THE BORROWED THINGS MYSTERIES

Borrowed for Murder

A short British cosy mystery

Hazel Maple

READING SAMPLE

Chapters One and Two

The complete mystery is available in Kindle and paperback.

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One

The man who wanted to close the borrowing room had come for a carpet cleaner.

Jo Mercer left her hand on the handle.

‘For how long?’

‘A day should do it.’ Graham Pike looked past her into the machine's transparent tank. ‘Possibly two. Does that bit come off?’

‘I meant close us.’

‘I said suspend new loans pending a review.’

‘You said it in an email to all five trustees and forgot to copy me in.’

Graham's mouth tightened. Behind him, through the glass door, Bev was attempting to pin a REPAIR MORNING banner to the brick wall. She had put it up upside down and was standing back to consider whether anyone would mind.

‘We need to know where the money's going,’ he said.

‘So do I. I could use some of it to buy a banner with eyelets.’

Jo moved the carpet cleaner between them. It was the newer of their two, clean, checked and unreserved until Monday. She had spent Thursday evening removing enough beige fluff from its brush to furnish a small animal. Graham examined it with the solemn interest he usually reserved for a disputed invoice.

‘Red wine?’ she asked.

‘Chocolate.’

‘Cake?’

‘A fountain.’

Jo looked at him.

‘My granddaughter was six. Apparently they have fountains now.’

He took out his phone and, after a moment's hesitation, showed her a photograph. A child in a silver cardboard crown stood on a dining chair. Chocolate striped one cheek. Beside her, Graham was holding a serving bowl under a small brown waterfall, his expression suggesting he had already lost the argument.

‘Good party?’ Jo asked.

‘She said it was the best day of her life.’

He put the phone away before she could decide what to do with that.

On the counter stood a tub of pencils, the returns clipboard and a biscuit tin containing washers which people kept opening with hope. Graham straightened the clipboard. Jo straightened it back so the next borrower could reach it.

‘I'll fetch the instructions. You can take it home after the presentation.’

‘Thank you.’ He glanced towards the stockroom door. ‘I also need the intake files. The paper ones. What you were showing me yesterday.’

‘February onwards?’

‘Start there.’

‘They're in the blue box. On your desk.’

It was his desk only on Saturday mornings. The rest of the week it belonged to Jo, a broken dehumidifier and whichever volunteer had lost an earring. But since Graham had helped negotiate the use of the old parcels building, he continued to say *my office*, and correcting him consumed time she needed for other things.

‘I'll have a look before people arrive,’ he said. ‘Keep those copies I gave you.’

‘They're in my tray.’

He nodded, lifted the old brass doorstop aside and went through to the stockroom, closing the door without allowing it

to bang. He was better with that door than most of the volunteers.

Bev came in carrying the banner.

‘We're calling it a rehearsal,’ she said. ‘I've sent Dot to find some string.’

‘There are cable ties in the second drawer.’

‘I asked you for those on Wednesday.’

‘You asked me for something that wouldn't damage the wall.’

‘And have you seen any damage to the wall?’

She set the banner down, took one look at the carpet cleaner and lowered her voice.

‘Has he brought it back filthy?’

‘He hasn't taken it yet.’

‘There's time.’

Bev lifted a small brass reading lamp from the trolley beside the counter and felt round its circular base.

‘Where's the switch on this one?’

Jo drew the lead towards her. The switch was halfway down it, a black oval worn shiny at one end.

‘Dot wants it for the raffle table,’ Bev said. ‘She can't read the little numbers under that hall light.’

‘I've checked it. Put it on the low stockroom rack, above the green case. I'll ask Helen to take it across.’

Bev carried it through, holding the loose lead clear of the floor.

Jo opened the bookings screen. Four collections, seven expected returns and a reservation for a wallpaper steamer she still had to test. In the workshop, beyond the glass partition, Owen Dale sat at a bench with a cream sewing machine turned towards the light. He lifted a hand when he saw her watching, then pointed to his mug.

She shook her head.

He pointed to the machine, raised four fingers and gave her a patient look.

Four hours, presumably. Owen considered time spent before breakfast eligible for a separate rate of sympathy.

Jo filled the kettle.

The Barrowcombe Borrowing Room had been open for four months. People still came in asking where the books were. Jo had stopped giving them a speech about sharing resources and started asking what they needed to get done.

Last week a woman had borrowed a sewing machine to shorten her son's school trousers. She had returned it with the trousers finished and the hem of her own coat pinned ready for a second attempt. On Tuesday a young man had brought back a drill and shown Jo a photograph of the shelf he had put up for his daughter's swimming medals. It sagged a little in the middle. He was pleased enough to leave the photograph open on his phone while she checked the drill bits.

