couldn't see anything. But she knew they were coming. Choking back a scream, she started across the terrace toward the steps and safety. Her foot slipped on a patch of water, and she almost went down, but she managed to right herself and keep on going. Behind her, the front door creaked open and this time she didn't bother to look over her shoulder; she knew they were there. A gust of wind blew a newspaper across her face just as she reached the top step; she screamed and lost her footing. Rather than risk falling backward into the arms of the hell that was chasing her, she twisted her body to her left, causing her to crash into a thorny bush. Thunder crashed overhead as she flailed her arms to regain her feet. Unable to see because of the newspaper across her face, she tossed

her head from side to side trying to dislodge it, but the rain held it firmly against her skin. Sobbing she finally managed to scrape it away just as lightning flashed, blinding her because she was staring straight up into it. Terrified, she heaved herself up and, in her panic, turned toward the side of the house rather than the street.

Tears mingled with the pouring rain and streamed down her cheeks as she ran around the corner. She tried to say the Twenty-third Psalm but found that it took all her concentration to keep going.

Trees and shrubs dominated the garden on the side of the house. Olive dodged around a yew tree and had just turned and started back toward the street when she heard them closing the distance. "Help me, Lord," she muttered, "help me." She found the strength to go on and raced around the corner to the back. A sob escaped her as the carriage house came into view. Thank God, Bernadine was home. She skidded on the mud but kept her feet and then stumbled over the protruding root of a huge old oak and went down hard. She pulled herself up on her hands and knees.

Olive raised her head and sobbed in relief as a figure stepped out and into view. Thank God, she thought, thank God. Relieved that she was going to be rescued, she tried to give a warning. "They're behind me." She lifted her hand to be helped up as the person approached. "We've got to get—"

"There's no one behind you, you stupid woman," a harsh voice said.

Olive's mouth opened in shock and her eyes widened as she saw the gun pointed directly at her head. Directly above her was a flash of lightning, but when the thunder crashed a few seconds later Olive didn't hear it. She was already dead.

"I must say, holding my tongue was becoming more and more difficult," Mrs. Jeffries said to the others gathered around the kitchen table. Hepzibah Jeffries, the housekeeper to Inspector Gerald Witherspoon of the Metropolitan Police Force, was a woman of late middle age. Her auburn hair was threaded with gray, there were freckles sprinkled over her nose, and her mouth was generally set in a cheerful smile, but she wasn't smiling today. She looked positively grim as she recounted her late encounter with the new vicar of St. John's Church.

"There's no law that says we 'ave to go to church," Wiggins, the footman, exclaimed. He was a handsome young man with brown hair and round, apple cheeks.

"In my last household, they made all the servants go to church every Sunday, whether we wanted to or not," Phyllis muttered. "But I suppose in my case it wouldn't matter, as I don't live in like the rest of you do." Phyllis Thomlinson was a plump girl of nineteen with dark blonde hair, brown eyes, porcelain skin, and a face as round as a pie tin. She'd worked in the household since Christmas and she was still a bit shy about saying too much in front of the others.

"It doesn't matter whether you live in or not, no one here is forced to go to church. That's not the custom in this household," Mrs. Goodge, the cook, declared. She was elderly and white haired, but her mind and her opinions were both still sharp. "The inspector believes in letting people make up their own minds about such things. A person's religion is their own business and employers should have no say in the matter. Isn't that right, Mrs. Jeffries?"

Mrs. Jeffries ducked her head to hide a smile. When this household had first come together, the cook would have been the first to say that a servant should be made to go to church and that the master of the household always knew best. But, like the rest of them, Mrs. Goodge's attitudes about society had changed greatly in the past few years. Having worked for some of the richest and most aristocratic families in all of England, Mrs. Goodge had appeared to be a hidebound old snob when she'd come to work for Inspector Gerald Witherspoon. Yet the first chink in her armor had already been made before

she'd even walked in the door. Her previous employers had sacked her without so much as a by-your-leave just because she'd gotten old. When Mrs. Jeffries had first interviewed her, Mrs. Goodge had mouthed a number of platitudes about what was right and proper in the world, but the housekeeper had seen that despite her stuffy manner, behind her wire-rimmed spectacles her eyes had been haunted with fear. She was old and she'd no place to go. She'd learned firsthand how cruel life could be when one was at the mercy of the whims of the rich. In the years that had passed, their investigations into Inspector Witherspoon's murders had completed the task of changing the cook's attitudes. "Yes, that's precisely what I told Reverend Cheney," she replied.

