

## CAPABLE OF MURDER – extract.

A cold wind blew across the tiny churchyard as the coffin was lowered into the soggy earth. Doleful chimes from the ancient church tower sounded tenuously across the valley and Belinda shuddered involuntarily at the sight of a worm slowly threading through the freshly dug soil. Belinda was the lone mourner, except for a representative of the legal firm of Munro, Munro & Clarke, a rather spotty-faced young man who appeared to suffer from rampageous adenoids, and Inspector Jordan who had investigated aunt Jane's death. The latter joined Belinda as she slowly made her way back to the solicitor's car, which had met her at the train station, transported her to the graveyard and was waiting now to convey her to Bath and a meeting with a senior member of the legal firm.

'It's almost certain that the old lady died as a result of a fall, Miss,' mumbled Inspector Jordan, and blew his nose loudly. 'Excuse me. Rotten cold.' He coughed by way of explanation.

'Almost certain?' queried Belinda.

Jordan nodded and began to suck noisily on a cough lozenge. 'One can never be quite certain, but there appears to be no break-in, nothing stolen and no motive for any attack. The autopsy revealed wounds equivalent to a fall of that distance, so ...' Again, he splayed his hands out before him as though protecting himself from a fall. Belinda walked on in silence and surveyed the deserted churchyard.

'Don't you think it odd that no one from the village attended the funeral?' she said eventually. Her companion shrugged and wiped his nose.

'You forget, Miss, your aunt was a bit of a recluse and didn't welcome any contact with her neighbours.'

'Yes, but after living here all her life, I mean, it seems a bit peculiar. I'm sure there must have been someone in the village or nearby who knew her, saw her from time to time. Aren't country people supposed to know everything that's going on around them?' Belinda stopped by a large monument that tilted at a precarious angle. Jordan stamped his feet and rubbed his hands together briskly.

'I hear that she made herself unpopular with the locals, Miss. Gave them short shrift. People have long memories around here. They don't like their attempts at friendship thrown back in their face.'

'Will there be any further enquiries into her death?'

'No,' replied the man firmly, 'the coroner's report has gone to her solicitor, "death by accidental causes". The case is closed.' He put his hands rigidly into his coat pockets and rocked gently back on his feet as though to emphasise the finality of the matter. Belinda nodded uncertainly, a hundred questions still seething through her mind.

'But there is the letter.'

A faint look of annoyance crossed the Inspector Jordan's face.

'Letter, Miss?'

'You said she died at the weekend, or no later than Saturday,' said Belinda tenaciously, 'yet the letter she sent to me was mailed on the following Tuesday.'

Jordan glanced at his watch. Afternoon tea would now be served at the station. He was feeling peckish - "feed a cold".

'Probably held up in the post. It can happen you know. Or maybe she got a neighbour to post it and they forgot to do it straight away.'

'But you said she wouldn't talk to the neighbours.'

There was a brief and resentful silence. 'As I said, probably held up in the post,' repeated Jordan testily. He glanced at his watch. 'Must be on my way now, Miss. You all right for a lift?' He didn't look as though he much cared one way or the other. Belinda nodded and

indicated the waiting solicitor's car. The hungry Inspector bade her farewell and, with a caution to accept the coroner's report and not fret, he set off eagerly for his tea.

Belinda walked slowly to the car. As she was about to step into it she glanced back to the churchyard where the gravediggers were completing their cheerless task.

Shaded by the protection of the tombs encircling the church was a dark figure.

She straightened up to get a clearer view. The figure, as though sensing her inquisitive gaze, moved sharply into the gloomy shroud of the surrounding foliage and vanished. Belinda's heart beat faster. The mysterious visitor sent a tingle of apprehension through her. If it was a genuine mourner, why had they not taken their place beside the grave?

From her vantage point beneath the shadowy trees, the woman in black muttered a profanity that was entirely out of place in the churchyard.

She sank down onto a long neglected tomb and cursed again when she saw the state of her new shoes. Her jaw set firmly in passionate ill will, she clamped a cigarette between scarlet lips, lit it, and exhaled disenchanted smoke from her long slender nose.

A gust of arctic air made the woman shiver and tuck wispy tinted hair back beneath her sleek fur hat.

