

Murder At St Marmaduke's
Chapter Seven
Monday 4th November 1985: 16.20 – 17.15

Darren Chafford was feeding Ringo, his dad's pet kakariki.

Strictly speaking, the bird wasn't theirs at all; it actually belonged to their elderly next-door neighbour, Owen. However, they'd discovered one night many months ago - when Owen had been rushed into hospital with a suspected case of death, and they'd casually dropped into his flat to check he hadn't left anything valuable lying around - that the green monster made for one highly efficient guard-bird.

After Darren's fingers - which Ringo had apparently mistaken for a plate of sausages - had been patched up, the bird, its cage, its food and sandpaper had been moved lock, stock and malevolent beak into the Chaffords' flat; since when, it had already foiled three break-in attempts, and the only contact Owen had had with it since his recovery was a conjugal visit every Saturday afternoon.

He'd just finished carefully manoeuvring the food bowl into position, and was sliding off his steel-tipped gauntlets, when a knock sounded at the front door.

Ah - his dad had said the rozzers would be around sometime today. He slipped the gauntlets into a drawer, then checked round to make sure there was nothing in view that might be seen as too swish for their benefits-fuelled lifestyle.

Having secreted away the Ming Dynasty vase his dad used as an ashtray - the proceeds of a job on an antiques' place that still had the police of two different counties running around in ever-despairing circles, he'd seen on the telly - he wandered out of the sitting room and into the hallway as another knock sounded.

'Yeah, alright, comin',' he called.

When he opened the door, he was surprised to find a young Asian woman standing there. And - *Mmm, very nice indeed*, he thought.

He leaned himself against the door jamb in what he hoped was an alluring fashion. It also served to block the door from entry, which was a bonus.

'Alright?' he said. 'Yo want somethin'?'

He locked his gaze onto the woman's eyes. They were very large, and very, very attractive. And they held something he struggled to identify for a moment.

Then he realised what it was. Intelligence!

He was going to have to be careful with this one.

She pulled a warrant card from her jacket. 'Darren Chafford?'

'That's roight.'

'Detective Constable Chowdhary, Camtown Police Station. Just like to ask a few questions, if that's okay?'

She paused, obviously expecting an invitation to enter. He maintained his alluring/blocking position, pretending not to notice.

'Right,' she said eventually, sounding slightly thrown.

He smiled to himself. Always best to get them on the back foot, Dad said.

Though just on her back might be good.

'Can you tell me your and your father's whereabouts this morning between eight and nine o'clock, please?' she said.

She had a really good voice to go with the looks. Refined, like, but not too posh. He bet she had a great figure, too, underneath the overcoat.

He began to wonder whether he could get her in as far as his bedroom but no further. Then he remembered the copies of *Busty* scattered around, and decided his dad's room might be the better bet.

Or he could just invite her into the sitting room anyway, and she might take the overcoat off. *I bet her skirt goes really short when she sits down.*

Maybe she'd got some handcuffs as well. He'd always wanted to do something with handcuffs, having read some very entertaining articles about them.

'Your father in, by the way?' she continued, breaking into his thoughts; which, although extremely pleasant, he suddenly realised weren't the sort he should be having about a woman who was here to pin something on him - and not in the way he was imagining.

He shrugged in a non-helpful kind of way. He'd got an 'A' in his Shrugging In A Non-helpful Kind Of Way O-level, so he knew how good he was at it.

'E's out.'

'Any idea where?'

Darren waved his hand in a vaguely somewhere-ish direction.

Her lips tightened. That was good; his teachers'd be pleased how obstructive he was being.

In actual fact his dad had left a couple of hours ago to catch the train for Glasgow and Tam McPlank, his regular fence. The proceeds from the church job were safely stowed in Ronnie's second-best suitcase, the one with the triple-combination lock on each clasp. At some time in the early morning he'd be back with the suitcase empty and his pockets full.

'So, your and his movements this morning. Any ideas?'

