

Murder At St Marmaduke's
Chapter Two
Monday 4th November 1985: 09.15 – 10.00

Father Frank Rawlings clicked his tongue in dismay as he reached the lychgate and saw the heavy oak door to the church standing open. *Oh deary me*, he thought. *How very careless.*

He hastened up the path and into the church.

'Oh *no!*' The cry erupted from his lips. 'Not the silver chalice and plate!'

But yes. As he reached the front, he was able to confirm the worst. Not only had the candlesticks and cross that habitually adorned the altar been lifted into not-thereness, but the safe that held the sacramental silverware had also been forced open. It, like the holy table, was empty.

He closed his eyes. This was a *disaster*. Worse, in fact, than the notorious collection-plate scandal of '81, when the entire offering for one Sunday morning had disappeared somewhere between the back row of the congregation and his waiting arms at the front.

That disappearance had eventually been traced to the organist, who it transpired had needed the money to buy a new Zimbelstern knob, having pulled the old one out during a passionate rendition of *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah*.

Frank doubted that this present theft could be laid at the door of the current organist. She was approaching ninety, and could hardly lift the lid of her instrument, let alone break open a safe.

He'd left Joseph, gibbering wildly about eyes and pointy things, in the tender ministrations of Clarissa, his young wife. He supposed she'd be giving the boy a nice reviving drink of tea; he suddenly felt the need for a cup himself, and wondered if the kettle in the vestry might be working.

And of course, the pay-phone was in there too; he must send for the police immediately. He headed towards the side of the church, stepping over the prone form of the elderly woman cluttering up the floor. Oh yes, and *she'd* have to be moved as soon as possible too, and all the blood - and whatever that was lying near to her - mopped up.

He shook his head, aggrieved. Really, Joseph was such a silly lad. Fancy forgetting to lock up the church. He'd really have to have a word.

Oh yes - he could phone Clarissa after the police, to see if she could bring a mop and bucket. He was sure there was one at the vicarage somewhere; she'd know where it was.

*

Joseph accepted a second cup of tea from Clarissa Rawlings. She bent over to pour, and he studied the wall opposite with desperate concentration.

He'd had no idea clothing could be so loose. Or underwear so...

Nonexistent.

He hadn't seen such a sight since...

Well, never.

Throughout his young life, his mother had kept him well removed from the distaff side of Adam-and-Evedom, even to the extent of packing him off to a school where the genders were separated by confining them to different halves of the campus. The halves were divided by two enormous chain-link fences, several yards apart. It would only have taken a few rolls of barbed wire in the no-man's land in the middle to turn the school into a World War Two film set. Any boy who dared to even begin scaling the fence on their side would inevitably hear their name bellowed across the playground, after which they would disappear into the sanctum of the headmaster's office; followed soon after by a tear-stained, buttock-rubbing reappearance.

It soon became the norm that you didn't even stand at the fence and *look* across to the other side, lest the teachers misinterpret your intentions. Thus Joseph didn't see a girl close up until well after his sixteenth birthday.

'There you are, Joseph.'

Her voice was like liquid honey poured slowly over a hot buttered muffin. He tried to remember how to say 'Thank you', and failed.

She reseated herself next to him; uncomfortably *too* next to him. He could feel heat coming from several parts of her body, and tried not to think about those parts, or any other parts. And failed.

He'd been astonished when she'd opened the door to his frantic ringing, all thoughts of Hettie Number One and Mabel Number Cartwright temporarily driven from his mind. He'd been seeing her around the church on Sunday mornings, but had no idea who she was. As she was the only other person in the congregation with an age

in relatively small double figures, he'd been trying to get up the courage to speak to her. His heart had sunk even lower than before when, standing on the vicarage doorstep, he'd realised she was Father Rawlings' wife.

After an interval of what had seemed an hour or two, during which time she'd gazed at him with one eyebrow quirked and a half-smile playing about her lips, he'd managed to gasp out, 'Church, madam. Murder.'

Her eyes had widened. 'You'd better come in. Joseph, isn't it?'

Now she leaned towards him. Even *more* towards him. 'You've had a nasty shock, Joseph. Do try to - relax.'

Even to his ears, which had never been exposed to as much as a Two Ronnies' sketch prior to living by himself, the pause in front of 'relax' seemed laden with innuendo.

