THE BORROWED THINGS MYSTERIES - BOOK THREE

A Last Cue for Murder

A British cosy mystery novella

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READING SAMPLE

Chapter One

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September 2026 | hazelmaple.co.uk

One

The king's coat arrived in a duvet cover, accompanied by a demand that nobody alter it.

Jo Mercer took the hanger from Peter Ransome and waited while he disentangled a sleeve from the zip.

‘Not even the loose button?’

‘Especially the loose button. Martin remembers it like that.’

‘He can remember it in a small envelope. At the moment it's attached by a thread which has retired.’

Peter smiled, then glanced towards the door. Jo had seen that expression on people who could afford to agree with her only until somebody else arrived.

The coat was dark green velvet, rubbed almost black at the elbows. Gold braid followed its fronts and disappeared round the back in an elaborate pattern. Beneath the hanger, the hem had folded upwards inside the duvet cover. Jo supported its weight on the Borrowing Room's worktable before easing the cloth away.

‘It belongs to you?’ she asked.

‘The company gave me the old costumes when we lost our store. I kept the useful ones.’

‘And the others?’

‘Also those.’

She found his loan agreement. They were helping the Barrowcombe Players with equipment for their anniversary production, not accepting a lifetime responsibility for Peter's spare bedroom. The coat would go back to him after the performance. So would the hat, two waistcoats and a crown which had arrived in a biscuit tin marked CHRISTMAS LIGHTS.

Across the room, Bev held up the crown.

‘There are no instructions.’

‘Put it on your head,’ Peter said.

‘I'm asking about the government.’

Jo laughed. Bev set the crown carefully on its tissue and went to answer the telephone.

Autumn sunlight lay across the public shelves. Someone had left a bag of windfall apples beside the kettle, each with an enthusiastic bruise. Through the glass of the workshop door Jo could see Owen checking a returned fan heater. It was still warm enough not to want one, which made this an excellent time to find out whether it worked.

Jo had agreed eight paid hours with the Players: equipment, two rehearsals and the practical handover. Esther Cole was doing the costumes. Danny Voss, whose theatre workshops normally occupied the hall on Saturday afternoons, had agreed to move one session in return for the company paying the replacement room hire. For once, an anniversary had come with a budget which allowed people to continue living in the present.

Esther came in carrying a flat sewing box. Her daughter followed with a script tucked under one arm and a bag of rolls under the other.

‘Lunch,’ Nina said. ‘Before Mum starts saying she isn't hungry.’

‘I said I didn't want to eat over velvet.’

‘You said that in the bakery.’

Esther put down the box and went straight to the coat. She was a slight woman with a grey plait which ended in an elastic band the colour of her hair. She did not lift the garment at first. Her fingers hovered over the braid, then settled on an old repair near the pocket.

‘Peter kept the blue lining.’

‘It was already there,’ Peter said.

‘Most of it. I replaced that piece after the tour.’

Jo turned the sleeve back. A triangle of faded blue cotton interrupted the darker lining. Along one edge the stitches were small and even; along the other they wandered where someone had repaired the repair.

‘Were you with them then?’ Jo asked.

‘I made this.’

Esther said it simply. Nina looked up from arranging the rolls on a plate.

‘You never told me.’

‘You never asked about a green coat.’

‘You told me you helped with clothes.’

‘I did.’

The bell rang before Nina could answer. Martin Vale entered with a thick folder pressed against his chest. Frances Holt followed, reading something on her phone.

Martin was taller than Peter by most of a head. He had the upright bearing of someone who expected people to recognise him even when they had never met. Nevertheless, he held the door for a borrower bringing a carpet cleaner through backwards, and took the hose from her before it could trip her.

‘A dragon,’ he said to the little boy following her.

‘It's a cleaner.’

‘That's what they call themselves before lunch.’

The boy considered the machine with fresh interest. His mother gave Martin a tired, grateful smile.

Martin set the hose beside the counter and came to the worktable.

‘There it is.’ He touched the coat's collar. ‘My old friend.’

‘Try it before we decide what it needs,’ Esther said.

Frances put away her phone. She wore a navy jacket with narrow white piping round the pockets and had already fastened her keys to her wrist with a loop of red cord.

‘We aren't changing the design. Just making it usable.’

‘Those aren't always separate jobs,’ Esther said.

Martin took off his own jacket. Jo held the coat while he found the sleeves. He settled his shoulders, drew the fronts together and stopped.

The velvet ended several inches above his wrists. The fronts would not meet.

‘It's shrunk,’ he said.

‘Quite selectively,’ Esther said.

Peter examined the crown in its tin.