None of this went in the quarterly report. The report counted loans.

Jo had counted props for twenty-three years. There were people who believed a theatre production happened because someone important stood under a light. In her experience it happened because someone less important had remembered the light needed a table underneath it, the table needed a working drawer, and the letter in the drawer needed to be there before the actor reached for it.

She had liked that work. She still did, when anyone could afford to give it to her.

Here, at least, people brought things back.

Mostly.

Helen Dacre arrived with a tray of paper cups tucked against her coat and a bag of oranges looped over her wrist. A blue-and-white bird brooch held one lapel out of the way. One

orange escaped as she pushed the door with her hip. Bev stopped it with her shoe.

‘Breakfast,’ Helen said. ‘For people who think tea counts.’

‘Tea does count,’ Bev said. ‘It just doesn't count as an orange.’

Helen laughed and began stacking cups. She had been the trust's treasurer since before Jo had heard of Barrowcombe. She knew which grant applications required a printed signature, which plumber would answer on a Sunday, and how to make a roomful of volunteers feel that somebody had noticed them. On Jo's first day, she had brought a spare chair from home because the one behind the counter had a spring coming through the seat.

‘Is Graham here?’ she asked.

Jo nodded towards the stockroom.

Helen put the oranges beside the kettle. ‘Right. I'll find him in a minute. What needs doing first?’

‘Tell me that suspension email was a misunderstanding.’

Helen's hands paused over the cups.

‘He worries when he can't make figures agree.’

‘So do I. But I usually ask the people who wrote them.’

‘Leave him with me.’

She said it quietly, without the brisk smile she used at meetings. Jo was grateful. It was tiring to be the newest person in a room where everyone else had years of old arguments to draw on.

Jo asked her about taking the lamp to Dot when she had a moment. Helen nodded and put the request on the small list she kept in her coat pocket.

Owen opened the workshop door.

‘If the machine's getting tea before I am, we've misunderstood the purpose of the exercise.’

Jo handed him a mug. ‘Can it go back on the shelf?’

‘Not today. I want another look at the foot control. It works, but it isn't behaving consistently.’

‘Sally's coming. She'll ask.’

‘Tell her I'm being careful with her mum's machine.’

He held the door for Jo while she took a red OUT FOR CHECK label from the roll beside the till. The sewing machine had a crescent-shaped chip below its handwheel and a little drawer of spare bobbins. On the day Sally donated it, she had brought the original handbook in a plastic bag and asked Jo not to lose the page with her mother's pencil notes.

Jo put the label in front of the machine, where nobody could mistake it for part of the repair demonstration.

‘Where's the case?’

‘Stockroom. Under the low rack. It was in my way.’

‘With the strap?’

‘With the strap.’

One of its catches was unreliable. Without the black webbing strap, you could pick the green case up by its handle and leave the sewing machine behind. Jo had discovered this at knee height, over a folded blanket, during the original intake check. She had no intention of repeating it on concrete.

‘I'm going out about half ten,’ Owen said. ‘Got a job in town. I'll leave the bench tidy.’

‘We've advertised a repair morning.’

‘You advertised volunteers looking at toasters. You didn't advertise exclusive ownership of me.’

‘Back for eleven?’

‘If I'm done.’

He returned to his mug and the foot control. Jo could have pressed him. Before the borrowing room, Owen had managed perfectly well without her arranging his Saturdays. She was trying to remember that.

Dot came back with the string and her phone already raised.

‘A picture before you all get busy.’

‘We are busy,’ Bev said.

‘Then look industrious.’

Helen picked up the oranges. Bev stood beside her, still holding the banner upside down. Jo leaned across to straighten it, and Dot took the photograph before she reached it.

‘That's natural,’ Dot said, examining her screen.

‘That's evidence,’ Bev said.

At ten, Bev unlocked the front door properly and the room filled in small, awkward bursts.

A woman brought a blue ceramic lamp in a shopping bag. A man wanted to know whether they lent lawnmowers, then explained at length why the answer should be yes. Danny Voss arrived with a hinged scenery panel and an extension reel that should have come back on Thursday. Behind him, his three theatre-workshop teenagers were steering another flat round towards the loading canopy.

Callum held its wheeled base while Tessa steadied the top. Mina followed with a phone stand. A window was painted on the solid board, surrounded by much more expensive-looking stonework than the hall possessed.

‘We're filming a scene,’ Danny told Jo. ‘It'll only take a minute.’

