THE BORROWED THINGS MYSTERIES

A Killing in the Catalogue

A British cosy mystery novella

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BOOK FIVE

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events are invented or used fictitiously.

One

The quilt had a price on it. That was the first problem.

The second was that Ada Baines had brought her own step to reach the price, and was standing on it when Jo Mercer arrived at the Malthouse Arts Centre with four display cradles and a bill.

‘Would you mind holding this?’ Ada asked.

Jo took the step by its side. Ada pulled the little card off its string, climbed down and handed it to the man waiting below.

‘There. Now it isn't.’

Tobias Shaw looked at the card. He had an open folder under one arm and the expression of someone for whom the afternoon had already exceeded its allowance.

‘It isn't the price, Ada. That's the insurance value.’

‘Then say so. People have offered me less insulting sums, but not usually on a label.’

Jo looked up at the quilt. Cream and dark red squares made a series of stars across it, interrupted near one corner by a blue patch. The patch was not trying to match anything. It was large enough to be a decision.

‘My mother caught it in a suitcase,’ Ada said, following her glance. ‘I repaired it. Everybody wants to know who made that bit, as though I should apologise.’

‘It looks as though someone wanted to keep using it.’

‘I did. I do.’

Tobias wrote INSURANCE ONLY across the card. He showed it to Ada before putting it in his folder.

‘I won't hang it up again.’

‘Thank you.’

Ada folded her step. The disagreement appeared to be over. Jo had learnt not to assume that the first tidy ending was the true one, but this was a new job and she was not there to improve other people's conversations.

The Malthouse stood beside the little river on the other side of Barrowcombe's square. For years Jo had known it principally as the place whose evening classes ended too late for the last bus. Now its long ground-floor room was being prepared for an exhibition called Things We Kept. Quilts, boxes, kitchen utensils and photographs occupied tables at several heights. The objects were not grand. Someone had saved them, which seemed a promising reason to look.

The room smelled of clean wood and the coffee being made in the reception area. Late September light reached across the floorboards. Beyond the gallery a short corridor led to an office and a loading room, whose outer door stood open to the courtyard. Jo had come in that way, carrying the first padded bag. Her second was still beside Owen's van.

‘Where do you want these?’ she asked Tobias.

‘Rose will know. She's checking the case at the far end.’

A woman in a green linen shirt looked up from a row of wooden spoons.

‘I will in a moment. Is one of them the low cradle we talked about?’

‘Two. And two taller ones. All four on the loan sheet.’

‘Marvellous. Kit, would you help Jo with the other bag, please?’

Kit was kneeling beside a table, tightening something beneath it. He put down his screwdriver and stood with the slow care of someone who had been there longer than his knees had intended.

‘Have I got to do the bill as well?’

‘Only if you're paying it,’ Rose said.

He grinned. Outside, Owen had already brought the second bag to the door. He passed it to Kit, wished Jo luck and checked whether they were still eating together that evening.

‘Seven,’ she said. ‘I'll bring the bread.’

‘You said that last time.’

‘And I brought it.’

‘On Sunday. We had supper on Saturday.’

Kit watched Owen go, smiling down at the bag.

‘I can remind you if you like.’

‘You may find your professional future depends on forgetting you heard that.’

Inside, Rose Venn had cleared a table. She was the exhibition's organiser, employed for the project rather than absorbed into the centre's permanent staff. On the telephone she had asked Jo what the equipment would cost, accepted the answer and booked two hours of installation help. Jo had liked her before meeting her.

Rose took the cradles from their pockets while Jo opened the second carrier. Both bags were dark grey outside, but carrier B had a loose white cotton liner which could be washed. Two pockets held the smaller

cradles; the wide space between them would take the taller pair lying flat.

‘Fold the pockets over before you close it,’ Jo told Kit. ‘Otherwise their corners catch the zip. And nothing dirty goes in on top of the liner.’

‘Is that a general life instruction?’

‘It has applications beyond this bag.’

He turned it round to find the stitched B on the side. Rose checked the contents against the loan sheet, then signed.

‘The small one is for the album. The other three for open books. We don't want anyone forcing a spine flat.’

