

## AN AUTHOR'S ENQUIRY

### Chapter One

‘Your mornin’ paper, Sir.’

The sudden cast shadow made Alistair Marsh look up. The short, rather sullen looking woman loomed over him with a copy of *The Pall Mall Gazette* in her hand.

‘Oh,’ he said, setting his tea cup down on the water-stained mahogany table. ‘Thank you, Mrs. Simmons.’

‘You’re welcome, Sir. Though why you insist on ‘aving yesterday evenin’s paper I will never understand...’

As she walked away, a trail of bergamot and lavender scent was left wafting about the room.

‘It’s called *research*!’ he called out after her but other than the slam of a door, there came no reply.

Marsh tutted and looked over the opening article, ‘THE QUEEN’S JUBILEE AND THE TWENTY-FIRST YEAR OF DR. BARNARDO’S HOMES’ ran the headline. Sighing, he couldn’t help but roll his eyes as he thumbed quickly through the pages. It was only when the clock chimed ten did he realise he’d been engrossed in the local obituaries for almost an hour. With numb hands, he stood up, stretched and retired to the fireplace. A large wood-framed mirror stood atop the mantle above it, gathering dust. Marsh wiped away the thin cobwebs and peered into it.

‘You’re getting on, old boy,’ he whispered to himself, pulling at the crow’s feet in the corner of his eyes. His reflection stayed silent; the wrinkles and bruises of his skin an unhappy reminder of the time he’d wasted.

‘You’re only as old as me,’ came an unexpected voice from behind him. ‘Younger, in fact!’

Marsh didn’t turn but shifted his gaze back towards the mirror that displayed a paralleled view of the room. He spotted a well-dressed man hovering in the doorway, unlit tobacco pipe in hand.

‘Oh devil, who let you in?’

The man laughed as he pocketed the pipe and stepped into the room.

‘Come now, Marsh. There’s no need to be grumpy on such a lovely morning as this.’

Marsh sighed heavily.

‘I take it you didn’t see last night’s broadsheets then?’ he said, indicating the newspaper left on the armchair.

‘Alas,’ his friend began, shrugging off his coat. ‘I did not. Though I can assume their content.’

Marsh turned around to face him, ‘I don’t care for the Royals, Evans.’

‘I know, old friend.’

Evans’ rosy cheeks blushed a warm tone of fuchsia as he brushed one large hand through his tousled brown locks. He turned his gaze to that of the open window; beady blue eyes sparkling as if caught in a sunbeam. Marsh watched him for a moment, silently cursing his positive demeanor. Reluctantly, he threw himself back down on the arm chair and patted the couch beside him.

‘And to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?’ Marsh said.

As he sat, Evans smiled. Slowly, he reached into the pocket of his tartan waistcoat and produced a cream coloured piece of paper with cursive writing scribbled neatly across it.

‘This came from Scotland Yard this morning.’

Marsh’s thin upper-lip curled. Running his fingers through his sleek black hair, he turned and snatched the envelope from Evans.

‘Addressed to you, and only you, I see,’ he said bitterly, fidgeting with the letter in his hands.

‘Come now, Marsh. We can’t be having this again.’

Marsh chuckled coldly, ‘I can assure you I haven’t the faintest idea of what you might mean, Evans.’

‘Inspector Galloway is a good man and an old friend of mine. I know you two don’t see eye-to-eye, but he calls for my help and I would like to think I can comply with his wishes.’

A bead of sweat formed on Evans’ brow and trickled down to his clean-shaven cheek. Taking an emerald handkerchief from his pocket, the man quickly dabbed it away.

‘Evans,’ Marsh began, placing both palms firmly on the arms of the chair. ‘It is not that we do not see eye-to-eye, it is simply a clash of strategy.’

Evans rolled his eyes.

‘But as you are my kindest friend I will try and indeed be, as you once so graciously put it, *civil*.’

An abrupt soft breeze ran through the house and blew several papers from the desk around the room. Evans watched for a moment, captivated by the way the light shone through the browning paper to form shadows on the walls.

‘Evans?’

The man stirred from his impromptu daydream and was greeted by Marsh’s bony, outstretched hand.

He shook it firmly, 'Thank you.'

Suddenly the door swung open and in walked Mrs. Simmons, carrying an enormous laden tray.