"I thought you said you held your tongue," Betsy, the pretty blonde maid, said as she reached for the teapot.

"I did. I wanted to say far more than I actually said." The housekeeper laughed. "Believe me, the urge to speak my mind was very strong, but I was very polite—when what I wanted to tell him was mind his own business."

Everyone laughed.

"Reverend Cheney isn't at all like the other one, is 'e?" Wiggins commented. "Reverend Glasse didn't give a toss if we went to church or not. I liked 'im."

"I liked him, too." Betsy glanced at her husband, Smythe. "And I'm glad it was him and not Reverend Cheney that married us. Did Miss Euphemia Witherspoon ever make you lot go to church?"

Smythe was the coachman. He and Betsy were newlyweds, having only just tied the knot at Christmas. He grinned broadly. "You've got to be joking. I don't recall her ever setting foot in church. As long as we did our work, she left us alone."

Smythe's history with the household of Upper Edmonton Gardens was the longest of all of them. Years earlier, he'd come to the Witherspoon house as a young coachman for the inspector's aunt, Euphemia Witherspoon. She'd paid a good wage and treated her servants decently. He'd worked hard and saved his money until he had enough for passage to Australia. He wanted to seek his fortune and he'd gotten lucky. He'd made a fortune mining opals in the outback, used that as seed money for other investments, and, years later, come back to England a very wealthy man. He'd only stopped in to pay his respects to his old employer. But Euphemia Witherspoon was sick, lying in squalor, and dying. The only one of her servants trying to take care of her had been a very young Wiggins, who kept vigils by her bedside and did the best he could.

Smythe had immediately taken charge. He'd sent the lad for a doctor, fired the lazy servants, and set about putting the house in order so the poor woman could have a bit of comfort.

But though she hung on for a number of weeks, even the best medical care couldn't save her. Before she died, Euphemia made Smythe swear he'd stay on in the household for a few weeks to see her only relative, her nephew, Inspector Gerald Witherspoon, safely settled in the house. The inspector had been raised in very modest circumstances, and now that she was leaving him a huge house as well as a fortune, she didn't want anyone taking advantage of him as they'd taken advantage of her. Smythe had agreed.

That was when his life had really gotten complicated. Inspector Witherspoon had moved into the house, Mrs. Jeffries had come along to be the housekeeper, she'd hired Mrs. Goodge as the cook, and then his beloved Betsy had collapsed on their doorstep. They had nursed her back to health and she stayed on as the maid. Just when he'd decided the new staff wasn't the sort to take advantage of anyone, Mrs. Jeffries had encouraged the inspector to try his hand at solving those horrible Kensington High Street murders and sent the rest of them out to snoop about for clues. Not that they had any idea what they were doing, at least not at first, but they'd soon figured it out and each an

every one of them had found investigating murder to their liking. So, without telling any of them how rich he was, Smythe had stayed on for a bit more, just to see how the case turned out. But the Inspector Witherspoon had “solved” the case, gotten transferred from the Records Room at Scotland Yard to the Ladbroke Road Police Station, and, almost immediately, had another case to work on.

By then it was too late. Smythe was involved, half in love with Betsy, and despite the fifteen-year age difference between them she’d let him know she had feelings for him. So he’d stayed and now he thanked his lucky stars he’d made the right choice. He and Betsy were happily married, the household had helped solved dozens of murders, and they’d become a “family.” Naturally, he’d told Betsy about his wealth before they wed. He didn’t believe in keeping secrets from his wife. Mrs. Jeffries had guessed that he had plenty as well, but he felt a bit guilty that he’d never found the best moment to tell Mrs. Goodge and Wiggins. The time never seemed right and now it was a bit awkward.

