

THE
MURDER
OF
MARY RUSSELL



*A novel of suspense featuring
Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes*

LAURIE R. KING



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SUSSEX



CHAPTER ONE

9:15 a.m.

Irony comes in many flavours, sweet to bitter. The harshest irony I ever tasted was this: when I was interrupted that spring morning, I felt only relief.

But then, tyres on wet gravel sound nothing like the crack of doom.

The noise caught me in the midst of an attack on the post overflowing my desk in Sussex. Since dawn, I'd been elbow-deep in five months' worth of pleas, adverts, requests for information now out of date, proposals of joint ventures similarly belated, legal and scholarly papers in need of review, and a thin handful of actual letters from friends near and far. I wanted nothing more than to haul the lot outside and set a match to it.

When I heard the noise, I assumed it was Mrs Hudson, returning for some forgotten element of her morning's trip to Eastbourne. However, the tyres sounded more tentative than Patrick's hand on the wheel (Patrick Mason was my farm manager and our housekeeper's occasional driver). Nor did the approaching engine sound familiar. A taxi bringing Holmes, perhaps, finished with his unspecified tasks for his brother, Mycroft? I hadn't seen my husband since he'd left Oxford, two weeks before.

But a glance through the library window showed an unfamiliar car with London number plates and a solitary figure considerably smaller than Sherlock Holmes. The driver circled counter-clockwise, coming to a halt before the house.

I headed to the door with a light heart: unarguable proof that Mary Russell had no talent for reading the future.

I stepped from the front door into the roofed portico beyond, stopping as the fickle morning sunshine gave way to another quick shower. The driver's door opened, but he hesitated, seeing not just the rain, but me. He'd expected someone else.

"May I help you?" I called.

"Er, the Holmeses?"

"This is the place," I confirmed. The shower grew stronger, spattering down the drive, and although the day was warm enough, I had no wish to change out of wet clothes. I turned to rummage through the odd population of canes, sticks, and tools in the corner of the entryway, but before I could locate an umbrella that functioned, the car door slammed and footsteps hurried across the stones. I let go the handle and gave the visitor some room under the shelter.

He was a short, stocky man in his forties, wearing a new black overcoat, an old brown suit, and a cloth driving cap that he now pulled off, snapping it clear of drops before arranging it back over his blond hair. His brief question had been insufficient to betray an accent, but it had to be either Australian or South African—his pale blue eyes positively blazed out of sun-darkened skin, and his suit had a distinctly colonial air to it. I had just chosen Australia when his greeting confirmed it.

"G'day, Ma'am. Nice place you got here."

With that greeting, I finally raised a mental eyebrow.

A person's first words can reveal a great deal more than the speaker's origins. The closer one sticks to the traditional forms—*Good day, Madam, terribly sorry to bother you but . . .* or a chatty variation such as, *Dreadful weather for May, Ma'am, please don't come any further into it, I just . . .*—the smoother the transition into a stranger's life. But *Nice place you got here*, coupled with a blithe spattering of drops across the entry tiles and

a grin that showed too many teeth? The man was out to sell me something.

Had I actually been working that morning—had I not been so grateful for any interruption at all—I might simply have taken another step back and shut the door in his face. Might not even have gone out at all, for that matter, thus setting events off in a very different direction. But with nothing more compelling than a stack of mail to draw me, that self-assured grin made for a nice little challenge.

Wouldn't one think that life with Sherlock Holmes would have taught me all about the perils of boredom? And overconfidence? But like a fool, I felt only relief at this holiday from envelopes. "My husband is not here at the moment."

Another young woman might have said those words apologetically, or perhaps nervously. I merely stated them as fact. He gave me a quick glance, head to toe, taking in my short but decidedly unfashionable haircut, my complete lack of makeup, the old shirt I wore (one of Holmes' with its sleeves rolled up), and the trousers on my legs. He reacted with a degree more sensitivity than I might have expected. His posture subsided, his bare grin gave way to something more polite, and he removed his hat again, this time a gesture of respect rather than convenience. Even his words reflected the change.

"Sorry, Ma'am, but it's not him I'm looking for. I wonder . . . does Mrs Hudson live here? Mrs Clari—Clara Hudson?"

"She does, but—"

His right hand shot out at me. "Then you must be the missus. Mary Russell? You look just like she described you!"

I stifled my arm's automatic impulse—to catch that outstretched hand and whirl him against the wall—and instead permitted him to grab me and pump away, grinning into my face. Still a salesman.

After four shakes I took back my hand. "Sir," I began.

"Is she here? My mother?"

If he'd squatted down to tip me head over heels, he could not have astonished me more. *Mother??*

He saw my reaction, and gave a sort of smacking-of-the-forehead

gesture. “What am I thinking? Guess I’m a little excited. My name is Samuel—Samuel Hudson. Great ta meetcha,” and the hand came out again to seize mine.