'I thought you might fancy a spot o' tea, Sir,' she announced, stepping over the stray pages on the floor.

Marsh tried to interject, 'We're actually in the middle of someth-'

'Would you like a hand, Mrs. Simmons?' Evans asked, stepping towards her with an extended arm, though the woman shook her head.

'Oh no, no, Mr. Evans, you tak' a seat, Sir. I'll get on wi' this.'

Marsh tapped his foot impatiently on the Jacquard woven carpet. Mrs. Simmons bumbled about the room, stacking books high on the side-table and making room for the tea tray.

'I'm poppin' your stories up on the shelf, Sir,' she said, doing so.

'They aren't *stories*,' Marsh replied with disgust, watching as dust settled around him. 'They are highly sought-after pieces of literature.'

Mrs. Simmons ignored him, 'I say, in't it a lovely mornin'?'

'Are you quite done, madam?' Marsh spat.

Evans furrowed his eyebrows and sat forward.

'Alistair,' he said sternly, before turning back to the lady. 'Indeed it is, Mrs. Simmons. Truly glorious weather we are having recently, is it not?'

The house-keeper smiled at him as she dropped two heavy cubes of sugar into each tea cup.

'Oh yes, Sir. The streetlamps weren't lit 'til seven last night; summer's coming, I tell 'ya.'

Evans nodded, 'Indeed. Do you get out in the sunshine often, Mrs. Simmons?'

'Not recently, Mr. Evans. Mr. Marsh keeps me under lock an' key on weekdays.'

Marsh, who had picked up the newspaper again in an attempt to distract himself, shook his head.

'Your job is to clean and cook, is it not Mrs. Simmons?'

The old lady turned to him, "'Tis, Sir.'

'And would that task not require one to be *inside* the house?'

Evans let out an unimpressed yawn.

'It would, Sir,' she replied.

'Very well then.'

Marsh sat back in the chair and scanned the article in his hand.

'Though it would be nice t' see daylight once in a while,' muttered Mrs. Simmons', as she clattered the tea-cup onto the table, sloshing hot milk over the side and onto Marsh's lap.

He leapt up from the seat, pulling at his trouser leg, 'Dash it woman! What do you think you're doing? Are you trying to scald me?'

Evans couldn't help but try and stifle his erupting laughter.

'I do apologise, Mr. Marsh,' Mrs. Simmons replied calmly, taking a napkin from the tray and handing it to him. 'My mistake.'

Marsh shot back a glare as he snatched the tissue from her, 'Be gone, madam. Away with you now!'

The woman shuffled out of the room, leaving only the echo of a door slam running through the corridors.

‘Do stop smiling, Evans,’ Marsh requested, as he looked up at his cheery companion.

Evans clapped his hands together and watched the man struggle with the damp stain.

Giving up, Marsh threw the napkin across the room, ‘She is quite possibly the worst housekeeper I have ever had.’

‘I think she’s wonderful.’

Marsh sucked in his cheeks, ‘I’d like to read the damn note now.’

Still chuckling, Evans sat back in his seat whilst Marsh cleared his throat.

‘Dear Hugo,’ he began. *‘I hope this letter finds you well and that you’re keeping busy. I apologise for being so upfront, but my friend I am in need of assistance.’*

Marsh looked up.

‘You were a constable only five years, surely he values his own judgement higher than yours?’

‘It was seven years,’ Evans replied with a sigh, ‘and he claims that I have a certain ‘knack for detection’.’

Dropping the letter to his lap, Marsh raised an eyebrow.

‘Is that so?’ he smirked.

Evans folded his arms across his chest, ‘Read on, won’t you?’

*‘There has been a report of foul play in the area. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, I caught wind of an unsolved case from the Cambridgeshire Constabulary who claim to have found the body of a deceased*

*woman with no indication to cause of death. It seems their inquiry has been halted somewhat and, as her last known movements before returning to Cambridge were in Surrey, they would like the Metropolitan Police to investigate. I know you lead a rather different lifestyle now Hugo, but if you could help out an old friend my gratitude would be eternal. Signed, Edmund Galloway.'*

Marsh paused for a moment and placed the letter beside the newspaper on the table.

'I say.' He took a deep breath, 'Will you abide?'

Evans looked up at his friend.

'Why of course,' he replied. 'In fact I've already called ahead and made arrangements, so you'd better get dressed. As we are not eight miles from the scene, I presume it won't be too long a journey. The cab will be here shortly.'