One side of him was pressed hard against the end of the sofa. He jumped as he felt a melony softness push against his arm on the other side. Try as he might, he couldn't make himself any thinner. 'Relax' didn't seem to have any space to wedge itself into.

Now he felt warm breath tickle his ear. 'Perhaps you should lie down, Joseph,' she whispered. 'Would you like to do that?'

Breathing was a distant memory. All he could see was the colour orange, and he realised with another start that his eyes were closed. The softness was pressing more insistently, and he knew that in a moment he was going to whimper. Something was happening lower down that his mother would have beaten him to within an inch for if she'd seen it...

And then the telephone rang.

*

Police Sergeant Ernie Bulstrode was about to launch into his own reviving mug of tea. He'd spent a hard twenty minutes studying the latest copy of *Busty*, confiscated from the top shelf of Mr Singh's newsagent on his way to the station, and was wondering how the lass on page 8 didn't spill out of the magazine and all over the reception counter. However she managed it, her statistics were a damned sight more entertaining than the latest crime ones, currently acting as a thick and papery coaster under his mug.

'*Hurry up and get that phone, Dawson,*' he yelled towards the kitchenette behind him. The damned thing had been ringing at his elbow for thirty seconds, and the jangle was driving him spare.

Terrence Dawson raced out of the small room, his six-foot-two, ten-stone frame reminding Ernie of somebody whose limbs didn't quite belong to the same person as the rest of him. 'Sorry, Sarge,' he said. 'I was just making my coffee.'

Ernie, who was quite happy with his own more comfortably upholstered frame, scowled at his subordinate. 'Priorities, lad. Get yer priorities right.'

Dawson reached for the phone. 'Oi!' Ernie barked.

Dawson's hand hovered. 'Sarge?'

'Where's me bleedin' caramel wafer, then?'

Dawson's gaze dropped to the phone, then back up to Ernie, then back to the phone. 'Erm...'

'Priorities, lad! What did I just tell yer?'

'Oh. Right, Sarge.'

Ernie tutted as Dawson raced back into the kitchenette, then out again, dropping the prescribed biscuit onto the counter. 'Bout bleeding time,' he muttered.

Dawson snatched up the phone. 'Camtown Police Station.'

Ernie went back to the page 8 girl, trying to work out if she and the one on page 9 would fit into the photographer's studio at the same time and still leave room for the camera.

'Hey, Sarge.' He'd been vaguely aware of Dawson talking to whoever the nuisance on the other end of the phone was. Now he sighed, and said, 'Well?'

'It's the vicar bloke from that churchy place in town. Saint - Saint -'

'St Marmalade's, lad. Well - what about him?'

'Says there's a crime been committed.'

'Too bleedin' right there has,' Ernie growled. 'And you're the felon; obstructin' me in the course of my tea break.'

Dawson looked nonplussed a moment, then recovered. 'No, straight up, Sarge. Says there's been a robbery. Lots of items of -' he glanced down at the pad he'd been scribbling on '- "exceptional value" been taken. He's really in a lather, Sarge. Does sound important.'

Ernie raised an eyebrow. 'Everybody's crimes are important to them, lad. It's what makes our job such a pain in the bleedin' arse.'

'Shall I give him the usual?'

'Course.'

Dawson unclamped his hand from the mouthpiece, and said, 'We'll get straight onto it, sir. Yes, we will. Goodbye.'

He placed the phone back in its cradle, and said, 'Asks if we can send our most senior man, Sarge. Shall I go and tell CID?'

Ernie tutted again. Dawson and his CID obsession. Anybody'd think the rest of the police force were there to make up numbers and issue parking tickets. 'No, lad, you shan't go and tell CID. They won't want to waste their time with robberies at bleedin' churches.'

Dawson's face registered confusion and shock; a combination that had his eyebrows unsure whether to project themselves in an upwards or downwards direction.

Eventually, he settled for one going either way. 'But Sarge -'

'Look,' Ernie said, 'who is this bloke whose valuable items are so important? Take it you got his name?'

Dawson consulted his pad again. 'Father Frank Rawlings, MMM, RCD, LFN.'

Ernie gave the constable the benefit of his best stare. 'Impressive list of initials there. Any of 'em mean anythin'?''

Dawson stared hard at his notes, then coloured. 'Oh, sorry Sarge. I think Fred on the night shift has been doodling over my pad.'

Ernie let the stare linger. Dawson's colour heightened. 'So what should I do, then, Sarge?'

