

Murder At St Marmaduke's
Chapter Five
Monday 4th November 1985: 14.00 – 14.45

Ernie Bulstrode and Terrence Dawson had been assigned to watch the interview room door. That was - Dawson had been assigned to watch the door; Ernie had assigned himself to watch Dawson. 'Lad in there decides to do a runner,' he'd said, 'you won't have a bleedin' clue what to do.'

The fact was, he wasn't going back to the front desk without his junior. The hour or so he'd been there while Dawson was at the church had been bad enough. Some woman had come in and asked where her missing *cat* was, for God's sake!

He'd pointed her in the direction of the pet shop, telling her it was under observation for suspected pussy-napping. He'd happened to read the phrase in *Busty* just before she rolled through the door.

Now Dawson said, 'I really don't see why Makumbo's been hauled in, Sarge. He told us everything he knew down at the church.'

Ernie raised an eyebrow. 'He's here, lad, because Inspector Clouseau's decided that because he's black, he's got to have committed some crime or other. If he can't get him for the murder, he'll get him for the robbery. Or cat-napping,' he added, thinking of the woman who'd disturbed his peace earlier on.

'Is DI Hampshire really that prejudiced?'

'He once had a dalmatian dog arrested for not being totally white. That answer your question?'

'Oh, right.' Dawson's face creased into a frown. 'But since we've been assigned to watch Makumbo doesn't get away...'

'Well?'

'Well - shouldn't we be on the *inside* of the interview room?'

Ernie spluttered. 'What? And maybe learn somethin' useful, all on our own? Like who really did the old lady in, and whether Makumbo saw the burglars at work? We wouldn't want to do that in five minutes flat when the Great Plodhopper can take all night, now, would we?'

'But Makumbo explained the murder...'

'Oh, *yeah*. Little old ladies with pointy things.' He gave Dawson a pitying look. 'You really think that's likely, lad?'

Dawson looked taken aback. 'You saying he's lying?'

'Of course he is!' Ernie tutted. 'Thought we were beginnin' to make a copper out of you.'

'But why would he lie about something like that?'

'Aven't a clue, lad. Probably thinks it sounds better than, "I run away when the burglars arrived, and left a little old woman to tackle them on her own." Anything'd sound better than that; leastways, if I was tellin' it, it would.'

'But what about the vicar bloke? All that business about people being beaten to death with a lecture, or whatever it was? That's got to be connected, surely? Why hasn't he been hauled in as well?'

'Oh, him!' Ernie gave a snort. 'Nutty as a monkey's breakfast, lad. All this persecution complex these religious bods have. Get him in here, he'd be tryin' to convert us to North Sea Gas, or whatever it is they believe in.'

'There were loads of bodies down in the basement, though.'

'Pound to a penny they were somebody's pet gerbils or something.'

'Gerbils? Sarge, they were people!'

'Gerbils are tricky buggers, lad. Had one convince me and Mrs Bulstrode for years he was our son. Ate 'is way through 'ouse and 'ome before we realised he was nothin' more than a rat with delusions of grandeur.'

'Oh, all right.' Dawson sounded annoyed at the joke. Ernie was pleased by that. The lad was beginning to show some spunk occasionally.

It wouldn't stop him giving the constable all the grief he could, though. That's what subordinates were for.

There was silence for a while, then Ernie said, 'Anyway, lad, it's not our problem now Hampshire's involved. Though why Charlie Meredith chose *him* to lead this particular investigation's beyond me.'

'Why *is* the DI so prejudiced, Sarge?' Dawson seemed to have got over his annoyance for the moment.

'Ah. Goes back a long time. All to do with his missus.'

'I didn't know he was married.'

'He ain't, now.'

'Oh?'

Ernie tapped his nose meaningfully. 'Not the time, lad.' He nodded towards the door that led to the CID corridor. 'I reckon I hear the dull plod of an even duller detective comin'. With luck, he'll have brought the CID brain-cell with him. Though personally, I reckon that Amita Chowdhary lass has got it on permanent loan.'

'Vindaloo Girl?'

'That's what he calls her. Though -' and he gave Dawson the hardest stare in his repertoire '- if I ever hear *you* refer to her by that name, I'll take you out the back and beat seven shades of shit out of you.'

