



**MURDER AT THE
BRITISH MUSEUM**

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CHAPTER ONE

London, 1894

Daniel Wilson and Abigail Fenton walked through the high-barred black iron gateway in Great Russell Street that gave entrance to the British Museum, then strode across the wide piazza towards the long row of towering Doric columns that fronted the magnificent building. Atop the columns were ornately carved friezes, recreating the imposing architectural styles of ancient Greece and Rome to inform the visitor that within this building were the treasures of those great civilisations, along with every other form of erudition and wonder known to man since the dawn of time.

They climbed the wide steps, passing beneath the huge porticos into the main entrance.

‘Murder at the British Museum,’ said Abigail, still bemused. ‘It’s a place where many of the exhibits celebrate violent death, but I’d never have thought one would actually occur here.’

‘Murder knows no boundaries,’ said Daniel. ‘A palace or a hovel, a desert or the most modern city in the world. It’s nearly always about love, money, power or revenge, and that can happen anywhere.’

Abigail cast a look at Daniel and smiled. Daniel Wilson, private enquiry agent and her husband in all but name. She recalled the

shocked expression on the face of her sister, Bella, when she'd told her.

'I am going to live with Mr Wilson,' she'd announced. 'When I am not engaged in travelling, doing my archaeological work.'

Bella had looked at her, bewildered.

'As a lodger?'

'As his lover.'

Bella's mouth had fallen open and she had stared at her elder sister, her eyes wide in shock.

'Will he not marry you?'

'In fact, Daniel has asked me to marry him on several occasions. It is I who have said no. I love him very much, but I'm not happy with the fact that once I marry, everything I own becomes the property of my husband. *I would become the property of my husband.*'

'But . . . but . . . to live in sin . . . !'

'It is not sin, not in our eyes. We love one another, we wish to be together, but I am not prepared to become a chattel of someone else.'

Perhaps one day she might marry Daniel, she thought as they mounted the steps. *He is everything I could want: kind, considerate, intelligent, resourceful, and – yes, she thought to herself as she looked at him – handsome, but in a slightly rugged, mature way.* His face looked attractively lived-in, not like some of the whey-faced narcissistic dandies she sometimes met when on an archaeological dig, who tried to impress her with their scholarship and knowledge. Daniel didn't try to impress her, he just did. A former detective inspector with Scotland Yard, one who'd worked closely with Inspector Abberline as part of his team of elite detectives, Daniel had left the police and set up as a private detective – or private enquiry agent, as he preferred. It was to Daniel that influential people turned when faced with a difficult case. His reputation for

discretion, coupled with his success rate at solving crimes, meant people who hired him could trust him implicitly. Any secrets that were unearthed by him during an investigation would remain secret; at least, to the public. Reputations would be protected. Unless that reputation was a cover for a villain, in which case the villain would be ruthlessly exposed. Daniel would never be part of a cover-up, no matter what inducements might be offered to him.

He is the first person I ever met that I feel I can trust completely, thought Abigail. And that is why I am bound to him.

After the bright daylight of outside, made even brighter by the breadth of the piazza, the interior felt dark, even with the gaslight illumination of the lower floor, but the gloom was brightened by a huge poster, an illustration depicting a youthful King Arthur in armour accepting a sword from a woman's hand which had risen from a lake. Above the picture were the words 'The Age of King Arthur – Exhibition Now Open'.

'I thought Arthur removed Excalibur from a stone,' murmured Daniel.

'It depends which version you read,' said Abigail. 'The historical texts say nothing about a stone, or a Lady of the Lake, or even of Excalibur. But I believe this exhibition explores both the historical and the romantic. I shall be interested in examining it.'

'And I'm interested in the practical purpose of our visit,' said Daniel.

He strode to the reception desk and said to the smartly suited man on duty, 'Good morning, Mr Daniel Wilson and Miss Abigail Fenton to see Sir Jasper Stone. He is expecting us.'

The man took a thick diary from beneath his desk, opened it and consulted it.

'The entry for today only says that Daniel Wilson has an

appointment with Sir Jasper,' he said. 'There is no mention of Miss Fenton attending.'

Daniel fixed the man with a firm look.

'The initial letter from Sir Jasper asked me to attend. I replied that I would be delighted to do so, and that Miss Fenton would be accompanying me. If her name is not in your book, then the oversight is on the museum's part. *We* are to see Sir Jasper.'

The man hesitated, then began in a superior sniffy tone, 'I'm sorry, sir, but . . .'