‘That includes all the minutes when you start again?’

‘Naturally.’

Bev picked up the extension reel and turned its return label towards him.

‘Thursday was an aspiration,’ he told Bev.

‘It was written in the box marked Return Date.’

Jo left them to it. She showed the woman with the lamp where to wait, checked a returned hedge trimmer into the red rack and helped Dot tie the banner outside. Dot's woollen hat

kept slipping over one eye. She refused to remove it on the grounds that people would see her hair.

By quarter past ten, someone had put biscuits in the tin of washers. Jo separated them and wrote WASHERS on the lid. Then, after thinking about it, she wrote NOT FOR EATING beneath.

Graham emerged with his spectacles in his hand.

'Jo, the machine on the bench. That's the Nash donation?'

'Yes. Sally's mother's.'

'And it hasn't been replaced?'

'No. What's wrong?'

'Nothing you need to worry about yet.'

She disliked *yet*. It gave worry an appointment.

'You want a photograph? I took one when it arrived.'

'Later, perhaps.' He glanced towards Helen, who was helping a woman write a label for a bag of curtain rings. 'Helen, could I borrow you?'

Helen finished the label before answering.

'Of course.'

They went into the stockroom. Jo looked after them, then at the carpet cleaner waiting beside the counter. Graham had left his chocolate-stained cuffs showing beneath his jacket.

She hoped that, when he came out, he would have remembered why the place existed.

Helen came back through the public room before Owen had finished packing his tools.

'Well?' Jo asked.

'He wants a meeting about the figures. Today, if possible. Everything today.'

She found a packet of raffle tickets beneath her oranges and took it towards the hall.

For a few minutes Jo dealt with a reservation made for the wrong day and a box of plugs nobody wanted to accept responsibility for. Bev's reading glasses turned up inside the

biscuit tin, on top of the washers, and Jo decided against asking.

Danny had opened his hinged panel beside the counter. One of its turn buttons had jammed, preventing him folding it again. Jo looked from it to the gap behind the counter. He seemed to have mistaken the space for a place where scenery might live.

‘We need some paper under that edge,’ she said.

Outside, Tessa had begun a speech in a voice which suggested she owned the building. Jo went out and walked round to the yard. The other flat stood directly in front of the loading doorway, sheltered by its shallow canopy. Callum held it steady while Mina recorded Tessa in front of the painted stonework.

‘Keep that wall where it is a minute,’ Jo called. ‘I need Danny for this one.’

Mina lifted a thumb without looking away from the phone on its stand.

Jo went back to the counter.

Owen passed behind the counter carrying his own canvas tool bag.

‘Back when I can,’ he said.

The front door swung shut behind him. Jo lifted the stockroom handle and went in for the roll of brown paper.

Graham was alone. The shallow racks stood against the walls, leaving the middle of the room clear. He had spread his papers across most of the desk; the blue archive box occupied the rest. The brass doorstop lay beside his chair.

‘Has Owen gone?’

‘Just now.’

‘I'll need the outstanding repair figures by Tuesday. Can you make sure he knows?’

‘I'll ask him. He works for himself, Graham.’

He reached past a folder and pressed the switch on the lamp's square brass base. Light fell across a page of figures. Jo stepped round the corner of the green case, took her roll of paper from the low rack and left him to it.

Helen was waiting at the counter when Jo came out.

‘I'll fetch that lamp for Dot. And the case.’

‘By the low rack. Lamp on top, case underneath.’

Helen went inside. Jo drew the door almost closed so the panel would not catch it.

She and Danny lowered the panel's edge on to the paper. It filled the gap between the end of the counter and the wall, with Jo holding one side and Danny bent over the stuck fastening on the other.

Bev looked across at them.

‘That isn't going to live there.’

‘I was just explaining that,’ Jo said.

The fastening was caught on a screw which had lifted out of the wood. Bev found them a pair of pliers. For several minutes Jo and Danny worked the frame backwards and forwards, trying to free it without twisting the hinge.

‘It's only until Tuesday,’ he said.

‘That's what you said about the wooden fireplace.’

‘That was an unusually long production.’

From the yard came Helen's voice, asking somebody to move the wall. There was a knock of metal, followed by the squeak of a trolley wheel. Jo had been meaning to ask Owen to look at it.

Danny was still talking.

‘Ask Graham,’ she said at last. ‘He's the one who wanted everything agreed in writing.’

‘Graham's the one who agreed our grant in writing. That didn't help much.’

‘Then ask him about that as well.’

Callum appeared at the front entrance.