“She once sent me over to St. John’s with some money for the poor box,” Wiggins added. “But she didn’t say I had to stay for the service, so I didn’t.”

Phyllis got to her feet and gave them all a sunny smile. “Church or not, this is the best place I’ve ever worked. When I worked for the Lowery household we only got a half day off once a week and then only after we’d cleared up the lunch table and done the washing up. Here, I’ve got the whole day to myself. I suppose I’d best go; I only stopped by to get my umbrella and I’ve spent an hour with you having tea.” She giggled. “I’d never have done that at my old place. But you’re all so nice.”

Mrs. Jeffries stifled a surge of guilt. Phyllis hadn’t been with them very long. She’d been hired a few weeks before Christmas and didn’t take part in their investigations. But the position was only supposed to be temporary, the housekeeper told herself, and they had kept Phyllis on well past Betsy and Smythe’s wedding. She’d not had the heart to let the girl go, she’d needed the position so badly. “You work very hard and you deserve your day out.”

Phyllis’ smile faltered. “But, please excuse me, I don’t mean to seem ungrateful, but the rest of you don’t seem to have as much time off as I do. I love working here—I don’t want to lose my position because you think I’m lazy . . .”

“We have plenty of time off,” Mrs. Goodge said quickly. “You just don’t notice because . . . because . . .”

“Because you’re always so busy,” Mrs. Jeffries finished. “Now, don’t worry yourself about your position. Go along now or you’ll miss your train. I’m sure your family can’t wait to see you. We’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Phyllis laughed, grabbed her overcoat from the coat tree and her umbrella from the stand, and disappeared down the back hall.

“What on earth are we going to do?” The cook shook her head. “We’ve been lucky so far; the inspector hasn’t had a homicide case since Christmas.”

“We managed during that one,” Wiggins pointed out. “But I know what you mean, it’s hard always watchin’ what we say. I’m afraid I’m goin’ to slip up and mention one of our cases. I like Phyllis. She’s a right nice girl and she’s so grateful to ‘ave a job.”

Mrs. Jeffries shrugged. “I like her, too, and she certainly tries very hard. Are you suggesting we tell her the truth?” She looked at Wiggins as she spoke.

He sighed heavily. “I don’t know. Sometimes it seems like half of London knows what we’re up to when we’re on the hunt, so there’s a part of me that thinks what difference would it make if we told her.”

“We shouldn’t say anything,” Betsy said quickly. “It’ll only make her feel bad because she won’t be able to help. So I think we ought to just go along as we are. Like Wiggins said, we managed during the

last case. She's not even here when we have our meetings."

When she'd hired Phyllis, Mrs. Jeffries had deliberately given her a short day. She didn't start work until after their normal morning meeting time and she left before they had their afternoon meeting.

"I thought she was only here because of the weddin' and us bein' so tied up on our last case," Smythe said curiously. "I like the girl, but is she goin' to be here all the time?"

He had a reason for asking, but he didn't want to share it with the others just yet. After the wedding, he and Betsy had decided to "live out" rather than stay in the house. He'd bought a building close by and had the best flat done up for the two of them. He knew his beloved would never give up their investigations, but he also knew that with his wealth, at some point it wouldn't be right for the two of them to keep working as servants. He donated all his salary to a variety of charities that helped the poor, and he suspected that, considering Betsy's reaction when he'd handed her the household accounts and told her to spend what she liked, she'd probably follow suit and donate her wages as well. He'd not realized he'd feel so guilty taking wages when there were so many unemployed in London. Blast a Spaniard, what a silly mess!

Just then, there was a pounding on the front door. Mrs. Jeffries started to get up, but Wiggins beat her to it. "I'll get it, Mrs. Jeffries," he offered as he hurried toward the stairs.

The footman took the steps two at a time, raced up the hall, and threw open the front door. A uniformed constable stood there. Alarmed, Wiggins frowned. "Is the inspector alright?"