Darren allowed his brow to crease in a slow frown, as if trying to remember something from a long time ago. 'Oh yeah,' he said, feigning a sudden lightbulb moment, 'we were 'elpin Owen next door move 'is cabbages.'

He saw the copper's eyebrows rise. 'Cabbages?'

'Yeah. In 'is allotment. Tricky buggers them cabbages. You gorra take 'em by surprise, otherwise they fight back.'

Her lips tightened again. 'Look, Darren...' she began.

'Not sure I like yo usin' my first name,' he said. 'Not bein' acquainted, like.' *Though maybe when you're off duty.*

The copper breathed in deeply; he recognised aggravation, and gave himself another mental gold star. 'Mr Chafford,' she corrected, with more than a hint of sarcasm, 'would your neighbour - Owen, was it? - be able to verify this story of yours, do you think?'

'Oh, yeah,' Darren said. And it was true; Owen was willing to give them an alibi any time they wanted. When they'd gone into his flat the night of his heart attack or whatever it was, they'd found more than a malevolent bird. There'd been some *very* interesting pictures hidden in a locked drawer in his bedroom.

'Thank you,' the copper said. 'Be sure I'll check with him, and come back if necessary.'

'Right-o,' he said. 'Yo do that.'

And don't forget to bring yer 'andcuffs, he thought at her as she headed next door.

He went back into the sitting room, and found that Ringo had emptied his water bowl through the bars and all over the carpet. As the bird seemed to have been using the bowl as a makeshift toilet, large black globs of kakariki poo lay in a congealed heap on the shagpile.

'Oh, yer bugger, I were goin' to empty that and give yer a fresh one!' he told the bird, and went to get a cloth.

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In Father Rawlings' blacked-out study, Clarissa was performing a lingering striptease. Her blouse was almost undone, the basque beneath - bought two days before - peeking out scarlet. Several candles flickered in the twilight, and Clarissa was hoping against hope that her husband's nether regions were responding likewise.

She'd taken to surprising Frank with these performances, brooking no argument from him as to inappropriate time of day, or urgency of completing his latest sermon. And for his part, after the briefest of protests he always fell in with a will that excited her, working on himself to try to achieve the longed-for arousal.

'You like this, don't you?' she purred as she slid the blouse from her shoulders and let it slip to the floor.

'Yes,' he gasped back as she bent towards him, giving him the full benefit of the basque's effect on her chest. His free hand groped forwards, and she drew back teasingly. 'Not yet, you naughty boy.'

The doorbell rang. The atmosphere went from red hot to turn-off instantly.

'Aww, damn!' Clarissa groaned.

Frank began hastily fastening his trousers. 'I suppose we'd better get it, my dear,' he whispered. 'One doesn't know if it might be something important.'

'I suppose.' She reached to the floor and picked up her blouse, then pulled open the study door. 'I love you,' she said softly, turning back to him before she passed through.

He smiled. 'I love you too, my dear.'

She donned the blouse as she headed towards the front door, neglecting to do up the top few buttons.

You going to answer it like that? her blasted conscience queried.

'Oh, shut...!' she began aloud, then closed her mouth. It was right, and she couldn't be bothered to argue.

She fastened the other buttons before opening the door.

'Oh, hello Joseph,' she said.

Irritation coursed through her. Yes, for all the young black man was cute, he'd interrupted a special time with her husband, and probably only so that he could drool over her breasts again; almost literally.

Perhaps she'd done herself a disservice acting as she had with him that morning.

Beginning to think twice about our infidelities, are we?

Shut up!

She suddenly realised he was staring at her, a puzzled frown on his face, and wondered for a moment if she'd spoken aloud. 'Oh - sorry, Joseph,' she said hastily. 'Please - come in.'

She stood aside for him, and as a sop to her conscience ensured she was far enough back that he didn't have to make contact with any part of her as he entered.