Mother?

Of all the mysteries that are love, maternal love may be the most basic. My own mother had died when I was fourteen. A few months later, with the raw instincts of a barnyard chick imprinting its affections on the first available surrogate, my bereft heart had claimed Mrs Hudson for its own. I had known her for ten years now, lived with her for more than four, and she was as close to a mother as I would ever again have.

I knew of course that she had a son in Australia—or rather, she had a “nephew” whom her sister claimed as her own. Glimpses of an older person’s complex and unspoken history can be startling, even when one’s main source of comparison is a dedicated Bohemian like Sherlock Holmes. Perhaps especially in that case: Mrs Hudson had always been a point of solid dependability amidst the anarchy that surrounded Holmes.

Motherhood is more than a biological state. Yes, I knew—well, suspected—about her past, but I had never conducted the close investigation I might have with a stranger, and definitely never asked Holmes if Mrs Hudson had been married before giving over the child to be raised. I admit that a few weeks into our acquaintance, when it dawned on me that the nephew might in fact be a son, my first reaction was an adolescent giggle over the idea of Mrs Hudson as a fallen woman. My second reaction was curiosity. Oddly, Holmes refused to say anything about the matter. It took a while before I realised that his blatant unconcern was the only way he could grant his poor housekeeper (as if she wasn’t so much more than housekeeper!) some degree of privacy.

Once I saw this, I followed his lead. I made no further attempts to rifle her possessions or read the letters from Australia—written largely by her sister (who had died, some nine months before this) although Mrs Hudson’s interest clearly lay more in the news about their shared son. To judge by the sighs and a general air of distraction after each letter’s arrival, it was not an easy relationship. In fact, her “nephew” seemed to be

something of a ne'er do well, but since she never asked for assistance or advice, we could only politely ignore her unspoken woes.

Until now, when he stood on our doorstep.

Assuming this *was* Samuel Hudson.

Would most young women accept such a claim without question? Perhaps. And perhaps most young women would be justified in their naïve acceptance. However, I was married to Sherlock Holmes, had known him only a few hours longer than I'd known Mrs Hudson, and the basic fact of life with Holmes was: the world is filled with enemies.

So, I would not permit this person to meet Mrs Hudson without a thorough vetting.

All of this reflection and decision took me approximately three of the fellow's hand-pumps. I bared my teeth to make a grin at least the equal of his, and drew back to welcome him inside (which had the added benefit of removing my hand from his).

"She's away for the morning," I told him, "I'm not sure exactly when she'll be back. However, I can probably manage to make you a cup of tea in her absence. Unless you'd rather have coffee?"

"A cuppa would go down a treat," he said, then to clarify: "Tea, thanks."

I closed the door against the cool air and led him into the main room, our idiosyncratic combination of sitting room, library, and dining room. The south wall, to my right, had a table in the bay window, where we took our meals; the east wall held laden bookshelves, and French doors to the terrace; on the north lay a wide fireplace with chairs and a settee, along with the entrance to the kitchen. Holmes' observation beehive, set into the wall beside the bay window, was behind its cover.

"Whadda great room," the visitor enthused.

I bit off my tart response—*I'm sorry, it's not for sale*—and instead turned the topic onto a more pertinent track. "Not to be rude, but I don't suppose you have any sort of identification? You don't look much like her." Mrs Hudson's grey hair had once been brown, not blonde, and her dark eyes were nothing like this man's bright blue. Even if the fellow had been born "Samuel Hudson," it was a common enough surname. He

might be some lunatic with a Sherlock Holmes mania built around a minor coincidence.

If so, this would not be the first fantasist to waltz into our lives, although the odds were mounting in his favour: he was certainly from Australia, and he knew not only our names, but where we lived. Still, the thought of that hand clamping down over Mrs Hudson's beloved palm . . .

(I recount these details to show that I was not entirely oblivious to the world around me. Just not attentive enough.)

"Nah, guess I don't," he said, running a hand over his visage. "That's probably why I never doubted who my mother was—Mum and I both have my granddad's looks, or so I'm told. Identification, is it? I didn't bring my passport, didn't expect—ah, what about these?" His fingers came out of an inner pocket with a photograph and a golden chain. He handed me the first.

It showed two women and an infant. The women sat in the formal pose required of a slow shutter speed, although it had been taken in a garden, not a studio—a private garden, most likely, since neither wore a hat. The infant was as unformed as any small human, little more than pale hair and layers of cloth. The woman holding him was blonde, with light-coloured eyes, and I thought—as I had from the first time I'd seen this photograph, years before—that there was something odd about the way the woman's hands clutched the baby, thrusting him at the camera rather than cuddling him to her. Her features, too, had some faint air of hidden meaning, a triumph almost, that made one very aware of the empty hands of the woman at her side.