The constable smiled reassuringly. "He's fine. He's been called out on a case, though, and he wanted me to stop by and let the household know."

Wiggins knew what to do. Inspector Witherspoon wouldn't have sent a constable around with a message this early in the day unless he had been called out on something important, like a murder. "Would you like to come inside for a cup of tea, Constable? It's an awful day out and right cold."

The constable glanced up, frowned anxiously, and then looked back at Wiggins. "That's a lovely offer but I don't think this lull in the storm is going to last and I'm on my way home. I worked the night shift." He started to go back down the stairs.

"Wait, did our inspector say when he'd be home?" Wiggins knew he had to get some facts out of the fellow.

He stopped. "He didn't say, but it's murder so I expect he'll be late for dinner."

"Cor blimey." Wiggins shook his head. "Some poor person got done in."

"The victim was a Miss Olive Kettering and she's either rich or important, because within two minutes of us getting the call from the constables on patrol, Inspector Witherspoon was notified that he had to take the case."

Wiggins grinned. "That happens to our inspector a lot. I hope he didn't have to go too far." He looked past the constable's shoulder as more rain began to fall. The constable noticed it as well and began edging down the stairs toward the street.

"He didn't go far, just to Brook Green. The victim lived on Fox Lane."

"Thank you, Constable, I'll let the housekeeper know he'll be late." Wiggins smiled gratefully. Now that he had a street location and a name, he knew he and Smythe could suss out the rest on their own.

"Right, then, I'd best be off." The constable nodded and left.

Wiggins closed the door, ran down the hall, and flew down the back stairs, taking them two at a time. As he raced into the kitchen, he yelled, "The inspector's been called out on a murder and won't be home till late. We've finally got us another case."

Olive Kettering lived in a huge six-story white stone house set well back from the street. A garden filled with bushes, flower beds, hedges, and trees was behind a black iron fence. The house was at the end of the road, separated from the row of elegant town houses that were the nearest neighbors by a copse of pine trees on one side. On the far side was the green itself.

Inspector Gerald Witherspoon stood beside the front gate and pulled his coat tighter as he glanced at the sky. "We're in luck, the rain has stopped." He was a middle-aged man with thinning brown hair, a mustache, and a pale, bony face. "Is the body at the back of the house?" he asked.

Constable Barnes, a savvy old copper with a full head of iron gray hair under his helmet, a ruddy complexion, and a sharp gaze that took in every little detail, said, "Yes, sir." He pushed open the gate and stepped through. He and the inspector had worked together on dozens of cases so he knew exactly what to do.

Two police constables standing beneath the portico by the front door started toward them as they advanced up the paved stone walkway.

"Good day, sir," the first one said, nodding respectfully. "She's just this way." He veered off and began moving toward the corner of the huge mansion. "We've not touched the body nor disturbed the scene."

"But we did put up tarpaulins to preserve any evidence," the second constable added. "Your methods have become quite well-known."

Witherspoon nodded modestly in acknowledgment of the compliment even though he was very embarrassed. He couldn't quite recall when he'd come up with "his methods," but then again, he must have done so because everyone except him seemed to know all about them. "Well, preserving the crime scene isn't really unique to me," he murmured. "The Metropolitan Police have done it for quite some time now."

Witherspoon stopped as they rounded the corner. The truth was, he was quite squeamish about bodies and he needed a moment to steel himself for the task at hand.

"Are you alright, sir?" one of the constables asked.

"The inspector likes to have a good look at the area before he examines the body," Barnes said quickly.

Witherspoon smiled gratefully and took a deep breath. "I'm ready now."

"The body is over there, sir." Barnes pointed to a spot beneath a gray tarpaulin that had been stretched between four poles, forming a cover. A man in plain clothes crouched over the body and two other police constables, both very young, stood next to the corpse. Witherspoon guessed the man in plain clothes was the police surgeon.

Barnes turned his attention to the constables. "Go back to the front and keep watch. Let me know who comes along."