The thud, thud of earth shovelled onto the wooden coffin only added to her exasperation, as the gravediggers committed Jane Victoria Lawrence's body to eternity.

'If the old bitch had only listened to reason.' The violent mute words echoed in the woman's brain. But there was no use crying over spilt blood.

It seemed there was an heir to the property and that could present either a help or a hindrance.

With an inquisitive eye she observed Belinda entering the car and being driven away.

'And we have Inspector Jordan on the case. Thinks he's Somerset's version of Hercule Poirot. More like a deficient Jane Marple,' muttered the woman in derisive tones as the Inspector's car vanished over the hill.

The woman rose a little unsteadily to her feet. The chill of the graveyard was entering her bones and she needed a warming brandy. Lurking around graveyards at her time of life was a little like tempting fate.

As she ground the half-smoked cigarette into the mud, she watched the Vicar, as he headed towards the church.

The Vicar hummed fragments of a hymn to himself. He'd not only despatched Miss Jane Lawrence from this life but also from his mind. His attention was now firmly fixed on Sunday's sermon and he was oblivious to everything around him. "Our life with its temptations and struggles is often similar to a voyage on a stormy sea" was the text, but how to put it into language that his largely geriatric land-bound parishioners would relate to?

The ancient church door swung shut, there was a moment's silence, and another figure emerged from behind the building. The woman pulled her elegant coat tightly about her, burying her chin into the gratifying warmth of the fur collar. Screwing up her eyes to focus on the man, for it was a man, a well-built athletic man, she watched as he made his way through the tombstones. For a moment, a desirable feeling of sexual anticipation warmed her, allowing her features to relax into a coquettish smile. But as the man drew nearer a frown of uneasy recognition creased her brow, adding lines to that face that had cost her dearly in cosmetic additives. Rather than confront him she turned and hurried away in the opposite direction, her black coat gradually blending into the gloomy environment.

The man had observed the funeral from the edge of the graveyard ('Serves the old biddy right. No one will miss her.') and had watched and studied the young dark haired girl who was the lone mourner.

The old lady had proved uncooperative. Her young relation might be more pliable - in more ways than one. A carnal smile twisted his lips and, certain now that he could no longer be observed, the man moved from his place of concealment and crossed the churchyard. His next step would be to contrive a meeting with the girl and discover how much she knew.

And if she proved difficult? Well, there were ways to deal with difficult women. A sudden movement in the trees alerted him to the fact that there was another mourner in the graveyard.

Hesitating, he saw a shadowy figure disappearing into the murky darkness. He recognised the swaying walk and his mocking grin developed into a snort of contemptuous laughter. So she'd got wind of the mystery as well? He wondered how much she knew. Probably very little. Still, it might pay to keep an eye on her. If she proved too inquisitive, she might have to be removed from the scene.

The car pulled up outside the solicitors' office. On the return journey to Bath Belinda had speculated on who the enigmatic mourner could be. The obvious answer was just a snooping villager. Try as she might, Belinda could not determine if the figure was that of a man or a woman.

'But if it wasn't a villager, who else could it have been?' she asked herself silently.

Aloud she answered, 'Murderer.'

The adenoidal driver gave a startled glance at her in the rear view mirror and Belinda transferred her attention to the passing houses. Yet she had spoken the word that had been haunting her for the past week.

Suppose aunt Jane had not fallen down the stairs? How else would she have acquired the wounds to her head?

Belinda herself had just walked into the house through an unlocked door.

Anyone could have done the same.

Or perhaps the intruder had left the door unlocked? And if it had been an intruder who murdered her aunt, why?

Were they after something?

Money?

Or was it just a random killing with no point or purpose?

Belinda snorted angrily. Inspector Jordan had been too dismissive, too ready to accept the easy explanation. There were many unanswered questions. Yet how could she prove anything? The police had their evidence and all she had was her doubts and suspicions.

And the letter.

The Munro, Munro & Clarke office into which Belinda was ushered was lined with dark panelled wood and had the odour of polish and decades of conservatism. Sitting at the gargantuan desk was the tiny white-haired figure of Mr Munro. 'I wonder which Munro he is?' thought Belinda as she made her way across the deep pile carpet. Mr Munro rose to meet her and shuffled around his desk.