To his satisfaction, Dawson's face went the colour of beetroot. 'Sorry, Sarge. I don't usually...'

'Good.' He turned his glare down a few notches; the lad wasn't really that sort of tosser, and he'd have learnt this particular lesson good and proper. 'Anyway, I've gotta go. When the Great Defective lets you bugger off, don't forget to come straight back to the desk. Lots of work to be done.'

'Work, Sarge? We've got work to do?'

'Yes, lad, work. For a start, I've missed my elevenses *and* my lunch. Three sugars, as usual. And *four* caramel wafers.'

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Jack Hampshire thrust open the interview room door, and stood on the threshold.

One, two, three, four, five...

He eyed the bloke sitting at the table; the young, black bloke.

His lip curled. Well - he'd terrify this one in no time.

What was the bloke's name? He glanced down at the file Constable Dozy, the woodentop plonk, had given him on the way in. Oh, yeah. Makumbo.

Not far removed from the name of the bastard who'd run off with his missus all those years ago.

He gave himself another ten count, then moved forward a pace. Just one.

He reached behind himself, and slowly swung the door closed.

One, two, three, four, five...

These were tricks that Archie Cosgrove, his old DI, had taught him. He'd never seen a suspect fail to be cowed by them. And this suspect *was* cowed. He could feel it.

'Good afternoon,' the suspect said. 'Have you come to take my statement?'

Huh?

He felt his legs wobble, and his mind went blank. No suspect had ever wished him good anything before.

'Erm -'

What was next?

His gaze dropped to the file. The file...

That was it! The next stage in the intimidation process. Open the file. Stare at the piece of paper it contained, the one giving a brief summary of the tissue of lies this bastard had probably come up with to explain away the murder. And the robbery.

He gave it a long, hard stare, reading nothing, trying to get his brain back into gear.

Okay. He felt steadier. Back to business. *One, two, three, four...*

He didn't get to five. The world ripped apart, and a dizzying, terrifying sensation came over him, as if he'd been crumpled into a ball and hurled a vast distance.

When the world had reformed, he found himself seated at the table, Makumbo leaning forward earnestly and saying, 'And that, as I told your sergeant and constable, Mr Inspector, is what happened.'

What?

He stared around in confusion. The recorder used for all interviews was working, the tape in it a good way through its length. His pad - that was open, a page filled in as if he'd been taking notes. 'So one old lady stabbed the other in the eye, and you know nothing about the robbery,' he heard himself say.

Where the hell had he got that from?

'That is correct, Mr Inspector.'

His head still spinning, he dropped his gaze to the file again, which was on the table in front of him. He hadn't even read the report. He didn't have the first clue what excuses Makumbo was making, about either crime.

Except that it seemed he did.

What the hell was going on?

There was silence; then he realised the suspect was waiting for him to say something else.

'Well, Mr -'

His voice sounded thin and weak. With an effort, he pulled himself together.

'Well - Mr Makumbo, *if* what you say is true, and St Marmalot's has been the scene of these fantastical happenings, be sure that they'll be investigated. Thoroughly.'

That was better. At least it sounded like normal him.

Had he had some kind of blackout? Conducted the interview while under the influence of an epileptic fit or something?

He certainly wasn't under the influence of anything else. True, he'd had his usual three whiskies and two pints at lunchtime, but they'd never had this effect before.

'It is true, Mr Inspector; honestly,' Makumbo was saying. 'And - I am sorry - but my name is Makumbo, and the church is St Marmaduke's.'

Maybe he should have had a third pint after all.

He cleared his throat, then put the best sneer he could into saying, 'I think I'll be the judge of what names are what in this investigation, *sir*.'

That was better, too. Much more like himself.

He had to get out of there, though. Take the tape, maybe; process just what *had* been said.

He stood abruptly, and reached over to the recorder's stop button. 'Interview ends -' he checked his watch '- 14.15.'

Fourteen fifteen? How the hell could that be the time?

He stared at his watch, aghast. He hadn't entered the room until ten past. From the length the tape had gone, and the notes he'd scribbled, surely the interview had lasted a good half-hour or so?

There was a clock on the wall behind Makumbo. He checked it. It echoed his watch exactly.

That did it. Something too bloody weird was happening. He needed a drink, and needed it *now*.