Evans stood from his seat and picked up the porcelain cup. Once the tea had been drained, he took the handkerchief from his pocket again and patted his neatly trimmed moustache.

'Well come on then Marsh, look alive!'

Marsh, however, only looked concerned.

'Evans,' he sighed, also standing up. 'I don't know if this is one of your best ideas...'

A knock from outside caught their attention.

'Enter.'

Mrs. Simmons poked her head around the door, 'Beggin' ya pardon Sirs, but there's an 'ansom waiting for you.'

'Thank you, we'll be there in a moment or so,' Evans smiled.

With a simple nod, Mrs. Simmons swiftly departed.

‘Marsh,’ the man continued, retrieving his coat and cap from the nearby stand. ‘Please put some clothes on, we have somewhere to be.’

‘Old friend, I really don’t think Inspector Galloway would want me to be-’

Evans silenced him with the raising of his hand.

‘I thought it might be inspiration for your next novel.’

Marsh’s eyes widened and his ears pricked up.

‘Now you come to mention it,’ he mumbled, fiddling with a piece of twine coming stray from the arm of the sofa. ‘I am rather lost for ideas at the moment.’

Evans smiled as the sound of horse hooves upon cobblestone drifted in through the open window.

‘Give me five minutes and I’ll be with you.’

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The drive to Oxshott was relatively calm, bar Evans’ insistence on reading aloud *The Pall Mall Gazette*’s Golden Jubilee Weekend itinerary accompanied by Marsh’s dramatic sighs of irritation. At eleven minutes past midday exactly, the hansom cab pulled up outside ‘The Surrey Royal Hotel’ and both men stepped down from the carriage.

‘Remind me, Evans,’ Marsh said stretching his neck with a circular head roll, ‘If the woman was found in Cambridge, why are we here?’

Evans tipped the driver, booked a return trip and then started to walk towards the large double doored entrance with Marsh pacing alongside him.

‘Galloway said this is where she was last seen. Apparently she’d taken a short trip.’

Marsh nodded and marvelled at the ivory tiled ceiling above him. Swirls of turquoise blue decorated the walls with teardrops of yellow and magenta painted onto glass above the entrance.

‘Rather majestic, isn’t it?’ Evans said, pulling at the collar of his rather creased white shirt.

‘I’d say,’ replied Marsh.

On the top step was a man, standing with his hands tightly clasped behind his back, sporting a red jacket with a matching silver-lined peaked cap. He pulled the door open and nodded as the gentlemen passed.

‘Thank you,’ they each said in turn before walking into the entrance hall. A grand staircase lay ahead, the banisters adorned with ornate gold leafing whilst a crystal chandelier hung above, providing a perfectly symmetrical balance for the rest of the room. Beside the door, to the left, lay a quaint, maple-wood table with a book and white feathered quill on top. Marsh wandered over to it and glanced at the front cover. It was dark green leather with the words ‘guest book’ written in black calligraphy along on the spine. He opened it and flicked to the last few pages, reading the penultimate entry.

‘Sylvia Price,’ he said aloud.

‘That’s her.’

Marsh turned and saw Inspector Galloway standing by the eccentric flower display in the middle of the room. His hand was outstretched towards Evans, who took it gleefully.

‘Wonderful to see you, dear friend!’ he said, pumping his arm up and down. ‘However unfortunate the circumstances.’

‘Indeed,’ replied Evans, eventually retracting the clasp and adjusting his necktie. Marsh cleared his throat agitatedly and the Inspector finally acknowledged his presence.

‘Ah,’ he said, raising his eyebrows in Marsh’s direction.

He turned his glare back to Evans, ‘I see you brought the writer.’

The last word was spat so bitterly that Marsh couldn’t stifle his insult.

‘Do you taste something foul, Galloway?’ he asked, slamming the guest book shut. ‘Or is it just my career choices that leave you foaming at the mouth?’

‘Listen here, you,’ said the Inspector, taking three quick strides across the room, his finger wagging in front of his face. Evans ran up alongside him.

‘Now, now gentlemen, please let’s put this to rest!’ he begged, standing between them. The two men scowled at each other.

Galloway squinted. His nose was wrinkled and his brow furrowed as he spoke, ‘Don’t ruin my case, Mr. Marsh.’

