



A DREW
FARTHERING
MYSTERY

Death
—by the—
BOOK

JULIANNA
DEERING



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Julianna Deering, Death by the Book
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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*To the One who knows me
and loves me still*

— One —

Drew Farthering dropped to one knee to get a closer look at the note.

It was a lovely thing really, written with an old-fashioned quill pen on thick, yellowed paper, the handwriting embellished with the generous loops and flourishes of Queen Elizabeth's day. In fact, it looked as if it could be from her time entirely. Sweet. Romantic. But it lost some of its charm when one read the terse message: *Advice to Jack*. The effect was further spoilt when one realized that the note was secured by means of an ornate Victorian hatpin driven into the heart of Quinton Colman Montford.

That Mr. Montford was in no position to be inconvenienced by this was largely due to the vigorous application of a marble bookend to the balding back of his head.

"Not much to go on." Drew stood and picked up the two halves of the bookend, a bust of Shakespeare only recently separated at the neck. "You did say this had been checked for fingerprints?"

"I did *not* say. But yes, it has. There aren't any." Chief Inspector Birdsong pursed his lips under his shaggy mustache. "Weren't any."

"Must have hit him awfully hard to crack it into pieces this way."

"Or it broke on the grate there when he fell."

Drew examined the hearth and then scanned the room. The Empire Hotel in Winchester exuded respectability and quality without ostentation. Just the image that would be prized by Whyland, Montford, Clifton and Russ of London. No doubt it would be Whyland, Clifton and Russ now.

"How long ago?"

Birdsong shrugged his stooped shoulders. "I'd say an hour, more or less. We'll have to let the coroner determine that."

"He couldn't have fallen this way. Not if he was clouted on the back of the head."

"Obviously the killer turned him over, the better to attach the message." The chief inspector peered at Drew. "And tell me again just how you happened to turn up at a fresh murder, young Farthering?"

"Appointment. Quarter past two. To discuss finalizing my, um, mother's and stepfather's estates and revising my own will." Drew looked at him expectantly.

"Right. So you said at first. And you didn't go to his office in London because . . . ?"

"He had other business to see to, as did I. I've been looking for someone competent to manage Farlinford Processing for me, so it was simpler for both of us just to meet here in Winchester."

"Did he tell you what his business was?"

Drew shook his head. "No, of course not."

"Of course not. And how long had Mr. Montford been your solicitor?"

"I believe my father put the firm on retainer about 1907 or 1908. Before I was born, at any rate, so a good twenty-five years or more now. So what's it mean? 'Advice to Jack.' Who's Jack?"

"No idea as yet," Birdsong admitted, the expression on his craggy face as world-weary as any old bloodhound's. "Bring anyone to your mind?"

"I'm afraid not, Chief Inspector. A client of the firm, perhaps?"

"Yes, well, we're checking that, though I expect there would be any number of Jacks or Johns or even Jonathans utilizing a law firm of any size. I wonder what advice our Mr. Montford could have given this Jack."

"Evidently, it wasn't very well received."

Drew looked down at the body. Montford was lying with his head thrown back, his mouth slackly open, one arm crumpled at an awkward angle beneath him.

"He couldn't have felt a thing. Thank God for that, poor fellow." Drew knelt once more, turning the head to study the wound on the back of the skull. "Looks rather like the killer was a tallish chap. My height or very nearly."

"Quite probably."

"I presume the pin was, ah, used after death?"

"It would seem so." Birdsong touched one callused fingertip to the small, dark stain on the front of the man's finely made shirt. "Stabbed through like that alive, I'd expect a good deal more blood than this. Clearly he was bludgeoned first."

The spatters on the grate and the hearth and the sticky reddish-brown that had soaked into the carpeting were testament enough to that.

Drew took careful hold of Montford's sleeve, lifting his hand. "Where's his ring?"

“Eh?”

“His wedding ring.” Drew pointed out the pale band of flesh and slight indentation on the third finger of the left hand. “I don’t suppose you chaps found it anywhere? Pocket perhaps?”

