THE BLOOMSBURY MURDER

By Mike Hollow

The Blitz Detective Series

The Blitz Detective
The Canning Town Murder
The Custom House Murder
The Stratford Murder
The Dockland Murder
The Pimlico Murder
The Camden Murder
The Covent Garden Murder
The Soho Murder
The Bloomsbury Murder

THE BLOOMSBURY MURDER

Mike Hollow

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2025.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-3200-5

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon LT Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd.

By choosing this product, you help take care of the world's forests. Learn more: www.fsc.org.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd. Elcograf S.p.A

EU GPSR Authorised Representative
LOGOS EUROPE, 9 rue Nicolas Poussin, 17000, LA ROCHELLE, France
E-maill: Contact@logoseurope.eu

For Barbara, faithful and generous of heart

CHAPTER ONE

He stopped at the traffic lights and looked up at the sky, one foot on the pedal and the other on the road while he waited for them to change. It was dull and grey, just like the streets around him. It wasn't so long ago he'd wished he was up there, roaring around in a Spitfire, but the past year had taught him there was a world of difference between what you'd like to be and what you actually were. With this job, when his time came round for being called up they'd probably put him straight into the army as a regimental cook. Not quite the same as a dashing young fighter pilot, but what could you do about that?

Besides, glamour wasn't everything. Just yesterday he'd heard about a young Spitfire pilot who'd joined the RAF at eighteen a couple of weeks before the war started. He'd fought over France and then over London, got the DFC and all, then last week he got killed, still just nineteen. That wasn't what Joe fancied, so maybe the army cookhouse would be just fine – at least he might

come through the war alive. In any case, by the time he was old enough to be called up the war would most likely be over. He might miss the whole thing and still be here working for Old Man Harris.

Harris – Mr Harris to his face, of course – had a butcher's shop in Lamb's Conduit Street, and Joe was his delivery boy. Probably everyone in Bloomsbury knew who he worked for, because the space under the crossbar on his bike was filled by a big metal nameplate with 'N. Harris & Co., High-Class Family Butchers' painted on it, together with the shop's address and phone number.

The lights turned to red and amber and then to green, and he stood on the pedals to get the bike going again. It was a Runwell, one of their special ones made for butchers' and bakers' deliveries, with a small front wheel to make room for the biggest possible wicker basket on the front. It was the kind of thing Harris would probably call 'sturdy', but to Joe it just meant hard graft. No luxuries like gears to make the going easier, and with forty or fifty pounds of meat in the basket he soon worked up a sweat. The only good thing was that it got lighter as you did the round, dropping off packages to the customers' homes. He was on the last leg of his Monday morning deliveries now, heading back to the shop and hoping Harris might allow him a cup of tea before he got on with the rest of his day's duties.

He pedalled his way across Brunswick Square and down Grenville Street until he came to a narrow turning on his right, identified by the single word 'Colonnade' carved into the stone lintel above it. This was what the old people called Colonnade Mews: a long row of two-

storey buildings behind the houses on Guilford Street, put up in the days when people got around on horses, not bikes or cars. Back then, apparently, they had stables on the ground floor, and upstairs there were flats for the coachmen to live in. Then when motors came along and horses weren't needed any more they became slums that only very poor people would live in. Now, though, to Joe's eye at least, they looked quite smart – perhaps they'd been done up.

His bike rattled and bumped its way across the cobbles that formed the narrow lane stretching a couple of hundred yards ahead of him. He'd learnt to be careful here, because the uneven stones could play havoc with his steering, what with the front wheel being so small. His next delivery was about a third of the way along, so he kept his eyes focused on the road immediately ahead.

