

**Murder At St Marmaduke's**  
**Chapter One**  
**Monday 4th November 1985: 08.00 – 08.35**

There was an almost-a-circle of chairs at the front of the church. Perfectly round on one side, but slightly flattened on the other; as if the person who'd set them out had converted to a more egg-based religion halfway through. The Church of the Seventh-day Omelettists, perhaps.

Joseph Makumbo counted ten. And five old ladies, one to every two chairs, as if saying, 'We might be here together, but we are definitely not here *together*.'

He could see them clearly as he tiptoed up the central aisle. Faces dry as toast, each decked out in virtually identical old-ladyly hats and old-ladyly overcoats, buttoned up tight against the wintry chill of a 15th-century stone church building.

What was worse, they could clearly see him. As they turned a combined glare in his direction, his heart plummeted into his feet, out through his shoes, down through the floor, and nestled on a sarcophagus in the vaults. Suddenly, he wished Father Rawlings hadn't suggested he plunge into the unknown world of the Monday morning prayer meeting.

'You'll be the perfect replacement for old Mr Jenkins,' the vicar had said. 'Since he was taken, the ladies have been missing the gentlemanly touch. And being young, you'll bring a fresh perspective.'

The vicar had looked at him rather oddly when he'd asked where Mr Jenkins had been taken. He still wasn't sure why.

To distract himself from the ladies' glare, he gazed around at the sheer *bigness* of St Marmaduke's. The church hadn't ceased to astonish him since he'd first walked into it five months before. Vast pillars soared into a high arched roof, which stretched into the distance on all sides. Huge stained-glass windows filtered the light into mosaics of colour across the floor and furniture. Ornately carved pews stood to attention in rows like the faithful queuing for communion on a Sunday morning.

Not at all like the place he'd come from. Nothing there but an eight-by-ten wooden shack, with a hundred congregants standing on each other's toes for the privilege of hearing the word of the Lord being declaimed.

But then – it was no use pining for Norwich, he didn't live there any more.

\*

From his vantage point carved into the pulpit, from which position he'd fallen asleep to many a sermon over the centuries, the effigy of St Andrew watched the young man's halting progress up the middle of the church. 'Psst! James!' he hissed to his neighbour. 'There's another one.'

He heard St James stir from his contemplation of what, Andrew felt, he disturbingly referred to as a 'very cute gargoyle' engraved into the end of a pew. 'Another what?'

'Lamb to the slaughter.'

'Really?' James's voice was suddenly alive with interest. 'What's this one like?'

'Male, young, and darker than we used to be before those Renaissance painters got hold of us.'

'Hmm. Not likely to survive this lot, then.'

'Oh, I don't know. They've only killed one in the last few months. And he was a wrinkly; too frail to defend himself.'

He heard James snort. 'I'll lay you six to four he doesn't get to the end of the meeting.'

'You're on.'

He thought about this for a couple of seconds. 'Hang on,' he said. 'I'm a carving. Where would I keep my winnings?'

His fellow icon sniggered. 'Got you again.'

Andrew stayed silent, fuming. He'd have liked to tell James to go stick his head in the font, but since they were both at the front of the church and the font was at the back, James would only come out with some crack about having to call the eagle off the lectern to give them a lift. And the eagle had refused to do that once before,

claiming two lumps of stone climbing all over him would ruin the polish the cleaning woman gave him every week.

'Anyway,' James broke the silence, 'why can't we shift positions for a bit? It's unfair you get to see all the good stuff while I'm stuck staring at pew-ends.'

Andrew was just about to explain that: one, somebody would be bound to notice if they did; and, two, as they were both integral to the structure of the pulpit it was impossible for them to move anyway; when a small but acerbic voice came from the middle of the left aisle. 'Oh, so not good enough for your eyes now, aren't I?'

'Oh, Lord,' James groaned, 'that's done it. I was getting on so well there, too.'

\*

Joseph reached the front, and took hold of one of the chairs to draw it out and sit down. Without so much as a backward glance the lady to its right slid across, pinning it to the floor and almost trapping Joseph's hand in the process. 'We must pray for Father Rawlings this morning,' she remarked to her neighbour. 'He has let standards slip just lately.'

Joseph hesitated, then laid his hand on the chair she'd vacated. With the same dexterity, and seemingly still unaware of his presence, she slid back onto it.

'Why don't you try the one opposite?' a voice whispered in his ear.

He looked over. Yes - lady Number Three was sitting staring into space, and Number Four was leaning across to chat to her left-hand neighbour; Number Five, if he counted the first ladies as One and Two. If he was quick, he might get between them before either could counter the move.

As he almost scurried round and took the unoccupied seat, he realised he was capitalising the numbers he'd given the ladies as if they were their real names.

*That is most odd, he thought. Could they be their real names? Perhaps I have heard them on a Sunday morning without realising?*

Then he caught himself up. *Do not be silly, Joseph.* He'd begun to chastise himself quite often since he'd left his childhood home and no longer had his mother on hand to do it for him.

