THE BORROWED THINGS MYSTERIES - BOOK TWO

A Place Set for Murder

A British cosy mystery novella

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READING SAMPLE

Chapter One

The complete novella is available on Kindle from Amazon UK.

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One

The smallest table in Alice Wren's wedding reception had become a problem before anyone had tried to sit at it.

It was made of card, with four legs folded underneath. Ben Matthews had placed it beside the window in his model of the community hall. Alice had moved it against the wall. Her mother had removed it altogether and was now holding it between a finger and thumb.

‘That gives us a clear space for presents,’ Ruth said.

‘It gives the presents nowhere to go,’ Ben said. ‘You're holding their table.’

Jo Mercer laid her tape measure beside the model. At the Barrowcombe Borrowing Room they could lend a great many things, but she had yet to find a way of lending one object to two places at once.

‘Before we decide where it stands, what has to fit on it?’

Alice consulted her folder. Its coloured tabs had survived the winter better than some of the original plans.

‘A box for the cards. The photograph of Gran. A vase, if Nell has enough flowers left over.’

‘Nell will have flowers,’ Ruth said.

‘Nell will have what we've ordered,’ Alice said. She glanced towards the door. ‘We said we weren't going to do that to her.’

Ruth put the miniature table down, but not back in the room. Jo found the dimensions of the room's narrow table in the loan catalogue and wrote them on a scrap of paper.

‘The narrow one would do. You can have a chair beside it if someone needs to write a card. But it can't go across the fire exit.’

Ben moved a rectangle which Jo had mistaken for a rug.

‘That's the dance floor.’

‘It can still be the dance floor. A little farther from the door.’

Alice smiled at him. ‘We've gained an exit.’

‘I'll put it on the list of things we've achieved.’

Across the counter, Bev was explaining to a borrower that the carpet cleaner's smaller bottle was not a complimentary extra. The man looked at the bottle, then at the doorway, calculating whether honesty might still be negotiated.

Jo left Bev to it. An hour had been booked for the wedding equipment consultation; the time belonged to these three people and their paper furniture. In half an hour Tamsin Grey, their reception coordinator, would join them at the hall. Jo had a paid setup job to agree and a theatre call to return afterwards. She had written both in her own diary, where they were harder to lose beneath somebody else's emergency.

‘And the table numbers?’ Alice asked.

Jo brought a shallow box from the shelf behind her. Inside were six brass card holders, each with a short upright stem and a round base. The felt underneath one had been replaced with a square of dark blue. The others still wore their old green circles.

‘Six. You've reserved all of them.’

‘There were seven tables on the first plan,’ Ruth said.

‘There are six dining tables now,’ Alice said. ‘That space is for presents.’

She pointed to the little table still stranded outside the model.

‘It was never a dining table in this model,’ Ben said.

For a moment all three looked at it. Jo waited. Years of rehearsals had taught her that people could disagree about an object for a considerable time before discovering they meant different objects.

Ruth opened her bag and produced a folded plan. A seventh numbered circle sat beside the hall window. There were two names pencilled beside it, too faint for Jo to read without leaning closer. She did not lean.

Alice took out her own drawing. The same space held the gifts table. Someone had written CARDS in a firm blue hand.

‘This is the one from February,’ Alice said. ‘Mum, that's the old one.’

‘It was in the folder you gave me.’

‘I sent you the new one.’

‘On the phone.’

Alice closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them at Jo rather than at her mother.

‘Six holders. We'll print from this version.’

Jo wrote the quantity on the loan sheet. The choice of paper in Ruth's bag was a family matter. The number of pieces expected back on Monday was hers.

The bell above the door rang. A woman entered carrying a long cardboard box against her hip. Small leaves clung to the sleeve of her black cardigan.

‘Before anyone asks,’ she said, ‘there are no free flowers in this box.’

Alice laughed and got up to help her.

‘Nell, we were defending you.’

‘Good. Defend me from underneath. It's heavier than it looks.’

They put the box on the worktable. Nell Collis opened it to reveal three empty glass vases packed in newspaper. One was chipped along the rim.

‘These are the shapes. These aren't the ones you're having. I brought that one because Dad uses it to store pencils and it's the right height.’

‘Will Hugh be here?’ Ruth asked.

‘He said he was coming. He wants to see where you're putting the photographs.’

‘We've agreed that.’

Nell lifted the chipped vase clear of the paper.

‘Then he'll be delighted to hear it.’

Ben moved his model out of the way. Jo drew two chairs up to the worktable, and Alice sat down opposite him. Nell placed the tallest vase between them. Its rim was level with Ben's nose.

‘We wouldn't be able to see across the table.’

‘You'd be able to see me,’ Nell said. ‘I'd be standing next to it asking you to pay the balance.’

They tried the shorter vase. Ruth moved one of the brass holders closer, then took a cream card from the pocket of her folder and slid it into the slot.

‘That looks better.’

Jo saw the name at the same time as Alice.

PATRICK WREN.

Underneath, in smaller type, was the number seven.

Alice reached across the table and took the card out.

‘Why have you got this?’

Ruth looked at the empty holder. ‘It must have been mixed in.’

‘Mixed in with what?’

‘The family cards. I didn't print them.’

Ben's hand came to rest on the edge of the model. Nell put down her vase. At the counter the carpet-cleaner borrower finally handed the little bottle to Bev, who accepted it without celebration.

Alice turned the card over. Its reverse was blank.

‘I'm not asking who printed it. I'm asking why my father's name is here.’

‘You should speak to your uncle.’

‘I've spoken to him.’

The doorbell rang again. Hugh Collis stopped just inside, with a square parcel under one arm and his reading glasses still hanging from his shirt collar. He looked first at Alice, then at the card she was holding.

‘Ah,’ he said.

It was a small sound for the space it left behind.

‘Did you invite him?’ Alice asked.

Hugh put the parcel carefully on a clear corner of the table. The brown paper had been folded neatly, without tape over the string.

‘I think this is a conversation we should have somewhere private.’

‘Then you should have had it before making a place for him.’

‘Alice-’

‘No. Did you?’

Jo set the lid beside the box of holders. Nobody needed her to pretend that the tape measure had become fascinating.

‘We can pause the appointment,’ she said. ‘You don't have to finish this here.’

Alice shook her head. ‘I don't want a meeting. I want an answer.’

Hugh looked at Ruth. She was folding the old plan along its existing creases, carefully matching the corners.

‘He received an invitation,’ Hugh said.

‘That's not what I asked.’

For the first time, Hugh seemed to have no useful way of arranging the conversation.

‘I know,’ he said.

Alice put the card flat on top of her own plan. There was no table seven to lay it beside.

‘I didn't send it.’

Continue the mystery

A place card bears the name of a guest Alice never invited. As wedding preparations continue, Jo finds herself drawn into a family mystery.

A Place Set for Murder is a complete British cosy mystery novella, available on Kindle from Amazon UK. A paperback edition is awaiting publication approval.

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Thank you for reading.