Jo asked Martin to lower his arms. The cloth pulled across his back. Whatever it had once done, the coat could not be made comfortable by persuading him to stand very still.

‘We need another coat for you,’ she said. ‘You can display this one.’

‘I'm not an exhibit.’

‘The coat would be.’

He looked towards Frances. She had opened the folder he brought and laid a programme proof on the table.

‘We can lose the costume for the speech. Your own dinner jacket will do.’

Martin let Jo help him out. Esther smoothed the lining on the table, looking at the blue triangle.

Nina picked up the programme.

‘Costume design, Frances Holt.’

Frances reached for the sheet. ‘That's the original credit. The new programme has a section for everyone helping now.’

‘Mum says she made this.’

‘Making and designing aren't the same thing.’

Esther closed the sewing box she had just opened.

‘Sometimes they are.’

The room became quiet except for Bev explaining to the small boy that the carpet cleaner had a tank, not a stomach.

Martin lifted the proof.

‘We can sort the wording out before Tuesday. It hasn't gone to print.’

‘It's on the poster,’ Nina said.

‘Then we'll sort that out too.’

Frances looked at him. Martin folded the paper and put it back in the folder without returning her look.

Danny appeared at the door, carrying a small speaker in one hand and a tablet in the other. Arthur Shaw followed more slowly, his walking stick catching against the mat until Danny held it flat with a shoe.

‘We've come for the king,’ Danny said.

‘He's suffered a constitutional difficulty,’ Bev told him.

Arthur grinned. He had the warm, rough voice of a man who had spent years competing with machinery. His part in the anniversary play was the gardener. It required him to interrupt Martin's speech with a single line at precisely the point when Martin had stopped expecting it.

‘I keep coming in early,’ he told Jo. ‘He leaves such a lovely gap. It's a waste not to use it.’

‘We'll record it,’ Danny said. ‘Then you can practise at home without having Martin in your sitting room.’

‘My wife would prefer that.’

They went across the service path to the separate community hall. Jo carried the speaker; Nina brought the current script. Esther stayed behind to eat with Peter, who had finally surrendered the crown to Bev.

The hall's committee room opened off a short corridor beside the stage. There was a table, a noticeboard and a high cupboard which had acquired a collection of things too important to throw away and too awkward to use. Danny put the tablet on the table. Martin stood beside the window, where his voice would not have to compete with chair legs in the main hall.

‘From “There is nothing more”,’ Danny said.

Martin began. Jo watched Arthur, who moved his lips silently before his own cue.

‘There is nothing more to be said,’ Martin declared. ‘Leave me to my accounts.’

A bicycle bell rang outside: two quick notes, then a third after a pause. Martin frowned but continued.

‘Come back when you have learned to knock.’

‘That's my bit,’ Arthur said, much too soon.

Martin laughed. Danny stopped the recording.

‘We'll keep that for practising the gap. One more, with no help from Arthur.’

‘A severe limitation,’ Arthur said.

Nina lifted her script. ‘We've changed accounts to letters. Frances agreed it on Thursday. There aren't any accounts in the next scene.’

Martin borrowed her pencil and corrected his own copy.

‘Then I shall be left to my letters. Less arithmetic.’

They made another recording. This time a delivery van drowned out half the speech. Danny said he would trim it later; for Arthur's practice, the first take would do. He sent Jo both complete files because she needed to time the entrance of a writing desk.

Arthur listened to his cue once more, with the speaker turned towards him.

‘Better,’ he said. ‘I can work with that.’

Martin sat beside him and ran the lines slowly until Arthur stopped anticipating the silence. Frances came to the door while they were practising. She waited with her hand on the frame.

Jo watched Martin repeat the same sentence a fourth time without impatience. It improved her opinion of him more than anything he had said about his old coat.

When Arthur was ready to leave, Martin went out to walk him to his lift.

Frances stayed behind.

‘We need that recording on Tuesday,’ she told Danny. ‘For the cast call. I'll set it up in here while you deal with the chairs.’

Danny sent her the files as well.

‘First one's the old wording,’ Nina said.

‘I heard you.’

Frances looked at the corrected page, then at Jo.

‘People remember the performance,’ she said. ‘They don't remember which person put every stitch in every sleeve.’

‘The person who did it might,’ Jo said.

Frances picked up the speaker and turned it over to look for its charging socket. She did not answer.

Continue the mystery

A borrowed costume exposes an old betrayal. When an actor is found dead, Jo must question the conversation everyone thought they heard.

A Last Cue for Murder is a complete British cosy mystery novella. Visit the book page for edition availability and updates.

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