Politely, Daniel interrupted with, 'You will be sorrier still if Miss Fenton and I depart, and you have to explain to Sir Jasper that it was you who turned us away.'

The man returned Daniel's firm look, then swallowed and said, 'Of course, sir. I will arrange for someone to escort you to Sir Jasper's office.'

'Thank you,' said Daniel. 'But I know the way. I have met Sir Jasper before.'

As Daniel led the way from the desk towards the stairs, Abigail asked, 'Was that outburst of Stone Age masculinity done to impress me?'

Daniel shook his head. 'No. I encountered him before, on a previous case I did here for Sir Jasper involving a stolen Saxon jewel. The man was officiously annoying then, and he still is.'

'And you enjoy puncturing that sort of superior attitude.'

'I'm not sure if "enjoy" is the right word,' grunted Daniel. 'It's just that posture annoys me. It's an abuse of a tiny piece of power to "put people in their place", as they call it. That same man will kow-tow and give flattery to a lord or a lady.'

'It's fortunate you left the police,' commented Abigail drily. 'You must have been a thorn in the side of some of your superiors.'

Daniel grinned. 'I was once described by a superintendent as my own worst enemy,' he said.

He led the way down the wide stone stairs to a corridor adorned with statues from ancient Egypt along its length.

'You must feel at home with all these,' he commented as they walked along the corridor.

'Most of the exhibits along here are New Kingdom,' she said.

'How "new" is New Kingdom?' asked Daniel.

'1550BC to 1077BC,' replied Abigail. 'The later part is also known as the Ramesside period after the eleven pharaohs that took the name Ramesses.'

'How do you remember all this?' asked Daniel, impressed.

'The same way you seem to remember the name of every criminal you've ever arrested,' said Abigail. 'It's what we do.'

They reached the end of the corridor and then climbed a short flight of stairs to where two doors of dark brown oak faced one another. Daniel went to one and knocked on it, entering at the call from within.

A middle-aged lady was sitting at a desk, and she smiled as she recognised Daniel.

'Mr Wilson! Sir Jasper will be so glad to see you.'

'My pleasure, Mrs Swift,' said Daniel. He indicated Abigail. 'Allow me to introduce my colleague, Miss Abigail Fenton. Miss Fenton, Mrs Swift, Sir Jasper's secretary.'

The two women smiled and shook hands, and Mrs Swift asked tentatively, 'Excuse my asking, but are you by any chance related to *the* Abigail Fenton, the Egyptian scholar and archaeologist?'

Before Abigail could reply, Daniel cut in with a proud, 'In fact, she is that self-same Abigail Fenton.' He turned to Abigail, smiling, and said, 'I told you your name would be known here.'

‘Indeed,’ said Mrs Swift. ‘Sir Jasper was recently in conversation with Hector Makepeace, who was singing your praises.’

‘Exaggerated, I’m sure.’ Abigail smiled modestly. To Daniel, she added, ‘I assisted Hector Makepeace two years ago in a dig at Khufre’s Pyramid at Giza.’

‘Is Sir Jasper available to see us?’ asked Daniel.

‘I’m sure he is,’ said Mrs Swift. ‘I’ll just go and tell him you’re here.’

She scurried out of the office to the door opposite.

‘Hector Makepeace?’ enquired Daniel.

‘A wonderful man,’ said Abigail. ‘In his seventies, but with the energy and enthusiasm of a ten-year-old. I learnt an awful lot from working with him.’

Mrs Swift reappeared.

‘Sir Jasper will see you now,’ she said.

Daniel thanked her, and he and Abigail crossed to the other door. A polite tap, then they opened the door and stepped into the very cluttered office of Sir Jasper Stone, Executive Curator-in-Charge at the museum.

Every available space seemed to be taken up with papers or books; every shelf, the surfaces of the two desks and most of the chairs were similarly groaning under the weight of paper, frequently with a carved ornament on top to stop them being disturbed by a draught and blown around when the door was opened. Two chairs, however, had been left cleared, ready for Daniel and Abigail.

Sir Jasper himself was a portly, benign figure who seemed to have modelled himself on the Prince of Wales, both in his style of dress and the shape of his beard and moustache. He stood up to greet them as they came in, shaking Daniel warmly by the hand.

‘Mr Wilson, it’s good to see you again, and thank you for coming at this difficult time.’

‘My pleasure, Sir Jasper. Allow me to introduce my colleague, Miss Abigail Fenton.’