The other woman, taller, straight of back and dark of hair and eye, looked into the camera with a gaze of sad acceptance. Even if I had not recognised this woman's features, I would have known her by that expression: *I see what you are up to*, it said, *but I love you anyway*.

Heaven knows she'd had plenty of opportunities to look at me that way, over the years.

I handed the photograph back to Samuel Hudson. "She has a copy of that." I did not add, *Hers is worn down to the paper from ten thousand*

touches of her finger. My mother had used that very gesture, on the mezuzah at our door.

“Well, that’s me,” he said. “With my mother and aunt—although until just a few months ago, I thought the two went the other way around.”

I glanced up sharply at the bitter edge in his voice, to see his other piece of evidence dangling from thumb and forefinger: a gold chain strung through a hole drilled in an old half sovereign coin.

“Does she still wear hers?” he asked.

The chain looked too bright and the gold of the pendant less worn than I remembered, but the necklace definitely caught my attention. I’d never seen it around Mrs Hudson’s neck, but I recognised it as the flash of gold I’d first spotted years before, tucked in the bottom of her incongruously large and ornate jewellery box. I might have taken no notice, at the time, but for the casual haste with which she had flipped something over it.

“No, she doesn’t wear one like that,” I told him.

“Well,” he said, “I guess she’ll remember it anyway.” He gave it a polish on his coat-tails, held it up in admiration, then set off on a circuit of the room, pausing on his way to drop the chain over the jack-knife Holmes always left on the mantelpiece. I watched with increasing unease as he surveyed the walls, peered at the books on the shelves, poked an obtrusive finger through the clutter of papers and oddments on the table under the window. I was sorry I’d invited him in. And I changed my mind about letting him cool his heels here until she returned.

I would give him a polite cup of tea, and I would get rid of him. Let Mrs Hudson meet him on her own terms.

“Tea,” I said. “Just let me put on the kettle. How long have you been in England? I hope your trip went well—that you weren’t caught in those storms I read about last month?”

As I moved in the direction of the kitchen, I became aware of two things. First, I wanted badly to be alone, just for a minute, so I could try to beat my thoughts into order. (*Mother? Mother! Though nothing like her. Shouldn’t I be pleased? Does that make him my sort-of . . . brother? But—*) Second and even more peculiar, while my mouth was making conversa-

tion, my body wanted nothing to do with him. I was edging away towards the kitchen door because I did not want to turn my back on this man.

What was going on? I knew of no wrongdoing on his part, other than making his mother sigh. Still, I kept retreating backwards, making conversation as I went—too bad he'd hit a rainy day because the view from Beachy Head was glorious. Where did he live in Australia? Was he staying in Sussex or just down from London for the day?

Sydney, came the reply (which I knew) and only for the day (a relief, although he hadn't come far that morning: the car bonnet was shiny, not hot enough to steam away the rain). At that point, my heels touched wood, so I ducked through the door and let it close, to stand with my hands resting on the old, well-scrubbed wooden table. I took a deep breath, then another.

I, better than most, had reason to understand that when one does not face up to events, they return—with a vengeance. My mother's death and my desperate adoption of Mrs Hudson in her place might be facts of a distant past—but only until a situation came along to upend matters.

Well, that situation had arrived. Mrs Hudson was not my mother. Mrs Hudson was getting old, and deserved a full relationship with her son—her *actual* child—before she died. That he was a touch smarmy for my taste had nothing to do with matters.

After a moment, I scrubbed my damp palms down my shirt-front and picked up the kettle. (*The new whistling tea-kettle that I gave her for her birthday, just last—Oh, get a hold of yourself, Russell!*) I filled it, shoved the whistle in place, and set its broad bottom over the flame. I would not hurry. Samuel Hudson might push through the door at any moment, to invade his mother's private realm, but he had the right to invade. This was his mother's home. If she were here, she would permit him inside. Therefore, so would I.

But I was relieved when he did not follow me.

Kettle on, two cups on a tray, anything else a hostess ought to do? A plate of something hospitable, perhaps? I searched through the tins where she stored her baked goods, and found a startling array of biscuits,

sponges, and tea cakes—ah, yes: we were having a party on Saturday. I hesitated between her Sultana biscuits and a loaf with strips of lemon peel on the top. Which would an Australian salesman prefer? Perhaps I should ask.

“Mrs—your *mother* has made Sultana biscuits and a lemon loaf. Which would you—”

My voice strangled to a halt as I stepped into the sitting room and looked into the working end of a revolver.

Behind the gun stood a man with murder in his eyes.