‘Helen's got through. Can we put the wall by the van?’

‘Please,’ Jo said.

Danny freed the turn button. Together they folded the panel, finally opening the gap behind the counter. He took it back out, leaving the extension reel where Bev had put it.

At ten to eleven, Sally Nash arrived wearing a yellow raincoat and holding a packet of biscuits in both hands.

‘I didn't know whether I ought to,’ she said.

‘You absolutely ought to.’ Jo found a plate before Bev could improve the storage arrangements. ‘Your mum's machine is in the workshop. Owen's checking the pedal.’

Sally looked through the glass. The machine stood alone on the bench.

‘She used to put it away after every seam,’ she said. ‘Drove me mad. Half your sewing time spent getting it out again.’

Jo followed her gaze to the exposed spool pin and the small chipped crescent.

‘We look after it.’

‘I can see that.’ Sally hesitated. ‘Is Graham here?’

‘In the stockroom. I'll fetch him. We're meant to be starting the presentation.’

Jo took a clean cup from Helen's stack. There was still enough tea in the pot for Graham, if he didn't mind it strong.

She knocked with her free hand.

‘Your public awaits.’

No answer.

The stockroom door had swollen in a wet winter long before the trust took over. Jo lifted the handle, pushed with her shoulder and felt the familiar resistance give.

The desk lamp was on. A black switch in its lead lay across an open folder, whose pages moved in the draught from the loading door.

Graham was on the floor between the desk and the shelves.

For a moment Jo was annoyed with herself for carrying tea. The thought arrived fully formed and utterly useless: she couldn't put down the cup because every surface was covered.

Then she saw his face.

‘Bev.’

She had meant to call out, but barely heard herself. She tried again.

‘Bev. Call an ambulance.’

Two

Bev took the cup without asking why.

Jo knelt beside Graham. She said his name, then said it again, louder. Bev's phone was already against her ear.

Afterwards, Jo remembered the next few minutes in instructions. Where to put the phone. What to tell the person on the line. The sound of her own voice when she answered. She did what the call handler asked and kept looking towards the door, as though the people who knew how to help ought to be coming through it already.

When they did arrive, she moved back far enough for them to work.

The cup of tea stood on top of the old filing cabinet. Someone had set a biscuit beside it.

She could not stop looking at the biscuit.

Bev had cleared the public room. Danny was outside in the rain with his three teenagers. Dot stood beside him, holding the loose end of the banner. Through the glass, they watched the stockroom door and then looked away when they caught one another watching.

Helen appeared at Jo's side.

‘What happened?’

Jo tried to answer. She knew what she had found. She did not know what had happened.

Helen reached for her arm, but Jo stepped back to let another responder pass and the offered hand fell between them.

‘He's been in there all morning,’ Helen said.

‘You were with him.’

‘For a few minutes. We were talking about the accounts.’

‘Was he all right?’

Helen looked towards the door.

‘He was Graham.’

It was the kind of answer that would have worked an hour earlier. Jo would have smiled and understood. Now she could only hear that it wasn't an answer.

A police officer came into the room. He asked who had found Graham, then where people had been and which doors they had used. Jo had to think before telling him the time. She had looked at the computer clock just before Sally arrived. Ten fifty. Or ten forty-nine. She explained that too.

‘That's fine,’ he said. ‘Tell me what you actually remember.’

It was a relief to be told that.

He asked her to wait near the front counter. She went there and found the carpet cleaner still standing neatly beside it, instructions tucked into the handle. Graham's booking was on the screen, unfinished.

She closed the lid of the laptop.

Sally was sitting on a folding chair by the window. Her yellow coat dripped on to the floor. She had been asked to remain because she was there when Jo found him.

‘I came to speak to him,’ she said.

Jo sat beside her.

‘I know.’

‘About something stupid.’

‘You don't have to tell me.’

Sally pressed her hands together. There was a little lump of biscuit dough, or pastry, beneath one thumbnail.

‘He could make you feel as though asking was the problem.’

Jo looked down at the damp patch spreading from Sally's hem.

She had spent much of the morning thinking precisely that about Graham. She did not want to agree now, while strangers worked behind the stockroom door.

‘There's a towel under the counter,’ she said. ‘For your coat.’

Sally nodded as though this was the answer she had been waiting for.

Jo brought the towel. When she straightened, she could see through the workshop glass to the sewing machine on Owen's bench. Nothing had changed there. His mug stood beside a tin of small screwdrivers. The foot control lay on a cloth.

She remembered the black strap.

The green case had been under the low rack when she fetched the paper, beside the wallpaper steamer. She had stepped round it while Graham sat at his desk.