Kit lifted the nearest cradle and frowned along its base.

‘This one's rocking.’

It was, very slightly. Jo tried it on the table in both directions, then on the floor. One edge had moved since its last check.

‘I can replace it tomorrow. Don't put the album on it meanwhile.’

‘Will that count against your two hours?’ Rose asked.

‘No. That's our equipment. I'll put the correction on the sheet.’

Tobias arrived with fresh coffee, having found enough cups for everyone by borrowing one from his own desk. He gave Ada the one without a handle until Rose noticed and exchanged it for hers.

‘Rose,’ he said, ‘you'll cut yourself.’

‘The handle came off last winter. It's not a geological event.’

She set it on the table and returned to the quilt's entry in her folder.

Ada stayed beside her, reading upside down.

‘You haven't put the suitcase in.’

‘We have forty words.’

‘It was a large suitcase.’

Rose laughed. She crossed out a line and wrote something shorter. Jo found herself wanting to see the exhibition once it was finished, when she was not carrying parts of it.

At the next table a dark flat iron stood beside a wooden sleeve board. Its smooth handle arched over a heavy pointed base. Kit picked it up to move the cloth beneath it and immediately supported it with his other hand.

‘They made exercise part of the washing.’

‘My grandmother's,’ Ada said. ‘Or somebody's grandmother's by the time I bought it. I won't guarantee the story the shop told me.’

‘That's why your catalogue entry says “from Ada Baines's household collection”,’ Rose said. ‘Not “belonged to a duchess”.’

‘It could have.’

‘She can write and tell us.’

Kit set the iron down. Rose asked him to put a pad beneath it before it scratched the table. This time there was a briskness in her voice which made him withdraw his hands quickly.

‘I was getting one.’

‘Then get it first.’

Tobias glanced between them, then began talking about the preview's drinks order. The coffee had done

its work. Jo took her cup to a chair where it could do less damage and opened her diary.

She was due at the Borrowing Room the following morning, with Bev taking over at noon. Leonie had agreed the change because Jo's installation work here finished early. Friday's visit would only replace the faulty cradle; the remaining loans would stay for the exhibition. There was no need to rearrange Saturday. On Saturday she and Owen were going to choose a kitchen table for his house. He had finally admitted that the small round one he owned would be more useful if one of its legs did not occupy the same space as a guest's knee.

‘A new one?’ Bev had asked that morning.

‘A different one.’

‘Ambition. I like to see it.’

Jo had not told her how oddly important the invitation felt. Owen had asked what she would like to sit at, not what she thought he ought to buy. It was a distinction she wanted to enjoy without explaining it until it disappeared.

Rose came over carrying a catalogue proof. She asked whether the Borrowing Room's name was correct in the acknowledgements.

It was. Jo checked it anyway.

Beside a photograph of the quilt someone had drawn a small red circle. Several other pictures had one too.

‘Are those the ones you're selling?’ Jo asked.

‘Good heavens, no. Checked illustrations. Kit puts a dot by each one after comparing it with the object. They come off before we print.’

‘In galleries they usually mean sold.’

‘Kit said that. I should have listened and used a tick. We aren't selling the exhibition. A few owners may want to speak to interested people afterwards, but that's between them.’

She took the proof back. Ada had gone to the far end of the gallery with Tobias, discussing how long the quilt could safely hang. Rose watched them for a moment.

‘Most people have been very generous.’

‘Ada wants it back.’

‘Of course she does. Lending is generous too.’

At five, Jo packed her tools. The two empty carriers remained in the loading room for tomorrow's replacement and the eventual collection. Rose showed her where they would be kept, on the shelf above the folding chairs. Jo wrote that on her own copy of the sheet.

At the door she passed a woman in a mustard-coloured coat who had stopped to look at the quilt. She was holding the catalogue proof, studying the blue corner.

‘Beautiful,’ the woman said.

Ada, just behind her, answered before anybody else could.

‘Yes. And warm.’

Jo bought the bread on her way to Owen's. She carried it into his kitchen held above her head.

He looked at the loaf, then at her.

‘Friday already?’