She led him into the sitting room, and motioned to the sofa. 'Would you like some tea?' she asked as he sat, then regretted the question as she saw his eyes spring wide. Damn! She'd need to get the basque off double-quick while the kettle was boiling, to give him the eyeful he wanted; and the ties were so fiddly.

Oh, and there was me hoping we'd mended our ways.

She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. *It's not doing any harm!* she snapped back.

Methinks we doth protest too much...

'Are you unwell, Mrs Rawlings?'

She opened her eyes again and forced a smile in Joseph's direction. 'Just a little tired, that's all,' she answered. 'I'll make that tea.'

To her surprise, he held up a hand to stop her. 'I do not wish to keep you, Mrs Rawlings,' he said. 'I merely wish to ask a question, if you do not mind?'

'Oh.'

A dozen questions he might want to ask instantly passed through her mind; all of them variations on the same subject, and all of them ones she'd had to answer in the negative before, to any number of men.

Slowly, she lowered herself into an armchair. What looked like disappointment flickered across his face, presumably that she was sitting opposite rather than next to him.

'What is it, Joseph?'

'I would like to ask,' he began, and she braced herself. To her astonishment, he continued, 'the prayer meeting this morning? The - erm - the unfortunate trouble that occurred?'

'Oh. Oh - yes?'

'Well,' he said. He appeared to be searching for the right words to use. 'There were other ladies there, apart from - apart from Miss Cartwright? There was one named Hettie, I think?'

'Hettie Foster?' She wondered where on earth this could be leading. Surely he couldn't want anything of that cantankerous old -

'Is that the lady's name? Well,' he went on, 'she was quoting words of scripture during the meeting, and I wish to ask her something concerning them. I wondered if you might be able to tell me where she lives, so that I might go and speak to her.'

She felt her eyes widen. 'Oh,' she said again. 'Is that all?'

'I am sorry?'

'No, it's me who should be sorry,' she said hastily, relieved and yet puzzled. Why on earth would he want to ask Hettie Foster anything about her King Jamesy rantings?

Or was that just an excuse? She felt a nagging doubt creeping up on her.

She realised that in all the confusion that morning, she hadn't even asked Joseph exactly what had happened at church. And it had been patently ridiculous when the police had marched him off to their station as if he might be in some way culpable.

And Frank, bless him, had only been concerned about the robbery, and had interrupted Joseph just as he was about to give them information about Mabel's death.

Could it be that Hettie Foster was involved somehow? She wouldn't put it past the old woman. Especially given the number of fatalities Frank told the sergeant had occurred in the past; a revelation that had astonished her, given that he'd never even mentioned them before.

She came to a decision. Standing, she said, 'I'll see if I can find Hettie's address for you. I shan't be a moment.'

She blessed the fact that Frank must still be holed up in his study, so wouldn't hear her leave. Grabbing her overcoat and scarf from the hallway cupboard, she opened the front door and slipped out, closing it quietly behind her.

She knew the addresses of all the congregation by heart. Not waiting for the bus in case Joseph came to look for her, she began to walk briskly in the fading light towards the part of town where Hettie Foster lived.

*

DI Jack Hampshire was fuming, and not only because of the cigarette he had stuck between his lips.

He was hammering at Joseph Makumbo's front door and yelling, '*Come on, I know you're bloody in there!*'

That bloody interview. What the hell had happened?

He'd listened to the tape, and been astonished how much he knew of what he'd heard on it.

All that guff about little old ladies and pointy objects, for example. He remembered every bit of it; he just couldn't remember actually being *told* it.

And he wouldn't have had *time* to be told it. He'd been in that room for five minutes; seven, tops. That was definite; he'd verified how long he'd been gone with the blokes in the squad room. And yet he had thirty-four minutes-worth of interview on tape.

'Come on! Open up!'

It must have been bloody Makumbo! Some kind of voodoo trick, no doubt. It was just what his kind did!