When she found Graham, that space had been empty.

She turned towards the officer, then stopped. He was taking Bev's details. A second officer stood at the stockroom entrance. It seemed absurd to interrupt them about an old carrying case.

‘What is it?’ Sally asked.

‘Helen said she was fetching the case for your mum's machine. It's gone. I don't know why it needed to go anywhere.’

Sally watched her for a moment, then looked into the workshop.

‘It isn't worth anything,’ she said. ‘If that's what you mean. The catches are terrible.’

‘I know.’

‘Mum used to say she'd buy a new one. Every year.’

She smiled, briefly, with her eyes on the machine. Then the expression went, and Jo realised she had made her talk about another person she had lost.

At the front door Danny was speaking to an officer. Jo could hear only pieces: the workshop grant, an email, *I didn't say that*. One of the teenagers had started to cry quietly. Bev took her into the hall next door with the other two, after checking with the police.

Helen went to the kettle.

‘Should we make more tea?’

‘They've asked us to leave everything where it is,’ Jo said.

‘The kettle isn't in there.’

‘I know.’

Helen kept her hand on the kettle's handle. Then she let go.

‘If I stand still, I think about it.’

Jo felt ashamed of her sharpness.

‘Come and sit down.’

They found Helen a chair beside Sally. She sat with the bag of oranges on her lap, though there was no reason to hold it. One rolled against the side of the bag whenever she moved.

The officer at the counter beckoned Jo over. He asked about staff, volunteers and the arrangement of the building. She drew it on the back of a cancelled booking printout: the public room at the front, workshop on the right, stockroom behind the counter, loading door into the yard.

‘Any other way into the stockroom?’

‘Those two doors. The windows are high up and don't open. The workshop door only comes into the public room.’

‘Does the loading door usually stay open?’

‘When we're moving things. It shouldn't, otherwise.’

‘And this morning?’

‘It was open when I found him. I don't know how long it had been like that.’

He made a note. Jo watched the pen move.

‘Something may have been taken out,’ she said.

‘What sort of thing?’

She explained about Helen going in to fetch the lamp and case, Owen's bench and the unreliable catches. Halfway through, she heard how it sounded: a woman describing a broken suitcase while somebody lay a few feet away.

‘We move things all the time,’ she added. ‘There may be a perfectly ordinary reason.’

‘I'll note it. Please don't go back and look.’

‘I wasn't going to.’

But she had been. Not to touch anything, she would have told herself. Only to make sure. The ease with which she might have done it frightened her.

Helen called from the window.

‘Are you talking about the green case?’

Jo turned.

‘Yes.’

‘I took it. Owen wanted the catches seen to. I put it in my car to drop off next week.’

The officer looked up from his notebook.

‘When was that?’

‘Before eleven. I couldn't say precisely. Dot was in the yard.’

Helen set the bag of oranges on the floor and gave him her name again, spelling Dacre carefully. She explained that she was the treasurer, that she helped with deliveries, that they all did jobs like that. The case was empty. Owen had the machine in the workshop.

Jo felt the tightness in her shoulders ease a fraction.

An ordinary reason. Exactly as she had said.

The officer asked Helen to stay where she was while he checked something with his colleague. Jo returned to the counter and sat down on the chair Helen had brought her four months earlier.

In the stockroom, the voices had changed. Nobody was speaking quickly now.

Bev came back from the hall. She stopped beside Jo rather than going to her own stool. Together they waited for someone to tell them what they already feared.

The words, when they came, were careful. Graham had died. There would be more questions. More people would be coming.

Jo put both feet flat on the floor. She thought of the little girl with the silver crown, and of Graham holding a bowl beneath the chocolate fountain. Someone would have to tell her. Someone who was not here and did not know their Saturday had changed.

Beside the carpet cleaner, on the corner of the counter, lay the copies Graham had asked her to keep.

Jo had put them there the evening before, intending to file them when she had a minute. The first sheet was an equipment invoice. She recognised the supplier heading and the three items Graham had circled, but she had not read them closely. He had asked for copies, not an opinion.

Now she could see the middle line.

S4 - Sewing machine, case and foot control. New. £485.

She looked through the glass at the cream machine with the chipped paint. Then at Sally, who was turning the edges of the damp towel between her fingers.

Sally's mother had bought that machine before Jo left school.

The trust had been given it.

Jo left the paper where it was and called the officer back.

Continue the mystery

Follow Jo as she traces what was brought into the borrowing room, what left it, and what the paperwork cannot explain.

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Thank you for reading.