"Yes, sir," they said in unison. They went back to the front of the house.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Witherspoon asked, "Do we know how the victim was murdered?"

"The first report said she was shot," Barnes said as they approached the body. "But we'll know more once we hear what the police surgeon's got to say."

"They generally don't like to say anything at all until they've done the postmortem," Witherspoon muttered.

Barnes chuckled and nodded at the two policemen standing guard over the body. One was tall and lanky, with a blonde mustache, and the other was short, stocky, and clean shaven.

The man in plain clothes rose to his feet. Witherspoon recognized him, it was Dr. Amalfi. "Hello

Doctor.” He extended his hand and they shook. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I was hoping they’d give you this one.” Amalfi smiled in pleasure at being recognized and remembered. He’d only worked a couple of the inspector’s previous cases. “It’s going to be quite ugly. It’s an out-and-out murder. This poor woman has been shot in the head.”

“It couldn’t have been an accident?” Witherspoon asked hopefully.

“I’m afraid not.” Amalfi pointed to the victim. “You can see where the bullet went into her forehead. Accidental shootings are rarely so precise.”

“Can you hazard a guess as to how long she’s been dead?” Barnes asked.

Amalfi hesitated. “Rigor hasn’t set in yet, so I think it’s probably less than an hour, but then again that’s only a guess on my part. I’ll know more after the postmortem.” He stepped away from the body. “I’m aware of your methods, Inspector, so I’ve placed her back into the position she was in when she arrived.”

“We didn’t touch her, either,” the clean-shaven constable added, “except to ascertain that Miss Kettering was dead.”

“Thank you,” the inspector said. He glanced down at the dead woman and then realized her body wasn’t terribly mutilated, there was merely a small hole directly in the center of her forehead. He swallowed heavily and knelt down beside her. He knew his duty. He examined her closely. She was a woman of late middle age, slender, with pale skin, deep-set eyes, and dark hair pulled back in a severe knot at the nape of her neck. She was dressed in a high-necked brown wool dress with an overskirt of brown and black stripes. “Her clothes are soaking wet, but that doesn’t necessarily mean she’s been out here for very long.”

“It’s been raining heavily all morning,” Barnes added. He knelt down on the other side of the victim. “It’s let up for the moment, but I think we’ve another bout on the way.”

She lay on her back, her eyes staring straight up toward the sky. There were no rings on her fingers, no earrings, no jewelry of any kind. On her feet were high-topped black leather shoes with short, stubby heels. He glanced up at the short, stocky constable. “You referred to her as Miss Kettering. Do you know her?”

“Only because I used to walk this beat, sir,” he replied. “She used to stop me to complain about the street vendors. She said they made too much noise. Well, they do hawk their wares, but they have a right to make a living, just like anyone else. She got quite cross when I told her there wasn’t anything we could do about them, that unless they were breaking a law, we couldn’t arrest them.”

“Is she the owner of this property?” Barnes asked.

“Yes, sir,” the other constable replied.

“Who found her?” Barnes continued.

“Mrs. Fox, she’s a tenant on the property. She lives in a flat over the carriage house in the back. She was quite upset so we sent her back to her house to wait for you.”

Barnes scanned the area under the tarpaulin. “Has anyone found a coat or an umbrella?”

“Not as yet, sir,” the tall constable with the mustache replied.

“That’s odd.” Barnes frowned. “Why would anyone in their right mind come out in the middle of a storm?”

“Perhaps she tried to run away from her killer,” Witherspoon speculated. He glanced toward the house. “Have you spoken to any of the servants?”

“There aren’t any, sir,” the constable with the mustache replied. “Mrs. Fox said they are all at the funeral this morning. Apparently Miss Kettering’s cook died and she gave them the morning off to attend the service.”

Witherspoon looked up. "Did Mrs. Fox say why she hadn't gone to the funeral as well?"

~~"I asked her that very question, sir"—he beamed proudly—"and she told me she stayed home because she's not been well and she didn't want to go out in this weather."~~

The inspector nodded and got to his feet. "Have any other witnesses come forward?" He knew it was a faint hope, but it was important to ask. Perhaps one day, he'd actually get a case where someone saw the murder and the murderer.