“No. All that was in his pockets were a few pound notes, some odd pence, ring of keys, nothing out of the ordinary.”

Drew shook his head. “He was a nice chap. Always a kind word when I was a boy, even when I’m sure I was a dreadful nuisance. My father liked him very much. My stepfather, as well.”

“Perhaps he wasn’t quite what he seemed.”

“I suppose there’s always that possibility, Inspector. Ah, well. Is there any way I can be of help here?”

“No, I suppose not. If you happen to think of anything that might be useful, you know where to reach me.”

“Certainly.”

“At any rate, I don’t expect that you will need to reach me.” Birdsong looked at Drew from under his heavy brows, and his meaning was clear.

“No need to warn me off.”

“True enough.” Birdsong’s scowl deepened. “Warning you off didn’t do the slightest bit of good last time, either.”

“Inspector, I assure you, I have no interest in this case. I was acquainted with the man, and I’m truly sorry to see he’s dead, but I have no idea who could have killed him or why. I assume you and your men are best equipped to discover that.”

“Quite right.” Birdsong narrowed his eyes. “All the same, if you *were* to think of something, it’s your duty to report it.”

“You may rely upon me.”

There was a tap on the door, and one of the uniformed officers came into the room. “They’re here to collect the body now, sir, if you are done.”

"All right, Barnes. We've just finished up." Birdsong turned to Drew. "If you'll excuse us now, sir . . ."

"Just leaving. Er, have they informed Mrs. Montford?"

"Someone is seeing to that, yes."

"Poor woman. I must send condolences to her. I met her a time or two when I was a boy. Charming lady."



Drew took the road past Farthering Place and into the village. He didn't want to think about murder anymore, unless of course it was written in the pages of a cracking mystery novel. It was about time for the latest release on the list from the Mystery Mavens' Newsletter if he had his dates in order. Perhaps Mrs. Harkness would take pity on him and let him buy a copy before she sent them out to everyone else. This time he'd be ahead of the game, and Madeline would be the one who had to wait.

Farthering St. John was comfortingly usual that afternoon. He waved as he drove past old Mrs. Beecham tending her roses, and sat smiling as Mr. Farnsworth drove his seemingly endless flock of sheep across the road in front of him. It was already early August and the spring lambs were getting big. Madeline would never forgive him if he didn't take her out to see them soon.

When the way was finally clear, Drew drove down the high street and pulled up in front of the Royal Elizabeth Inn, fondly known as the Queen Bess, the center of everything in the village and just down from the bookshop.

He got out of the Rolls and stepped into the street, only to jump back again as a bicycle whizzed past.

"Good afternoon, young Farthering!"

"And to you, Mr. Llewellyn!"

Drew laughed to himself. The old blighter had to be nearing

seventy, but there was no one who could discourage his vigorous jaunts on his two-wheeler. The people of Farthering St. John contented themselves with the knowledge that he hadn't yet run anyone down.

It was a good day, and Drew wasn't going to let the unpleasantness in Winchester spoil it for him. Now, if Mrs. Harkness would just be obliging, the day could turn out to be very fine, indeed.

He glanced up at the sign above her bookshop: *The Running Brooks*. Most people thought the name odd, but he'd always liked it. It played on a quotation from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and it suited Drew's mood most especially today to read again the words of the exiled duke painted on the shop's sign:

*And this our life exempt from public haunt
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in everything.*

Yes, there were certainly worse things than the quiet of little Farthering St. John.

Drew pushed open the door to the shop, tripping the bell that hung above it, but there was no one in sight. He looked round for a moment.

"Hullo?"

"Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Farthering!" Mrs. Harkness came out from behind a stack of large boxes. "Do pardon the mess. I've just gotten in my latest shipment, and they've gotten it all wrong, I'm afraid."

"Oh, dear," Drew said. "Have you spoken to them?"