He didn't see the cat until it was almost under his wheel. He wobbled, and the startled creature skittered away across the road. From the corner of his left eye he glimpsed the open door from which it had shot, just in time to see a woman staggering out behind it. She was about his mum's age and had red hair – that was all he had time to notice. It was too late to manoeuvre the heavy bicycle out of her way, and she clattered into him. He stuck his right foot out onto the ground to stop the bike going over and dumping the contents of its basket onto the cobbles, then got off and kicked down the stand over the front wheel so he could make sure the woman wasn't hurt. She was leaning back against the wall, panting for breath. Her eyes scared him – she was staring straight ahead as though she'd seen a ghost.

'You all right, Mrs?' he said, approaching her cautiously.

She shook her head, her faced etched with fear. 'No.'

'What's happened?'

'I can't—' she blurted out. 'She's . . . She's in there.' Her voice dropped to a terrified whisper. 'I think she's . . . dead.'

CHAPTER TWO

'Yes, sir,' said Jago.

He rarely found himself in agreement with Detective Superintendent Hardacre, but years of working in hierarchies of rank, first by conscription in the army and then by choice in the police, had taught him that dissent was generally best left unvoiced. Not that he actively sought a quiet life – he wouldn't be a detective in the Metropolitan Police if he did – but he'd also learnt in those years that wherever possible it was best to fight on your own terms and when the circumstances were most favourable. In Hardacre's case, Detective Inspector Jago was still finding his way.

The question he'd answered was an apparently simple one, albeit unexpected: 'Do you know anything about Canadians?'

It seemed prudent, however, to admit that his experience was limited. 'I met a few in the war, sir,' he said. 'They were there at our side and came a long way to fight for the King.'

‘So they did,’ said Hardacre. ‘And now it looks like one of them’s been murdered – in Bloomsbury.’

‘A soldier?’

‘No, a middle-aged woman, but Canadian, and that makes it a bit sensitive, what with the Canadian Army coming over here to help us with this war. They were quick off the mark, too – got stuck in as soon as it started. So it doesn’t look good if one of their civilians gets murdered on our patch.’

‘I see what you mean, sir. Those Canadian troops were fearsome men to have with us. Some of our best snipers too.’

‘Yes – damn good fighters, those lads, if my memory serves me right. When a tough job needed doing, they were the men to do it. Remember what they did at Ypres, 1915?’

‘No, sir – before my time. Were you there?’

Jago knew that asking this question was a calculated risk, but he was curious to know how Hardacre would respond. He was not to find out, however, as his superior officer ploughed on as if he hadn’t heard it.

‘The Germans used gas,’ said the detective superintendent, ‘and there was chaos, but the Canadians held the line. An impressive body of men – good generals, and fine foot soldiers who knew how to obey orders. An example to us all.’

‘Absolutely,’ Jago replied, in no doubt that Hardacre saw himself as the general in the room and his subordinates as the foot soldiers.

‘Backbone,’ Hardacre continued, warming to his theme, ‘and dedication, that’s what they had. Not like

the miserable cheats and layabouts we have to contend with these days.'

He swivelled his eyes in the direction of Cradock, who instantly drew himself up to attention, staring straight ahead and not daring to breathe until the detective superintendent's gaze returned to Jago.

'I don't know what it is about this war,' he continued, 'but discipline seems to have gone to pot – everywhere you look there's grocers fiddling the rations, frauds claiming the dole when they're getting paid for a job, people conning gullible fools out of their life savings, confidence tricksters round every corner. I tell you, it beggars belief. There's a bloke living not two miles from me who's just been tried for bigamy – he was living with a woman he called his wife and had three kids by her, but it turned out he's been married to someone else since 1919. And on top of that he'd been posing as a copper so he could check up on what his so-called wife was getting up to with some other bloke. These people are shameless.'

'Was he convicted, sir?'

'Oh, yes, he was convicted all right – he's been sent down for eight months for bigamy, which is something, I suppose, and fined ten quid for impersonating a police officer, but I mean, what's the country coming to? Whatever happened to good old-fashioned honesty?'