"Not as yet, sir," he replied. "But we've followed procedure and we've got men out taking statements from around the neighborhood. Unfortunately, there aren't any close neighbors and with the weather being so awful, I doubt there was anyone outside."

"And Faroe Road was flooding this morning." The stocky one stepped forward and pointed to the street that was perpendicular to Fox Lane. "So no one would have been out and about there, either. But we've got men searching the grounds just in case the killer left us some evidence."

"Good work." The inspector glanced at Barnes. "Let's go and interview Mrs. Fox. Perhaps she can tell us a bit more."

Barnes got up. "Yes, sir." He turned to Dr. Amalfi. "We're through here, Doctor. You can take her away. Have one of the lads at the front send off for the mortuary van."

Amalfi nodded and started toward the front of the house. "I'm planning on doing the postmortem right away. I'll send my report to you as soon as I've finished," he called as he disappeared around the corner.

"Come and get us immediately when the servants return," Barnes instructed the two constables. He and Witherspoon headed toward the carriage house.

"That's got to be it." Smythe pointed to a cluster of constables standing at the end of Fox Lane. They milled about in front of the wrought-iron gates leading to a huge white mansion set well back from the street. "Blast a Spaniard," he continued. "There aren't any near neighbors so we'll not be using any stairwells to 'ide in."

"What about those trees over there?" Wiggins nodded his chin toward a copse of trees on the side of the house. "We could cut around the far side of the green to get a closer look."

Smythe shook his head. "That won't work. The inspector's probably got men searchin' the grounds as we speak and we might get caught."

Wiggins held his breath as one of the constables by the gate looked toward them. He exhaled in relief when he didn't recognize the man. That was one of the problems they faced—too many of the inspector's subordinates knew who they were.

"We passed a pub on Faroe Street." Smythe jerked his chin back the way they'd just come. "Let's see if news of the murder has traveled that far."

Quietly, so as not to draw any attention to themselves, they turned and began to retreat. A few moments later, they stepped inside the doors of the Nag's Head Pub.

The room was full. The customers were mainly workingmen and -women. They stood at the bar, some with coats over their servant garb, along with shopkeepers who'd popped in to hear the latest gossip and clerks with their bowlers lying atop the counter. A fire burned in the hearth next to the bar, and there were people at the few tables scattered about the room, and the benches along the walls were full as well. A buzz of excitement, over and above normal pub chatter, filled the room.

Smythe grinned at Wiggins. "We're in luck, they've heard of the murder."

Just then, two men wearing greengrocer's smocks moved away from the counter and toward the

door. Smythe and Wiggins quickly took their place.

“What’ll you have?” the barman asked.

“Two pints, please,” Smythe replied. He glanced to his left and caught the gaze of a lone, gaunt-looking man lifting a glass of gin to his lips. He tried a friendly smile but the fellow just knocked back his drink and turned his head. No gossip to be had there.

Wiggins eased closer to the two women standing next to him and cocked his head toward the conversation.

“I’m not surprised someone finally did her in,” the older of the ladies said. She was a portly woman wearing a long gray coat and a black knitted cap. “Considering the way she treated poor Elsa, God rest her soul, she’s not one that anyone will be shedding any tears over.”

The barman slid a pint under Wiggins’ nose and he absently nodded his thanks. He made eye contact with Smythe and gave a small shake of his head toward the ladies.

“She wasn’t a nice person,” the younger lady, a tall redhead, replied. “But she didn’t deserve to be hacked up in her own garden.”

“She weren’t hacked up, she were shot,” a workman in a flat cap said from the other side of the women.

“Was someone killed?” Wiggins asked innocently.

The two women and the man looked at him. He smiled shyly. “Sorry, I couldn’t ’elp overhearin’.”

“The woman that owns that big house across the way got herself shot,” the man said. “Her name Olive Kettering and she’s a spinster lady.”

“Did they catch who did it?” Smythe leaned forward over the bar.