And then another realisation hit him.

He stared at the vast but empty space behind Numbers One and Two, then carefully moved his head from right to left, then back again. Then, just to be sure, he twisted it a full 180 degrees and looked directly behind him.

The voice had been male. Definitely male.

There were the five elderly ladies in their seats.

There was one male; himself.

There was nobody else.

\*

In the sorting room at Camtown Post Office, Bill Johnson let out a whistle as he picked up the last envelope to go into his bag. *Kevin Proctor*, the name on it read. *Proctorpress Publishing Company*.

The envelope was A4-sized and backed with cardboard. Totally unsuitable to be bent and shoved through a letter-box. Perfect!

Spiky Simmonds, the youngest of the dozen postmen on the staff, was staring across at him. 'Whassup, Johnno? You look like the cat that got the whatsit.'

Bill stiffened. He could feel the dirty great grin that had spread across his face; he hadn't realised it was there till Spiky had addressed him. He wiped it off quickly, and made to stuff the envelope into his bag.

But Spiky was there, and grabbed it from his hand. 'Oh, that's it, is it?' he said, giving his own form of appreciative whistle. 'You gotta go see Sally Evans.'

'Don't know what you mean,' Bill said gruffly, attempting to snatch the envelope back. But Spiky leapt out of his reach, and he was left grasping at air.

'Give me that back!'

Spiky began a curious gavotte round the sorting room, waving the envelope aloft. 'Too bad, Johnno. I got it now.'

The other postmen were looking on in amusement, coupled in some cases with slight revulsion. 'Don't be a tit, Spiky,' Fred Harris, the senior man, grumbled.

But Spiky carried on prancing. 'Guess I'll 'ave to go and see 'er instead,' he crowed. 'Ard luck, Johnno.'

He followed this up with a comment so filthy, Bill wondered that the others, who were generally so broad-minded they could hardly get their heads through the door in the morning, didn't clap their hands over their ears in disgust.

'Come on, Spiky,' he reasoned, 'it's miles off your round.'

'Don' matter. I can take a whatsit.'

That was the Sally Evans effect. Every man of them would willingly take a thousand whatsits - detours - for the pleasure of delivering a package into her hands. Many of them spent their sorting time boasting how large a package it would be.

Bill lurched to his feet. 'Spiky, give it back!'

Spiky halted his dance. 'Or what?'

The room fell into silence. Bill's heart began a thump-thump-thump that could clearly be heard above it.

'That'll be a challenge, then?' Fred Harris broke the silence in his usual pragmatic way. He stood, and reached over to one of the large post-bags hanging on the wall beside his station.

'Let me just take 'im outside and punch 'is lights out.'

Fred tutted. 'You know we don't do that, Spiky.'

'Aw.'

Fred withdrew two tubes from the bag. 'Just so happens I've got these to deliver to that art company on Rembrandt Street. Should be about right; and I can explain away the dents on those pillocks in Hounslow.

'Right, gentlemen.' He tossed one each to Bill and Spiky. 'En garde, then.'

Bill tried to control his breathing, which was struggling to bypass the lump that had formed in his throat. Spiky was so much younger than him; and since the last of the Star Wars films had come out two years before, he'd been constantly practising with rolled-up copies of the Radio Times that came in once a week for subscribers. He'd been particularly effective with the last year's double-sized Christmas edition.

Indeed, Spiky was already sweeping his tube around in slow-motion figures of eight and making 'zhumm, zhum' noises.

Bill raised his tube. The secret was to get in the first blow. No time like the present.

But then Spiky stepped backwards and raised a hand. 'Just one thing, Johnno.'

'What?' Bill felt relief flooding through him. Maybe the young prat had reconsidered.

But the flood turned to ice as Spiky said, 'No thumpin' round the mush, right? After I done you, I wanna look me best for Sally when I go see 'er.'

\*

The meeting was in full swing, but Joseph was no longer taking part. He was worrying over the voice he'd heard, and the lack of any-other-maleness in the vicinity.

He hadn't whispered in his own ear, after all. At least – he was pretty sure he hadn't.

He had tried to join in. Ignoring the chills that both the atmosphere and voice had sent crawling down his spine, he'd launched into his introductory speech, the one he'd written for himself the previous night.

*Good morning. My name is Joseph. I am 20 years old and my family hails from Kenya. I am trainee editor at the Proctorpress Publishing Company in Wordsworth Street, and have recently commenced writing my own first novel, which concerns a murder and a robbery in a church much like this one. It is a pleasure to be here with you this morning.*

Unfortunately, he'd got as far as *Good morning* before the rest of the words had taken a detour between his vocal chords and his mouth. After a couple of seconds flapping his jaw up and down like a goldfish, he'd given up.

Besides, the prayers were progressing quite happily without him. Lady Number One was obviously in the driving seat, and a stream of complaints against every other member of the church's congregation was issuing heavenward, backed by a chorus of amen-amens from the others. His participation didn't seem to be required.

Three of the others, anyway. The fourth, Lady Number Three, continued to stare off as if her body was there but her mind still in bed.