Marsh’s face remained expressionless as he twisted the cufflinks of his shirt.

‘I wouldn’t dream of it, Sir,’ he replied.

Galloway retreated slightly and looked back at Evans.

‘You know he isn’t qualified to be here?’

Evans shrugged his shoulders, ‘True but, quite frankly, neither am I. Not anymore.’

Marsh smirked and patted him on the back with a loud thump.

‘Still as sharp as a tack though, aren’t you Evans?’ he laughed, as the hostile atmosphere eventually evaporated. ‘Fill us in won’t you, Galloway?’

The Inspector bared his teeth like a dog ready for a fight, though he quickly gritted them and took out a piece of paper from his overcoat pocket.

‘This is the report that came up from Cambridge today,’ he explained, passing the telegram over to Evans. ‘We now know that Mrs. Sylvia Lee stayed here for three nights last week, checked out on the Saturday evening and was found on the front-door step of her house in Buckden the next morning.’

Marsh cocked his head, ‘The inscription in the guest book claims ‘Price’ as her name?’

Galloway looked at him, debating whether he reply with civility or overlook the comment entirely. Ultimately, he decided upon the former.

‘That’s how she checked in. It seems she goes by her maiden name when travelling.’

‘How peculiar,’ commented Evans, rubbing his forehead.

‘Indeed,’ the Inspector said.

The men pored over the telegram with just the tick of the grandfather clock piercing their attention.

‘The instruction from Cambridge says to interview the last eye-witness,’ Marsh said, pointing at the piece of paper.

‘Yes,’ Galloway grumbled, snatching the letter back from him. ‘It does.’

‘Right,’ said Evans, clapping his hands together and sending an excited smile back at both gentlemen. ‘Who is it we are talking to first?’

‘The porter,’ replied the Inspector, as he headed for the door. ‘Other than the ticket collector at the railway station, *he* was the last person to see Sylvia Lee alive.’

ISABEL WYATT

## FULL PLOT SYNOPSIS

Following the events of Chapter 1, Marsh, Evans and Inspector Galloway interrogate the hotel's porter, a man named Jack Morgan. From him, it is revealed that Sylvia Lee was a regular visitor to 'The Surrey Royal Hotel' and frequented the same room every third Wednesday of the month.

After another quick-tempered feud between the Inspector and Marsh, Galloway dismisses both the men from the case, though Marsh convinces Evans to keep up the investigation on the sly. Whilst exploring Lee's guestroom, Marsh finds a letter addressed to the victim, but is quickly interrupted by a startled chambermaid, who drops her laundry basket and flees. Worried that they'll be found out, the men promptly leave, but not before Evans finds a small glass bottle underneath the bed.

Back in London, Marsh discovers that the letter had previously been opened but then resealed again, proving it had been tampered with. Evans accidentally leaves the glass bottle on the table and it is found by Mrs. Simmons who asks what they could 'possibly need with rat poison?'.

Marsh visits the author of the letter, John Clarke, who admits to having an affair with Sylvia Lee. He says he left the sealed letter on Lee's desk the night she died, though noted the chambermaid walking by as he was leaving, claiming she was there to 'tidy the room'.

Marsh immediately hails a cab and he and Evans return to the hotel. Upon arrival, Morgan leads them to Edith Shaw, the chambermaid, who is stood in the open window of Lee's room, clutching a photograph of John Clarke. As Evans tries to talk her down, Inspector Galloway arrives at the scene and commands Marsh to explain himself. Marsh reveals that it was slow-

action rodenticide that killed Sylvia Lee, ingested from a cup of tea made by Shaw just before Lee checked out of the hotel. She'd tried to dispose of the evidence, but the bottle under the bed had been wrapped up in the laundry that Shaw dropped when she first encountered Marsh and Evans in the bedroom. Shaw admits that she was in love with Clarke, and became aware of his affair with Lee as she was dusting the bedroom. Recognising Clarke's handwriting, she opened the letter and read his request for Lee to run away with him to Newcastle. Once she resealed the letter, using candle wax and the flame from the stove in the hotel's kitchen, her obsession became uncontrollable. Infuriated by the concept of never seeing Clarke again, she blamed Lee for taking him away and set out to get kill her using a poison found in the hotel's cleaning cupboard.

Finally Evans talks Shaw down from the window, and she is immediately arrested by Inspector Galloway.