“I doubt it; she were only killed this mornin’,” the redhead said. “So they’re not likely to know much, now, are they?”

“Cor blimey, that’s terrible. The poor lady,” Wiggins added.

“Poor lady my foot,” the older one put in. “I’m not one for speakin’ ill of the dead, but Olive Kettering was a mean-spirited old cow and I don’t much care who hears me say it. She was so miserable to her servants she wouldn’t even let them take a few hours off to go to the doctor and not look what’s happened. Elsa Grant is dead.”

“Someone else is dead?” Wiggins exclaimed.

“Yes, but she wasn’t murdered.” The man reached for his glass. “Elsa Grant was the cook at the Kettering house. She died and her funeral is today.”

“We don’t know that she wasn’t done in.” The redhead glared at the workman.

“She died of natural causes,” he protested. “She had something wrong with her stomach. God knows she’d been complainin’ about it for months.”

“He’s right,” the older woman added. “She’d been feelin’ poorly for months. Dr. Hilton thinks she probably had the cancer, leastways that’s what he told my Ned when he was there putting in those fancy new lamps in the surgery.”

“Yes, but she didn’t get to see Dr. Hilton until it was too late, did she?” the redhead argued. “So he don’t know what it was that killed her. It might have been something simple that he could have cured if she’d been allowed to go see him. But Olive Kettering wouldn’t give her time off, would she?”

“Elsa had an afternoon out, just like everyone else in the household,” the man pointed out. “She was the one who didn’t want to waste her time going to a doctor until it was too late.”

“But the Kettering woman wouldn’t let her go then, would she?” the redhead snapped. “She knew how sick Elsa was and she wouldn’t let her off to see a doctor and didn’t call one to the house until it was too late. Seems to me Olive Kettering got exactly what she deserved.”

The flat over the carriage house was large, airy, and spacious. Witherspoon had noticed the small but modern kitchen they'd passed as Mrs. Fox had led them down the short corridor to the drawing room. It was quite an impressive room, with tall windows draped with blue and cream silk curtains and a polished wooden floor laid out in an intricate diamond pattern. The walls were painted a pale rose cream and topped with carved white crown moldings. A cut-glass chandelier hung from the ceiling, and all the French Regency furniture filling the room was upholstered in a dark sapphire and rose striped fabric.

Bernadine Fox stared at her two visitors. They were sitting in front of the fireplace; she was on the center of the sofa and Witherspoon was on her right. Barnes had taken a straight-backed chair by the hearth. She was a small, slender, rather attractive middle-aged woman with blue eyes and streaks of gray in her dark brown hair. She wore a gray skirt and a high-necked white blouse with an onyx and gold pin at her neck. "I wouldn't have even seen her if I hadn't glanced out the window." She bit her lip and looked away.

Witherspoon nodded sympathetically. "It must have been a terrible shock for you."

She sniffed, pulled a white handkerchief out of her sleeve, and dabbed at her eyes. "It certainly was. One doesn't expect to see one's neighbor lying in the garden."

Barnes looked up from his little brown notebook. "What time was this, Mrs. Fox?"

"It was just past ten o'clock," she replied.

"You looked at the clock?"

"Yes"—she pointed at the grandfather clock standing by the door—"and I noted the time. I was wondering if Olive—Miss Kettering—was going to come over for a cup of coffee." She sighed.

"Was it Miss Kettering's habit to come over each morning?" the inspector asked.

"It wasn't a habit, but she did occasionally come by and we'd have our morning coffee together. I was all alone here, as I'd let my maid go to a funeral, and I knew she was alone as well."

"They all went to Elsa Grant's funeral, is that correct?" Barnes asked.

She nodded. "Yes, that's right. She was Miss Kettering's cook. Her death was sad, but certainly not unexpected. She'd been ill on and off for some time."

"This flat is beautiful." Witherspoon glanced around the room as he spoke. "Did Miss Kettering live in it furnished?"

"Certainly not," she replied. "The furnishings and the fixtures are all mine. It was nothing but bare walls when I rented the place."