Sir Jasper shook Abigail’s hand warmly as he said, ‘Miss Fenton, it is a pleasure to meet you. I know of your work, of course, at the Fitzwilliam, and in Giza and other sites in Egypt. And I read that recently you’ve been involved in archaeological research along Hadrian’s Wall.’

‘Indeed,’ said Abigail. ‘I’m flattered that you’re aware of me.’

‘The world of museum curation is a small one, especially when it comes to archaeology,’ said Sir Jasper. ‘Word about good people spreads.’ He smiled. ‘And about bad people.’ He gestured towards two chairs opposite his desk. ‘Please, do sit.’

They sat, and Sir Jasper’s face grew serious as he said, ‘I take it you know why I’ve asked for your assistance.’

‘A man was stabbed to death here a few days ago,’ said Daniel.

‘Professor Lance Pickering.’ Sir Jasper nodded. ‘His work on Ambrosius Aurelianus features heavily in “The Age of King Arthur” exhibition we are currently staging. It’s been hugely popular. On some days the queue to get in to see it has stretched right out onto Russell Street.’

‘On the day of the murder, Professor Pickering had not long arrived. He was here to help promote the exhibition by giving a talk on Ambrosius and his connection with Arthur. Not that the exhibition needed any promotion, but the arrangement to have Professor Pickering here had been made before we saw how successful the exhibition was.’

‘I assume he was also here to promote his book on Ambrosius,’ put in Abigail. ‘I saw it on display at the entrance.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Sir Jasper. ‘Again, that was an agreement made before the exhibition opened so successfully, but we agreed to honour our agreement with the professor, so his book has

been on display both at the exhibition and in the museum shop.

‘On the day in question, Professor Pickering handed in his hat and coat at the cloakroom, and then went to the gentlemen’s convenience to freshen up before his talk. The staff on duty became worried when he didn’t appear and the audience for him were waiting, so one of them went to investigate. The door of one of cubicles in the convenience was closed. In fact, it had to be broken down because it had been bolted from the inside. The body of Professor Pickering was discovered within. He’d been stabbed a number of times.’

‘The rest of the convenience was empty?’

‘Yes,’ said Sir Jasper. ‘That was the other puzzling thing; a notice saying “Out of Order” had been put on the door. But the person who escorted Professor Pickering to the convenience swears the sign was not on the door then.’

‘So the killer put the sign there to stop anyone coming in and perhaps preventing the murder,’ said Daniel. ‘This suggests the killing was planned and not a random act.’

‘That was Inspector Feather’s opinion as well,’ said Sir Jasper.

‘Inspector John Feather?’ asked Daniel.

Sir Jasper nodded.

‘A very good man,’ said Daniel. ‘If he’s on the case I’m not sure you need me.’

Sir Jasper hesitated, then said awkwardly, ‘Unfortunately, Inspector Feather is not in charge of the police investigation. His superior officer, Superintendent Armstrong, has taken charge, and he has different views on the case to Inspector Feather.’

‘Yes, he would have,’ said Daniel grimly. ‘I’m guessing it’s not just the murder you wish us to investigate, Sir Jasper?’

Sir Jasper gave a wry smile. ‘Very perceptive of you, Mr Wilson, as always. No, the murder is one thing. My main concern is the

reputation of the museum. If the reason for Professor Pickering's murder might in any way adversely affect the museum . . .'

'I understand,' said Daniel. 'Leave it with us, Sir Jasper, and we'll see what we can find.'

Sir Jasper passed over two cards to them. 'These cards, signed by me, will give you full access to anywhere in the museum. I've taken the liberty of doing them because, unfortunately, some of our staff can take their responsibilities a little too literally when it comes to some areas of the museum, and I don't want your investigation to be obstructed in any way.'

'Thank you, Sir Jasper,' said Daniel, taking the two cards and handing one to Abigail. 'Can I also ask if it's possible for us to have one of your lesser-used rooms as a base for our investigation? I'm thinking if information comes to us from outside, or if we wish to talk to people privately. I know that space is at a premium, so something small like a storeroom, or a broom closet, would be sufficient. So long as we could get a desk and a couple of chairs into it.'

'Of course.' Sir Jasper nodded. 'I'll talk to David Ashford, the museum's general manager. He'll arrange it for you. Give me an hour.'

'Thank you,' said Daniel. 'In the meantime, we'll start our investigation. The sooner we begin, hopefully the sooner we'll find out who was behind the killing.'