The lad was like a puppy about to be kicked. Ernie reached a decision. The street outside was quiet; it didn't look like the great unwashed would be flocking in with their aggravating problems at the moment. 'I can spare you for a couple of minutes, Dawson. Go and see what's occurred, then I can decide whether to go and tell CID or not.'

'But Sarge -'

'Well?'

'The vic said he wanted our most senior bloke.'

Ernie sighed. Young coppers nowadays... 'And, Constable, if you go on your own you'll be the most senior bloke there, won't you?'

Dawson opened his mouth as if to comment, but Ernie forestalled him with another look. 'On your way, lad.'

'Right-o, Sarge.'

Dawson put his greatcoat on and opened the door to the reception area. 'Oi,' Ernie said. 'Ain't you forgettin' something?'

'Erm... What, Sarge?'

Ernie brandished the empty biscuit paper. 'I've only had one caramel wafer.'

He turned his attention back to the pages of *Busty*, as Dawson raced back towards the kitchenette. 'I told you, lad. Priorities.'

*

Clarissa smiled at Joseph and rose to answer the phone. Knowing his gaze would be glued to her backside, she added an extra wiggle to her walk as she crossed to the sideboard where the instrument lay.

You really aren't a nice person, Rissa.

She stopped short. That damned voice again.

It was herself, of course. Her damned conscience, forever beating her up about this or that.

Shut up, she snapped back. *I'm not doing any harm.*

Oh really? Her conscience voice had its usual mix of wry amusement and contempt. *And what harm do you think it would do Frank, knowing how you were behaving right now?*

Oh -

She cut off the intended swear-word. *Leave me alone,* she finished lamely.

It was true; Frank would be devastated if he knew she was toying with Joseph like she was. And yet, she couldn't help it.

Oh really? her conscience said again.

Look, she thought furiously, *you know about Frank's problem. I've got to have some fun - in that way. I'm twenty-seven, for God's sake. And if I'd wanted to be a nun, I'd have joined St Benedict's on the other side of town.*

So just because your husband is fifty-five and impotent, and you want to have your thrills, it's okay to seduce a young, attractive member of his congregation?

Seduce? I'm not seducing! I'm - I'm -

But there her argument fell flat. 'Mildly flirting' was the phrase she wanted. But she couldn't voice it. She knew she was doing more than that.

Beginning to realise?

Oh, shut up!

It wasn't as if she would actually take Joseph upstairs and do the deed. She had enough self-control not to do that. Later, when he'd gone, she'd take herself off there and satisfy the feelings that were being stirred by her teasing. But she'd never -

Are you really sure you have that much self-control?

She gulped. Was she?

'Are you all right, Mrs Rawlings?'

His voice broke her internal wrangle, and she realised with a start that the telephone was still jangling in front of her. She reached out her hand to pick up the receiver.

'I'm fine, Joseph,' she said, trying to put conviction into her voice. 'Just fine.'

*

Ronnie Chafford shot up from his armchair as the door of the flat thundered open. '*There were a body, Dad!*' his son, Darren, screeched as he careered into the sitting room. '*A freakin' body!*'

'Jesus, Dazza!' Ronnie clutched at his chest as his heart threatened to make a getaway through it. 'I thought you was the Old Bill! Frightened the 'ecking life out of me!'

'Nah, it weren't no Jesus, Dad! It were an ol' biddy!'

Darren began an agitated pacing around the room, weaving tight little circles as he went. It looked like a complicated manoeuvre he might make to avoid being followed. Ronnie glanced anxiously at the door, expecting to see blue-clad figures lumbering through. Darren had never quite got the hang of shaking off shadowers; it was one of the two O-levels he'd failed, along with advanced safe-cracking.

'Calm down, Son! What you goin' on about!'

But Darren was chuntering to himself in that weird accent he'd picked up from five years at the Brumagen School for Aspiring Ne'er-do-wells (Dudley Campus). Ronnie couldn't tell what he was saying; but then, since the boy had returned from up-north-parts, Ronnie had needed a translator to decipher his breakfast requests.

One of Darren's circles brought him close, so Ronnie grabbed his arm and held on tight. '*Dazza,*' he yelled, so close to his son's ear he heard an echo come back from inside it, '*will you calm down and tell me what the 'eckin' flip you're goin' on about!*'

The boy went rigid; his jaw dropped and his eyes turned inward to stare at each other through his nose.