"They're supposed to send someone round this week, but you know how it is these days. No one ever seems to take the

trouble to do things properly the first time.” She smiled and brushed a strand of short, graying hair out of her face. “Now, how can I help you?”

“I, uh . . .” Drew gave her a sheepish shrug. “I know it’s not due yet, but I thought I’d see if you had the newest book from the Mystery Mavens’ Newsletter in.”

“Now we are eager, aren’t we?” Mrs. Harkness wagged one thin finger at him. “You know I’m not allowed to sell those yet. They’re not officially released until Friday.”

“Oh, but you know better than anyone how I like a good murder mystery.”

Unbidden, the image of poor old Montford’s battered body sprawled before him, but he pushed it out of his mind. That wasn’t his case to solve. He much preferred the ones with handy answers contained within the covers of Mrs. Harkness’s books.

He took a deep breath and then grinned at her. “I had hoped to collect the newest one from you directly. The last one was stolen from me, you know. Right out of the post.”

Her eyebrows shot up under the sweat-dampened fringe of hair on her forehead. “Stolen? Did you report that to Mr. Pringle at the post office?”

“Not to worry. I know the perpetrator, and she returned the book to me directly after she’d finished reading it. And she was good enough not to spoil it by telling me the ending.”

The indignation on Mrs. Harkness’s face quickly turned to indulgence. “Ah, your young lady. Miss Parker.”

“Miss Parker.” He couldn’t quite subdue the smile that tugged at his face. “Have you met her?”

“Not to speak to, no, but I’ve seen her about the village, and of course at her uncle’s funeral. She’s a lovely young lady.”

“An intelligent one as well, and I’d sooner take a clever woman

over a beautiful one. She was quite pleased with that volume of Shakespeare you suggested I give her. You know, I'm sure the two of you would get on famously. Madeline loves books. I daresay she'll be your best customer in time. Next to me, of course."

"I daresay. Though, if she reads your books, I don't suppose she'll be buying her own, now, will she?"

"No, I suppose not."

"So she's not going back to America?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Then she hasn't accepted you yet. Of course, you know I've always had hopes for you and my Annalee."

"Why, Mrs. Harkness!" He chuckled despite the flush he felt in his cheeks. "Annalee is married and has two children."

Mrs. Harkness's eyes sparkled with mischief, and she began unpacking one of her boxes. "Well, one never knows what lies ahead."

"Besides, I thought she'd moved away."

"Oh, yes. Marcus has been given a position at Lewis's in Liverpool."

"That must be a grand opportunity for him, though I suppose you didn't much care for him taking Annalee and the little ones along."

"Well, she couldn't very well have her husband go off without her, could she? But Annalee's just a girl yet. She's not yet twenty-five."

"I was sure of that much, seeing her mother's little more than a girl herself." He winked at her. "If only I were just a bit older . . ."

She turned bright pink and put a hand to her mouth, looking rather like a schoolgirl after all. "Now I *know* you're after something."

“Well, I do have an ulterior motive.” He leaned closer to her and lowered his voice. “Are you *sure* I can’t buy a copy of the new Mystery Mavens’ book right away?”

“Now, now,” she scolded, shaking her head and chuckling as she checked one of her packing lists.

“After all, I did risk life and limb to come see you.”

She pursed her lips. “You did, did you?”

“Well, I was quite nearly run down by Mr. Llewellyn and his beloved bicycle.”

Again her smile was indulgent. “He seems a nice old gentleman even if he is rather an odd duck.”

“Is he? Odd, I mean.”

“Well, really. A man of his years ought to slow down a bit. And he should have his people about him.”

“Perhaps he hasn’t any.”

“Yes, perhaps you’re right. And really, there’s no harm in him. I’m sure he’ll settle into our ways once he’s been here awhile longer.”

“Oh, no doubt.” Drew looked about the stacks of new books once more. “Now about that new book . . .”

“You know I’m not allowed.”

“But you do have them in, don’t you?”