He'd normally have stood staring down at the suspect in an intimidating manner, before saying, 'I'd advise you to get a lawyer, *sir*. I think you're going to need one.'

Instead, he heard himself mumble, 'I'll get the constable to show you out.'

And with that, he showed himself out, fast.

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Ernie Bulstrode was staring out at the waiting area, his copy of *Busty* lying disregarded underneath the reception counter.

Something was up. The beat of the station - normally as regular as his trips to the Gents - was out of gear. He didn't know how he knew. It was just he'd been part of the furniture so long, he could feel it in his tea-induced water.

Everything'd been fine until ten minutes before. Then something had gone 'clonk'.

Footsteps sounded, and Dawson appeared. 'I'll put the kettle on, Sarge.'

He sounded distant, and his normally cheerful face held a frown. 'What's up, lad?' Ernie said, following him into the kitchenette.

Dawson filled the kettle, and set it onto its base. 'I don't really know, Sarge. It's just - DI Hampshire was a bit weird when he came out from the interview.'

Ernie quirked an eyebrow. 'Weird, lad? What did he do? Let Makumbo go with a pat on the back and a pledge to donate his next month's wages to the Orphans in Africa appeal? By the way - that'll boil a lot quicker if you switch it on.'

Dawson looked down, surprise on his face. 'Oh. Sorry, Sarge.'

'Well, it was more or less that,' he continued, depressing the switch. 'Just stomped out and growled, "Get rid of the bastard." No holding in the cells for as long as we're allowed. He didn't even look down his nose at me like he normally does. And he looked worried. I've never seen him look worried before.'

'Now that is odd; I'll grant you that.'

'And besides, he'd only been in there five minutes. If he was getting Makumbo to repeat the story he told us, it should've taken far longer than that.'

'Mmm.'

Ernie nodded. This was linked to his own unease. He knew it, as sure as he knew that eggs were little round things that came out of chickens' bums.

He'd already reached a decision, but this reinforced it. 'Right, lad,' he said, heading out, 'you look after things here; I'm going to see a man about a rottweiler.'

'Sarge?' Dawson stared down at Ernie's empty mug, and at the kettle, which was beginning to steam.

Ernie waved a hand. 'You can do me one when I get back.'

Some things were even more important than tea break.

And some aspects of tea break were more important than anything else. 'By the way, Dawson...'

'Yes, Sarge?'

'I know the exact number of caramel wafers in that cupboard. And I know how many do a vanishing act when I'm not around. Just remember that.'

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DCI Charles Meredith swore; loudly, longly and very explicitly. Slamming shut the top drawer of his leftmost filing cabinet, he appended the expletive with, 'You'd think the bloody A's would all be in the same place!'

He yanked open the second drawer. An explosion in a paper factory met his eyes. He counted to one, then hurled that drawer closed as well. 'I will not - will not - *will not* - lose my bloody temper!' he told himself.

A knock sounded at his office door. With a sigh of relief at not having to try the next drawer down, he turned back to his desk and called, 'Come in.'

The door opened, and the comfortable figure of Ernie Bulstrode barrelled in. 'Ah, Ernie,' Meredith said. 'Come and save me from this bloody filing system, for God's sake.'

Ernie grinned. 'Another secretary left you in the lurch, Charlie?'

Meredith slumped into his seat and waved a bad-tempered hand in the direction of the cabinets behind him. 'It took Sheila Granger two years to build a system I could work with. She retires, and six temps reduce it to rubble in three months flat. Only thing these agency girls know how to file are their nails.'

Ernie, uninvited, plonked himself onto the chair opposite. 'That bad?'

'That bad. I've just discovered the last one filed everything under "R" for "Report", God help us.'

Ernie let out a bark of laughter.

'It's all right for you,' Meredith said. 'You've nothing to worry about except when your next tea break's due.'

'Oh, dunno about that. The stress I've got tryin' to get Dawson to put the right amount of sugar in.'

'I feel for you. And how is the young constable getting on?'

'Fine, Charlie, fine. Definite CID material; which is, of course, his ambition in life, the prat.'

'Really? You think he's that good?'

'Yep. Likes to dig into things; and logical with it. You should see the way he's organised the caramel wafers.'

'He'll make a good copper one day,' the sergeant continued. 'He just doesn't know it himself at the moment.'