He beat a few more minutes-worth of tattoo on the door. It remained stubbornly unanswered.

Right!

Stepping back, he raised a foot, prepared to give the offending piece of timber a good, *Sweeney*-style kicking-in.

A clicking of locks sounded from inside, and the door swung hesitantly open.

'Hello?' a small, elderly, mousy man said. 'May I ask what on earth you're doing?'

Hampshire shot forwards and grabbed the man's cardigan, hauling him nose to nose. 'Where's bloody Makumbo!' he barked.

The man recoiled; his eyes widened and his jaw began working as if he wanted to speak but couldn't remember how. Smoke from Hampshire's cigarette curled up between them, and he snatched it from his mouth and brandished it in front of the man's face. 'Makumbo! Where is he? Quick, you bastard!'

The man went cross-eyed. His jaw continued to wobble severely; then, just as Hampshire was choosing which of his captive's nostrils to hide the impromptu weapon up first, a quavering sound emerged from the man's lips: 'Who - who are you?'

'I ask the bloody questions!' Hampshire snapped. Half-regretfully, he shoved the cigarette back into his mouth. 'Who the hell are *you*, if it comes to that!'

'I - I'm Mr Jones. Mr Makumbo's upstairs neighbour.'

'Right, Mr bloody Jones, Mr Makumbo's upstairs bloody neighbour, I'll ask again. *Where the hell is Makumbo!*'

Jones's eyes were like ping-pong balls. Any wider, they might well have left their moorings and begun rolling around the floor.

'I - I'll call the police,' he whimpered.

'I *am* the bloody police!' Hampshire shot back.

He didn't bother reaching for his warrant card. He always figured that the only credentials he needed were his natural air of authority and the threat of a knuckle sandwich. Besides, he'd lost the card months before, and didn't want to confess this at the station and go through the rigmarole of getting another one.

Instead, he tightened his grip even further; so much so, his fingernails nearly met the back of his hands through both the other man's clothing and his own palms.

'I - I think he might have gone to see the vicar of St Marmaduke's,' Jones whimpered. 'He went out about an hour ago. I was just coming in from the shops as he passed me at the door, and he said something about the church. Some terrible crime. He was very distracted. I got the impression he was off to the vicarage.'

'At bloody last!' Hampshire released his grip, sending the luckless Jones flying, and wheeled around.

Right!

He marched down the path and out onto the pavement. By God, Makumbo had better be at the vicarage or he'd start arresting everybody within a five-mile radius for obstruction, whether they had anything to do with the case or not.

And after he'd banged Makumbo away for murder, robbery *and* playing merry hell with time, he'd get on with his task of finding the bastard who'd run off with his missus thirteen years before.

And he *would* find him. If it was the last bloody thing he did!

*

Amita Chowdhary wandered away from Jack the Ripper Court, her mind playing over both interviews she'd conducted there.

She wasn't happy with either of the mental recordings. For one thing, she wondered if she should have been firmer with Darren Chafford; she might have been able to shake his obviously absurd story if she'd shown more contempt, say.

And for the other thing...

Owen Sheadley, the Chaffords' next-door neighbour, had confirmed that, yes indeed, Ronnie and young Darren had been with him for the whole of that morning, including whatever time it was that whatever it was had happened, wherever it had taken place.

And did she by any chance have a younger sister at home?

She could still feel her skin crawl at having been in the same room.

He hadn't been too specific about what he and the Chaffords had been up to together, playing the 'old man with a touch of the doolallies' card. He had, however, been extremely specific about the age he wondered if her sister might be, and while the number only bordered on the illegal rather than crossing into it, the fact that he must be seventy years older than that made his enquiry sickening in the extreme.

That aside, he'd obviously been lying through his lack of back teeth about his morning's activities. Unfortunately, she had, at least for the moment, to accept his word as proof of the Chaffords' innocence.