'Miss Lawrence. Welcome to Bath. My condolences. You must forgive me for not attending Miss Lawrence's funeral, but my arthritis, you understand?' He extended a deformed claw. Belinda shook his hand and a shower of seeds, trapped in her sleeve cuff, cascaded onto the polished veneer of the desk. Blushing, she attempted to gather the seeds together. But the old man's eyes lit up with delight and he plucked the seeds up and examined them minutely.

'Ah, Marigolds. Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth century saint, dedicated them to the Virgin and named them Mary's Gold. Difficult to get the old fashioned ones now. They all seem to be miniature and flagrantly bulbous. I prefer the orange-gold spread of the unsullied originals. Such simple flowers. But the world nowadays seems to demand more and more

exotic species, don't you agree?' He waved Belinda to a chair.

'I really wouldn't know, I'm afraid, Mr Munro. I have little knowledge of plants.'

Mr Munro looked disappointed. 'Oh, I see. I thought ...' He gesticulated at the mound of seeds on his desk. Belinda sighed.

'It would take too long to explain the seeds, I'm afraid. But I am no gardener.' The old man nodded and silently slipped a few of the seeds into his pocket.

'Well, to business, Miss Lawrence.' He opened a well-worn file. Belinda leaned forward in her chair.

'You said in your letter that you were handling my late aunt's estate?'

Mr Munro looked at her over the top of his rimless glasses.

'Great-aunt, surely?'

'Yes. I meant great-aunt,' replied Belinda, feeling as though she were suddenly back in school and had been called to the headmaster's study to explain a childish misdemeanour. The elderly man flashed her a self-satisfied smile.

'You will excuse my pedantic manner, but I believe that it is always best to be accurate in every detail, in all areas of human concern.'

Belinda nodded. She was beginning to feel just a little impatient with Mr Munro.

'How does my aunt's ... my great-aunt's death affect me, Mr Munro?'

His withered hands caressed the legal documents and he cleared his throat.

'The late Miss Jane Victoria Lawrence, of Milford in the County of Somerset,' he intoned, 'according to her last will and testament has named you as beneficiary to her estate.'

Belinda sat upright in her chair. 'Estate?'

'Yes. She has named you as her sole heir and has left you the sum of eighty thousand pounds.'

Belinda dropped her handbag. 'How much?'

Mr Munro glanced over the top of his glasses again and replied slowly and distinctly as though talking to a hearing impaired person.

'Eighty thousand pounds.'

Belinda sat back in shock.

'I don't know what to say, Mr Munro. I only met my aunt ...' Mr Munro cleared his throat. '... great-aunt, I mean. I only met her once and although we sent cards to each other at Christmas, I had no idea that she would leave me such an amount of money.'

Mr Munro transferred his gaze to the papers before him.

'That is not all she has left you. The title for her cottage and adjoining land in the village of Milford will be transferred into your name.' Mr Munro removed his glasses and looked across his desk to Belinda. For a moment she thought his eyes revealed a touch of envy and his voice, when next he spoke, a shade resentful. 'It seems that your aunt was very fond of you, Miss Lawrence.'

'Great-aunt,' whispered Belinda automatically, her eyes wide with surprise. Mr Munro coloured, cleared his throat and replaced his spectacles.

'Er, yes. Quite so.'

'Mr Munro,' said Belinda, 'I thought that perhaps my aunt had left me a piece of jewellery, nothing more. I can't tell you how surprised I am.'

'The late Miss Lawrence had no jewellery that I am aware of.'

'No, I wasn't expecting any really. Nor was I expecting to inherit the cottage or any money.'

'Well, be that as it may, Miss Lawrence, you now own the cottage and I will have a cheque for the required amount made out in your name.' He slid a copy of the will across the desk top, dislodging a few of the marigold seeds, which he hurriedly pocketed. Belinda glanced at the paper.

'May I visit the cottage?'

'My dear young lady, as you are now the owner of it, you may do whatever you like. It will take a few days or so to complete all the paperwork and I will require your signature on some documents, but in the meantime ...'

'In the meantime, I would dearly like to visit the cottage,' said Belinda.

'That can be arranged. As a matter of fact I am going past the village on my way home. I only come into the office for a few hours each day now. I much prefer to spend my time in my garden. I would be happy if you would accompany me, Miss Lawrence.'

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