She tried to look stern. “I’m not supposed to say.”

“But suppose I just happened on a copy.” Drew looked into one of the open boxes. “Perhaps in here.”

She shook her head, and he pointed out another box.

“Here?”

“Certainly not. Those are textbooks.” She snatched up the box and put it on a side table. Then she began unpacking the books, setting them out on a high shelf.

“May I help you with that?”

“Oh, no. I can reach it just fine, thank you.”

“Very well.” He walked round to the front counter where her packing lists were awaiting verification. There was a freshly opened crate just beside it. “Now there’s an interesting possibility. I suppose with something as popular as the books for the Mystery Mavens’ Newsletter, there would be several copies coming in all at once. They wouldn’t be in there, would they?”

She turned to face him, abandoning the task at hand. “I am absolutely not going to tell you where they are.”

Again she tried to look stern, but she was softening, he could tell. And she hadn’t said the books weren’t in that one.

“No, of course not.” He strolled over to the crate, peering sideways into it.

“Now, Mr. Farthering, if there’s nothing else, you really must let me get on with my inventory. I have to sort through some of the boxes in the storeroom, and if I come back and count the books in that crate and find one missing, I’ll just have to put it on your bill.” She looked at him over her spectacles, her expression stern, but her eyes twinkling. “And you won’t be getting one when I send the rest of them out.”

He made his own expression humble, even abject. “That would be no more than right.”

“Well, then, I must get to my inventory. Have a look round the shop if you like. I’m sure you can show yourself out.”

With that, she gathered up her packing lists and went into the back room.

It was as much as an invitation.

Drew waited just another moment before reaching into the crate. The new book was by Dorothy L. Sayers, *Have His Carcase*. The latest exploits of Lord Peter, no doubt. Delicious.

He slipped a copy into his coat pocket and then, just to make sure, he left in its place money enough to pay for two or three of its kind. And if she added the price of the book to his account on top of it, that would be all right as well.

When he went out into the street, he made sure to give the bell above the door a good jingle so she'd know she could come back to the front of the shop.

He would have doubtless been swaggering on the way home if he had been walking, but since he was behind the wheel, he had to content himself with a certain smugness of expression.

"Well, my fine Miss Parker, you'll not be getting those dainty little hands on this one before I've had a go at it. The further adventures of Lord Peter and Harriet Vane, including the romantic ones, no doubt, and I won't be giving you so much as a peek at it till I've finished the whole thing, but those lovely blue eyes as you will."

The scene from earlier in the afternoon tried once more to force its way into his thoughts, but he again drove it off. He would occupy his mind with Detective Lord Peter Wimsey and not solicitor Quinton Montford. No doubt Chief Inspector Birdsong would thank him for it, too.

With a determined smile, he turned toward Farthering Place and then slowed, puzzled at what he saw. Unless he was mistaken, that was Nick standing there at the side of the road, waving his arms like the flagman for a railway, his sandy hair sticking up and his hazel eyes wide. Drew pulled over.

"Nick, old man, what in the world—?"

"I just managed to slip out the back way." Nick jumped into the car and wiped his sweating face with his handkerchief. "Madeline. She said I had to warn you."

"What's happened? Is she all right?"

“No, no, she’s fine,” Nick panted. “Perfectly fine. It’s you she’s worried about.”

Drew let out the air that was pent up in his lungs and put the car back into gear. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on without all the melodrama?”

“I’ve just had the tongue-lashing of my life, I can tell you that much.”

“Really? Why?”

“Accusations of a rather forceful nature, I must admit, and insinuating all manner of impropriety.”

Drew chuckled. “What exactly have you been up to?”

“Yes, go on and laugh now, but you might want to turn round, you know. Before it’s too late.”

They were at Farthering Place by then, and Drew pulled up at the steps, glad to see his family’s ancestral home was still standing in the grove of oaks at the end of the drive in all her imposing, respectable glory. From what Nick had said, Drew had half expected to find the old manor house nothing but rubble around his feet.