The early-evening air was chilly, and she drew her coat snugly around her. She was only dawdling, reluctant to hurry back to a work situation where she felt as welcome as curry-flavoured ice cream.

Maybe she should seriously think about asking for a transfer to somewhere less white-centric. The trouble was, if she got the wrong place, she might well be stepping out of the frying pan into the roaring blaze.

Of course, she didn't have to go back to the station quite yet. Not if she could find a reasonable excuse to stay out.

An area of further investigation would help. Naturally, the boss wouldn't approve; but then, if it led to a breakthrough in the case, maybe one of the higher-ups would take notice and it might even be pursued properly.

And if it didn't, she wouldn't actually have to tell anybody. Even if the DI noticed her absence, she could blame it on a delay in the enquiry he'd given her.

She shivered as she realised how devious her mind was becoming. Was this really what being a copper was all about?

Uneasily, she shrugged the thought off and tried to concentrate instead on where to begin.

Really speaking there were two crimes to be solved. The murder and the robbery. The DI, in his muddle-headed, prejudiced way, was trying to pin both on Joseph Makumbo; but what if they were separate from each other?

Well - she'd failed to get anywhere with the latter; suppose she thought about the former for a while?

There was some woman involved, for example. She'd read the notes that Terrence Dawson and Sergeant Bulstrode had taken at the scene. The ones where Joseph Makumbo was adamant that a woman named...

Named...

Hettie, something. That was it. According to Joseph Makumbo, this woman, Hettie, killed the other one. That piece of evidence (if evidence it was, rather than blame-shifting) was being totally ignored at the moment.

Maybe she should try to ascertain Hettie Something's exact role in proceedings.

But how? Her heart sank as she realised she'd have to go back to the station anyway, to find the woman's surname and address. That was bound to mean getting sidetracked by some worthless job given to her on a whim, and she'd never get to Diamond Crescent at all.

She stopped dead.

Diamond Crescent? Why had she thought of Diamond Crescent?

But then - her eyes widened as she reflected on the idea - didn't it make a kind of sense?

Diamond Crescent. Very smart, a collection of OAP bungalows looked after by the council, each with a small garden out front, most of them well-tended and blooming with flowers and shrubs.

It was the kind of road she could imagine an old, churchgoing lady residing in.

But where on earth had the idea come from to look there?

She shrugged. Did it matter? Even if there was nothing in it, it would keep her away from the station for a bit longer.

Okay. She crossed the road and began to head towards Diamond Crescent. She hadn't a clue what number this Hettie might live at, if she lived there at all. But if it was meant to be, maybe something would turn up to give her guidance.

*

In the Rawlings' sitting room, Joseph checked the clock on the mantelpiece again. Clarissa had been gone for nearly thirty minutes. Surely she'd have been able to find Hettie Number One's address by now?

He stood, wondering whether to go and investigate her whereabouts. Then he sat again. He wasn't sure he wanted to roam the vicarage with Father Rawlings possibly still irate over his carelessness at the church.

He repeated his up-down calisthenics, then did them again. He was on his third recurrence when he heard footsteps in the hallway outside. At last!

The door of the sitting room swung open, but instead of the hoped-for sashay of femininity, Father Rawlings stepped in with a rather more masculine gait.

The vicar stopped at the threshold, surprise on his face. 'Oh. Mr Makumbo. Joseph.'

Joseph felt heat rising from his collarbone. 'Erm - Father Rawlings. I - er - I am waiting for Mrs Rawlings to return,' he gabbled. 'She is getting some information for me - regarding... Regarding...' He ground to a halt, unsure whether he wanted the vicar to know of his interest in Hettie Foster.

But Father Rawlings was staring around the room, as if searching for a prized possession. Now he completed his entrance, a puzzled frown on his face. 'Yes,' he said, his voice matching the frown. Reaching the armchair opposite Joseph, he more fell into it than sat. Once there, he stared around again as if double-checking he hadn't missed anything.

'Is something wrong, Father Rawlings?'