*Perhaps the man who spoke to me is hiding behind one of the pews.*

But that was absurd. Why would somebody do that?

*Perhaps he left before I could turn and see him.*

Nonsense. The only way he'd have reached the door in time was to have run; and Joseph would have heard that, quite clearly.

*Perhaps he followed me round and is behind me, hiding in the choir stalls.*

That didn't make sense either. Again – why?

*Perhaps...*

Perhaps he'd been spoken to by somebody who wasn't there.

But that was the most absurd of all. Mainly because it was too frightening to think about.

'We ask thee, Lord, that those who embrace the evils of Roman Catholicism will come to true faith before it is too late for them.'

Joseph's attention thudded back into the room. *Pardon me...?*

'And their demon-inspired beliefs of papal infallibility and transubstantiation,' Number Four added.

Number One opened her eyes and scowled at her. 'I rather think I was about to say that!'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Hettie dear,' Number Four stuttered. 'I just thought you might have forgotten.'

Joseph wondered if, with all the oddness the morning had so far contained, his ears might have started inventing words. Did these ladies *really* believe that about their fellow Christians?

And just as oddly, it was at this point that Number Three finally left wherever it was she'd been tarrying, and arrived in the meeting. 'Excuse me, my dear,' she quavered. 'Don't we believe in the transubstantiation?'

The others turned to stare at her with expressions that suggested a snake had just dropped in to offer them an apple each. The atmosphere in the church dropped another ten degrees.

'No, Mabel Cartwright,' Hettie Number One snapped. 'We most certainly do not!'

'But isn't that where Jesus rose from the dead after his crew cut?'

There was dead silence.

'Oh, Mabel, don't be such a silly,' Number Five broke in. 'Jesus had a crucifixion, not a crew cut. And afterwards, he had a resurrection, not a transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is where the communion bread and wine turn into his body and blood.'

'And don't we believe in that, dear?'

Hettie Number One surged to her feet. 'Mabel Cartwright,' she barked, 'as the scripture says: *Hereby we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*'

Number Two sighed. 'Really, Hettie dear. Must we go through this again?'

But Hettie Number One was advancing on Mabel Cartwright with a frighteningly mad gleam in her eyes. As she did so, she fiddled with her hat, from which she produced something long, gleaming and extremely pointy.

'*And the Lord spake unto Moses,*' she intoned, '*saying, "Bring forth him that hath cursed without the camp. And let all the congregation stone him."*'

Joseph stared at her, his mind in a whirl. *Stone him?* Surely she didn't mean...?

She did. With a splurping noise that rang through the church, she thrust the pointy object straight into Mabel Cartwright's left eye.

Mabel let out a scream that echoed backwards and forwards, multiplying itself until there were a hundred Mabel Cartwrights in the throes of agony. Joseph's consciousness fled the building for a second, and when he came to he found himself, almost impossibly, curled tight underneath his chair.

He stared around wildly. To his astonishment, the other ladies were now shuffling down the central aisle towards the exit; one even had a solicitous arm around one of her fellows, helping her to hobble along. The only one not going anywhere was Mabel Cartwright. She was lying inches away from him, one watery grey eye staring at him in reproach, as if it was all his fault.

The other eye caused his breakfast to leave him in a hurry.

Gasping, he slithered backwards, then stood, very slowly. Then, pausing only as long as it took to make sure the ladies – and, more importantly, the pointy object – were gone, he bolted down the aisle, out of the door, and down the road towards the vicarage.

\*

‘Was that him doing the screaming and gurgling and stuff?’ James asked. The phrase ‘I told you so’ hovered on his lips. He was looking forward to collecting his winnings from Andrew.

‘No,’ his fellow carving replied, ‘it was one of the wrinklies.’

‘Oh?’ He swallowed his disappointment. ‘That’s a surprise. Which one?’

‘The one who never looked like she was here when she was.’

‘Oh, that one.’ James had never actually seen ‘that one’, or any of the others. But Andrew had described them all in great detail over the years.

He dismissed the situation from his mind, with the hope that Andrew had forgotten their bet, and went back to his own problem. He was trying to get back into his gargoyle’s good books; she, for her part, was now flirting shamelessly with an ornamental griffin adorning the font. James began calculating how he could span the distance between the front of the church and the back for a confrontation while being inextricably attached to a lump of marble.

‘No,’ Andrew continued, ‘our lad’s just shot out the of door like he’s in a race. I think he would have won, too. Impressive speed.’

‘Ah, well,’ James said, only half listening. ‘That’s the end of the excitement for this morning, then.’

‘Hmm, maybe not.’

James tutted, annoyed at still being side-tracked from his gargoyley concerns. ‘What’s up now?’

‘I’ve just noticed. He’s left the door key on the cupboard with the hymn books.’

‘Forgotten to lock up, you mean?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Tricky. He’ll cop it from the vicar.’

‘True,’ Andrew said. ‘But then, to be fair to the lad, he probably had other things on his mind.’