“Hadn’t you better—?”

“Too late,” Nick breathed, nodding toward the formidable middle-aged woman dressed entirely in black, who, despite her cane, came sailing along the garden path round to the front of the house like an ocean liner in open water.

“There you are!” Steely eyes blazing, she pointed one accusing finger at Drew. “Finally man enough to show your face, are you?”

Drew blinked at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“And well you should, young man. Stand to your feet when addressing your elders. Now, where have you been hiding yourself?”

“Hiding?”

“Stand up, I say!”

She thumped her cane against one of the tires. Drew scrambled out of the car, removing his hat and feeling horribly guilty. Guilty of what, he did not know.

"I was just at the bookshop and—"

"A very likely story. Now, what do you have to say for yourself?" She turned her head sideways, peering at him over her wire-rimmed spectacles as if she were some enormous parrot in full mourning.

"I, uh—"

"Yes, of course. There is no excuse you could possibly offer. I'm glad we can agree on that much. I hope you realize that the situation cannot continue as it is."

"I don't—"

"Well, I didn't think you would, but that doesn't matter."

"Look here—"

She put up a hand to silence him, looking the perfect image of saintlike patience in the face of great provocation.

"No amount of contrition will be sufficient at this late hour. I have already arranged for a taxi to come take us to the train station and told one of your housemaids to have everything packed up before he gets here. This little episode will soon be nothing more than a shameful memory. For you and for Madeline, I trust."

"Me and—" Then it all made sense. Drew smiled. "Aunt Ruth, it must be. How lovely to meet you at last."

"Oh, dear," Nick murmured, and he slunk out of the car and toward the house.

"Don't you Aunt Ruth me, young man!" she roared. "I'm not your aunt, and don't hold your breath waiting for me to be."

"Again, I beg your pardon." Hat over his head and determined to keep hold of his affable demeanor, Drew made a slight bow

in her direction. "Shall we go into the house, Miss Jansen? I'm sure Madeline will be delighted to see you."

"She has seen me already. And no, she was not delighted." Aunt Ruth swept up to the top of the steps, then turned to glare at Drew once more. "I will go into the house only because I have never been one to air dirty laundry in public."

Nick scurried up to the door and opened it for her.

She vouchsafed him a nod of thanks. "I apologize for what I said to you earlier, young man. I had no way of knowing you were not this Farthering fellow, but we sometimes suffer for making poor choices in the company we keep, don't we? Let that be a lesson to you."

"Indeed, ma'am. I certainly will."

With a derisive snort, she sailed into the house.

Drew stood at the foot of the steps for a moment more and then glanced longingly back at the car. It wasn't too late for a quick getaway.

Nick gave him a half-dazed smile. "Coming inside, old man?"

"Good heavens. No wonder you looked as if you'd been hit by a train."

Nick laughed, and a touch of color crept back into his face. "I believe the only thing she didn't accuse me of was sacrificing Christian maidens to my pagan gods out here on the front lawn."

"Sorry about that. Obviously that was all intended for me. What exactly am I meant to have done?"

"Evidently you've led one Miss Madeline Parker astray with your silver tongue and modern ideas, not to mention forever soiling the family honor."

Drew chuckled. "Oh, is that all."

"Apparently, it's enough."

"Well, that's easily cleared up. I'll just explain to her that

Madeline has been living at Rose Cottage since her uncle died. Even the old hens in the village haven't quite figured out how to be scandalized at that."

"Explain away, my friend, for all the good it will do you. When the dear auntie came in earlier, she found Madeline sleeping—sleeping, mind you!—on the divan in the library. And she had her shoes off." Nick grinned. "If that doesn't tell the whole sordid story, I don't know what would."

"But surely Madeline told her—"

"You've seen what it's like to try to get a word in edgeways, haven't you? I daresay Madeline gave up trying to be heard ages ago."

"Well, the lady has got to take a breath sometime, hasn't she? I will just wait for a lull in the storm."