Jago suspected that honesty was no rarer today than it was in the rosy past of the detective superintendent's imagination, but knew by now that expressing an alternative view when Mr Hardacre was in full flood was like trying to calm a runaway horse by stepping into its path. 'I suppose there's always going to be wrong 'uns out

there pretending to be what they're not so they can trick some mug out of their money,' he said. 'We just have to try and nick as many of them as we can to spare the victims. Isn't that right, sir?'

'Well said, Jago,' said Hardacre, looking slightly surprised by such ready agreement. 'So you just keep your eyes peeled.'

'Will do, sir. So this Canadian woman who's been found dead in Bloomsbury – was she some kind of trickster?'

'Good Lord, no. She was a respectable woman by all accounts, highly thought of – a bit of a do-gooder, apparently. So mind your step. The powers that be don't want any complications to mess up our relationship with Canada, not now they've sent thousands of troops over here to fight for us. So you get over to Bloomsbury double-quick and find out who did it, and try not to tread on anyone's toes, especially Canadian ones.'

He turned to Cradock. 'And you, Detective Constable – what do you know about Bloomsbury?'

'Nothing, sir,' Cradock blurted out, instinctively taking the path of least resistance.

'Well, you mark my words – there's a lot of people there who think they're very clever. Been to university, friends in high places – people who've got ideas.' He pronounced the last word in a way that sounded to Jago's ear as though he was saying it with a capital *I*. 'Dangerous things, ideas – they can get you into a lot of trouble. Do you know what the sergeant said when I joined the army?'

Cradock twitched his head rapidly from side to side. 'No, sir.'

'He said, "If any of you lot've got ideas, leave 'em

behind where they belong. You just do as you're told and leave the ideas to the officers."' He cast a hostile glance in Jago's direction. 'And we know where that got us, don't we? Same with some of those characters in Bloomsbury – intellectuals and the like. Too clever for their own good, some of them. So don't let any of them run rings round you, Detective Constable. Just remember your job's not getting tangled up with their fancy ideas – your job's nicking villains. I don't want to hear of any tomfoolery by you. Is that understood?'

'Yes, sir,' said Cradock.

'I can assure you, sir, you won't,' Jago added.

Hardacre peered at him through his wire-rimmed spectacles, as if weighing the meaning of this assurance with a degree of scepticism. 'Right,' he said. 'Just watch your step – both of you.'

'Yes, sir. And the address?'

'It's Guilford Street, near Russell Square – number 85. But you have to go round the back, to a mews sort of alley called Colonnade – there's a back entrance to the property there, and that's where it happened. I've told the photographer to report to you at the scene, and I've left a message at St George's Hospital for Dr Gibson, asking him to get up there as soon as he can.'

'Thank you, sir. If that's all, we'll get over to Bloomsbury straight away.'

'Yes.' Hardacre looked thoughtful for a moment, and then fixed Cradock with a scowl that seemed designed to induce guilt in the young man. 'And by the way, Constable, those Canadian snipers your guv'nor mentioned – you could learn a thing or two from them. They were good at

their job – farm boys and hunters, most of 'em, and they'd learnt their business by hard graft. That's what I want to see from you – hard graft. They didn't just go over the top, charging in with all guns blazing – they were too valuable for that. No, they were patient, stealthy, focused on their target, waiting for the moment when they had him squarely in their sights, and then bang, they got 'im. If you want to be a half-decent detective one day, think about them. Don't go in with your blunderbuss, shooting at everything and hitting nothing – bide your time, wait till you've got your man in the crosshairs, and then pounce.'

'Yes, sir,' said Cradock, 'thank you, sir.'

'Right, off you go, then – and try not to make a fool of yourself.'

Jago was surprised: his private estimation would have put Hardacre's approach to policing firmly in the blunderbuss category. Perhaps these remarks to Cradock about subtle preparation and patience were more a reflection of how the detective superintendent imagined himself to be than the reality of his character, but even so, it wasn't bad advice. And a reminder to young Peter not to make a fool of himself was as timely to him as it was to anyone, including, Jago inwardly conceded, himself.