'And no doubt you're encouraging him all the way.'

'Sarcasm, Charlie.'

Ernie leaned back in his chair and gave a beatific smile. 'The way I see it is, if you give 'em enough bollocks, they develop all the quicker. The lad snapped at me only this mornin'. Good sign.'

'I'll tell him you recommended him.'

'If you do, I'll deny it to the end of my days.'

Meredith chuckled. 'All right - I'll bear him mind when an opportunity arises.'

'Not before you get me a replacement!'

'Oh, naturally.' A thought struck Meredith. 'Did you say, "organised"?''

'Uh huh.' Ernie looked suddenly worried.

'As in, "could organise a badly mauled filing system"?''

'Oh, now - hang on, Charlie...'

Meredith smiled triumphantly, and leaned forward. 'You know you should be calling me "sir", Sergeant?'

'What - after all the years we've known each other?'

'Rank counts over friendship.'

'And I s'pose you're about to pull it.'

'I am indeed.'

Meredith sat back again and continued, 'Right, that's fixed, then. You tell young Dawson to report to me as soon as you get back to your counter. Shouldn't take him more than - oh, five days? - to sort out this mess.'

'Five days! You want me to deal with Joe Public for the rest of the week!'

'You have it, Ernie. Well deduced.' His smile widened. 'Ever thought of applying for CID yourself?'

Ernie's reply was inaudible and, Meredith assumed, not fit for the ears of a superior officer.

'Anyway,' he said, dismissing the subject, 'I take it it isn't young Dawson's future you've dropped in to discuss?'

'Nope.'

Meredith listened as Ernie described the day's goings-on. 'I'd lay a pound to my mortgage that the Chaffords are behind the robbery,' the sergeant said. 'But not the murder. Though the way Hampshire went into the interview room it's a dead cert he wanted to pin both on the black lad.'

'That wouldn't surprise me, I admit.'

'There's another thing...'

Meredith frowned as Ernie told him about the strange wobble he'd felt in the station's routine. It didn't occur to him to doubt what the sergeant was saying. He'd have taken Ernie's word on anything that happened in Camtown nick.

'You say Jack only spent five minutes interviewing Makumbo?'

'According to Dawson.'

'That's bizarre. I've never known Jack take less than an hour, especially where anybody darker than a gloss white's involved.'

'That's a point, Charlie. Why *did* you put him in charge of this one?'

Meredith sighed. 'Nobody else available, Ernie. I've left him till last pick; it so happens all the other senior officers are tied up on other cases. Besides - I have to use him, otherwise the Chief Constable gets on my back.'

'Hampshire's uncle, isn't he?'

'Cousin, Ernie. Either way, I can't get rid of the pain in the arse. When I finally get slung out myself, I would like a pension to go home to.'

'Appreciate your problem.'

'Oh, well.' Meredith shifted himself in his chair. 'I suppose I'd better have a word with him. See if I can get the idea through that he might need to look elsewhere.'

'Though God knows,' he added with another sigh, 'once he gets something fixed in his head it takes a team of navvies with a JCB to dig it out again.'

'Leave it with me, Ernie.'

The sergeant got up to leave.

'And don't forget to send young Dawson in,' Meredith added. 'If he's as good as you say he is, I look forward to him finding where the latest bimbo filed my lunch last Friday.'

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Kevin Proctor threw aside the Patagonian shepherdess and rubbed his eyes wearily. Oh God, if he ever had to go through that again...!

He gazed at his slush pile. He knew exactly what it contained. HL Danvers' latest masterpiece. HL Danvers' masterpiece-before-last. HL Danvers' masterpiece-before-that-one...

Oh - and the new one. He lifted it off the pile. Refreshingly thin; and refreshingly not HL Danvers.

He drew it out of its envelope. *Interesting title*, he thought.

Setting it in front of him, he lifted the frontispiece to turn it over.

The phone rang.

'Bugger!'

He picked it up. 'Yes, Sal?'

'My name's Sally, Kevin. I have a call for you.'

Kevin's heart plummeted. 'Oh, not...'

'I'm afraid so.'

A click sounded. Reaching into his throat and yanking out his most enthusiastic voice, Kevin said, 'HL! How lovely to hear from you...'