'Hmm?' The vicar's gaze stopped wavering and settled on Joseph. 'Oh,' he said, 'I thought Clarissa would be here. She isn't anywhere else; I've been looking for her. That's why I'm surprised to see you. I assumed that whoever our visitor was would be gone by now.'

Joseph stared at him. 'She is not anywhere in your house?'

'No. Apparently not.'

'You mean that she has gone out?'

Father Rawlings looked at him with a touch of his asperity from that morning. 'Really, Joseph. Do you often repeat yourself in such a fashion?'

Joseph, puzzled, replayed the last few sentences. Oh - he saw what Father Rawlings meant. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'It is just - as I told you, Mrs Rawlings was getting some information for me. The address of one of the ladies at the prayer meeting this morning. Hettie - Foster?'

The vicar's eyes widened. 'Harriet Foster? Why? Why do you need her address?'

Joseph hesitated. Besides not knowing whether they were talking about the same person, he still wasn't sure how much to confide.

He suddenly realised he needed to make a decision quickly. He spun a mental coin, which came down Heads.

His mother, of course, would have taken his father's belt to him for daring to play games of chance. But his mother, he told himself again, was no longer the major influence in his life. He also determined that sooner or later, he was going to believe that.

'Father Rawlings,' he said, 'as I was trying to explain this morning, Hettie - Miss Foster - killed Miss Mabel Cartwright whilst we were in the meeting. It seems that the police do not believe me, and I wish to ask her to tell them the truth. That is why I asked Mrs Rawlings for her address.'

'Oh, well.' The vicar waved a hand, as if in dismissal. 'As to that, I could have told them Miss Foster was likely to have been behind Miss Cartwright's death. She normally is whenever one of the elderly parishioners go to glory while at the prayer meeting.'

Joseph stared at him, aware that his jaw was once again heading floorwards. 'You could have told the police that Miss Foster killed Miss Cartwright?'

'Now you're repeating what I say, Joseph. You really ought to rid yourself of this habit.'

'But - but -' Joseph wasn't sure how to say, 'Then why the hell *didn't* you tell them!' He didn't have the required vocabulary, for a start; and besides, he was too stunned to say anything.

However, Father Rawlings saved him the necessity of doing so, by continuing: 'The thing is - why would Clarissa have gone out at this time?'

'She would not normally?'

'Not unless she's on a pastoral visit. She does often visit the sick for me.'

'So she may be doing so now?'

The vicar shook his head. 'I don't believe we have any sick at the moment. All our flock are rampantly healthy.'

'And besides,' he continued, 'Clarissa would never be so rude as to go out and leave a visitor. It's most unlike her.' Once again he swept the room as if expecting to see his wife climb out of the sideboard or somewhere.

Joseph's thoughts had been turning in a very unpleasant direction, and now he felt he had to follow them. 'Father Rawlings, I think that we may need to try to find Clarissa - Mrs Rawlings, I mean. I told her a - well, a small untruth; and she may have gone to see Hettie Foster to verify my statement. If she has - then I am afraid that she may be in terrible danger.'

The vicar's face turned a deathly pale. 'You mean that she might be visiting a murderer?'

Joseph forbore to point out that the vicar was now repeating what *he'd* just said. Instead, he leapt to his feet. 'Father Rawlings - do you know the address of Miss Foster?'

'Well, no. But it will be on the membership list.'

He too rose from his chair; more of a lurch than a leap, though. 'Wait there,' he said. 'I'll fetch it.'

'Hurry, sir.'

Father Rawlings paused as he reached the door. 'Be assured, Mr Makumbo,' he said, with a tone as severe as anything Joseph's mother could have summoned, 'that your lies will be exposed to the light.'

That is all very well, Joseph thought. But for myself, I am more worried about your wife being exposed to someone with a pointy object in their hat.

'Do hurry, Father Rawlings,' he urged.

But having intoned his warning, the vicar had already left the room.