Ronnie relaxed, confident he'd got his son's attention. 'Right; now we've got a bit of order, tell me what you're talkin' about.'

It was a relief to say something that didn't end in an exclamation mark. He let go of Darren's arm and flopped back into his chair.

Darren, trembling, slumped onto the sofa opposite. '*That were loud, Dad,*' he complained.

'Never mind that. What's this about a body?'

Darren's eyes, which had returned to more-or-less normal, closed briefly, and he shuddered. 'I were on me way to Mr Singh's, like you said...'

'Uh huh.' Ronnie had sent Darren to the newsagent's to pinch a copy of *Criminal's Weekly*. He suddenly noticed with annoyance that the boy's hands were empty. There was an article on how to grow lockpicks in a window box he wanted to read.

'Well,' Darren was going on, 'I were passing that church place, you know...?'

'St Marmite's, that the one?'

'Yeah. An' I saw that the door were open. So I thought I'd 'ave a look inside, like.'

Ronnie raised his eyebrows. 'We've cased that joint before, Son. You know it's used on a Monday morning for their prayer meeting thing.'

It was his turn to shudder, as he remembered being collared when they'd got through the door one morning on a recce. Several old women had (and he still couldn't work out how) dragged them to the front, then spent the next half-hour talking to the air about them. According to the women, he and Darren had walked through the door

as a 'blessing' to the church; he still, after nearly a year, ground his teeth at the thought of exiting several pounds poorer than he'd gone in, when the intention had been to leave a great deal richer.

'Yeah, but this were twenty to, Dad,' Darren cut into his thoughts. 'I knew they shoulda gone by then.'

'An' 'ad they?'

'Yeah. But Dad, this ol' biddy were there, lyin' on the floor. An' 'er eye, Dad...'

Darren shuddered to a halt again, and Ronnie sat back to think. He couldn't be sure if the boy had actually seen what he said he had, or if he'd been sniffing his socks again. Either way, if there was a chance that St Marmite's was standing open and unguarded...

'Come on, Dazza,' he said, heaving himself to his feet again. 'We've got a church to visit. With a dirty great bag.'

Darren's eyes snapped open, and he stood as well. 'Oh, sorry Dad. Forgot to say.'

He went out into the hallway. Something went 'chink', and he lumbered back in, a sack slung over his shoulder. When he set it down, the 'chink' repeated.

'Did it before I come out, Dad. Thought I might as well. I were wearin' me gloves an' that, an' I 'ad the bag an' me chisel on me, so it were easy to get into the safe.'

He reached into the bag and pulled out a plate of such - *silveriness* - Ronnie felt his jaw drop. Another reach in, and out came a goblet of the same lustre. Four candlesticks followed, and then a gold cross. The light from the window hit these objects and danced around the room, causing Ronnie to narrow his eyes against the dazzle.

'All right, Dad?'

He became aware that he was still gawping. He snapped his mouth shut, and said, 'All right, Son...?'

He couldn't say any more, his brain was leaping too many somersaults to find the right words.

Darren was pointing proudly to the sack. 'Like it, Dad?'

With extreme reluctance, Ronnie wrenched his gaze from the shinies. The sack was daubed with thick white streaks. 'SWAG, Dazza?' Ronnie enquired, reading the capitals they made.

'Painted it on meself, Dad. The cops are so stupid round 'ere, I thought they'd be bound to think it were just a joke.'

'Did it work?'

'Yeah. One even 'eld it for me while I nipped round to Singh's for your paper...' He withdrew the awaited copy of *Criminal's Weekly* from the sack. 'Sorry, I 'ad to pay for it; thought it'd look suspicious if I just grabbed it and run. But there were some loose change in the church, in some sort of offerin' box, so I used that. 'Ope that were all right?'

Ronnie's mental assessment of Darren had undergone a complete one-eighty. 'Son,' he said, 'it couldn't be more alright if I'd done it meself.'

He took the sack, and began to reload the bullion. 'I'll hide this away, Dazza, then we can get rid when the heat's off a bit.

'And meanwhile -' he hoisted the sack over his shoulder '- I'm gonna write to that flippin' school of yours about that safe-crackin' O-level.

'Failure, indeed.' He gave the sack a chink-inducing shake. 'Reckon you should've got double-A plus, Son.'