Witherspoon nodded. "Do you live here alone?"

"Yes. I moved in when my husband passed away." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I have a maid, but she doesn't live in, and before you ask, I pay the maid's wages, not Miss Kettering."

"How long have you lived here?" Barnes asked.

"Five years, but what does that have to do with Olive's death?"

The constable smiled slightly. "It's just routine, ma'am," he assured her.

"Can you tell us everything that happened this morning?" Witherspoon asked softly.

"There isn't much to tell." She shrugged. "I went to the window to see if the rain had let up—I knew Olive wouldn't venture out if it was still storming. When I looked out, I saw her lying on the ground, I grabbed my cloak and rushed out. At that point, I didn't know she'd been shot." Her voice trailed off and she closed her eyes.

"Please go on," the inspector prompted. "I know this is difficult, but the more we know, the faster"

we can catch the person who did this to her.”

She nodded. “Yes, of course. As I said, I rushed out and when I reached her, I saw straightaway that she’d been shot. For a moment, I simply stood there, blinking my eyes, sure that I was seeing things. Then I realized I had to fetch the police.”

“Had the rain completely stopped by then?” Barnes asked.

“I think so.” She frowned slightly. “Oh, to be honest, I don’t remember. I don’t remember much of anything except running toward Faroe Road. I had my cloak over my head so I don’t . . . actually, I think the rain had stopped. Yes, yes, it had. I remember now. When I got there, I saw the constable up the road so I screamed and waved my arms. He came straightaway and when I told him what I’d seen that someone had been shot, he blew his whistle and summoned more help. Then we came back here.”

Witherspoon eased back against the cushions. “What time are the servants due back from the funeral?”

“I’m not sure. Cook’s funeral was in Kent and I gave my maid the day off. Her family lives in the region so I said she needn’t come back until tomorrow. But I should think Olive’s staff would be back soon. The train service is quite good, and even if they stayed for the reception, I’m sure Olive expected them back by the early afternoon. She wasn’t one to take care of herself for long periods of time. Truth to tell, I was surprised that Olive—Miss Kettering—gave all of them the morning off at the same time.”

“Surely she didn’t begrudge them paying their respects to their colleague,” Witherspoon exclaimed. “She doesn’t sound as if she treated her staff very well at all.”

“By her standards she treated them very well.” Mrs. Fox smiled. “By theirs, I’m sure they felt very hard done by. I’m sure she complained bitterly about being left on her own, but in the end, she did let them go.”

“Then exactly why were you surprised, ma’am?” Barnes gazed at her curiously.

“She didn’t like being alone in the house,” Mrs. Fox replied. “For some reason, it made her nervous. Recently, there had also been some friction between Miss Kettering and her servants.”

Witherspoon sat up straighter. “What kind of friction?”

Mrs. Fox looked down at her hands and then lifted her eyes to meet the inspector’s. “They blamed her for Elsa Grant’s death. I overheard the downstairs maid telling the gardener that all of the servants blamed her and that most of them were going to start looking for new positions.”

The inspector’s heart sank. Ye gods, surely there wasn’t going to be another murder. “Exactly how did the cook die?”

“From natural causes, I assure you.” Mrs. Fox waved her hand dismissively. “Mrs. Grant died from a stomach ailment. She’d had it for months.”

“Then why did the servants think Miss Kettering was to blame for the woman’s death?” Barnes asked reasonably.

Mrs. Fox shrugged. “None of them like Miss Kettering, she has very exacting standards.”

“Lots of servants don’t like their masters, but they rarely accuse them of murder,” the constable pointed out.

“As I said, Miss Kettering has very exacting standards; she works her servants quite hard,” she replied. “The staff seemed to think that the cook took a turn for the worse a few days ago. Miss Kettering insisted the cook finish preparing dinner instead of going to the doctor. They seem to believe that if Mrs. Grant had seen the physician, she’d still be alive today.”

“Even for a woman with exacting standards, not allowing a sick woman to see her doctor is fairly harsh,” Witherspoon muttered.

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