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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE QUEENS A NOVEL OF CRIME

The
Queens
of
Crime

A Novel

Marie Benedict



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For Jim, Jack, and Ben

Chapter One

FEBRUARY 1, 1931
LONDON, ENGLAND

None of us is as we appear, I think as I watch the woman enter the marble-trimmed lobby of Brown's Hotel. Her step is hesitant, her gray cloche hat is perfectly nondescript and low on her forehead, and her eyes are averted from the gaze of high-hatted bellhops helping a well-heeled family of five with their mountain of trunks. Who would ever believe that this meek creature is capable of arranging unspeakable murders and seeing into the minds of the most dastardly criminals? For that matter, who would believe that I am?

She pauses and scans the bustling space, seeming not to see me. She looks so uncomfortable that one would think this was not her self-professed favorite establishment. I cannot stand to watch her flounder for another painful moment, so I raise my hand in welcome.

When my presence still does not register, I wave and call out, "Good afternoon. I do believe our table is ready in the Drawing Room."

Recognition and relief flutter across her face in equal measure. I gesture to the right, where the inviting warmth of the wood-paneled tearoom beckons, and she follows me with a quickened stride toward our table for two. We settle into sage-green upholstered chairs arranged in front of a small ornate hearth ablaze with a welcoming fire.

Although we exchange a few words in greeting, I do not initiate conversation until the waitress finishes taking our tea order—chamomile

for her and Earl Grey for me. An uncharacteristic silence has overtaken me, a quiet that my dear mama repeatedly wished for during my chatterbox childhood. I furtively study my teatime guest as she plays with a wayward curl and tucks it back into her hat.

How could this be the same animated woman I met at Hatchards bookshop on Piccadilly nearly five years ago? A woman who strode right past the queue of patrons waiting for her to sign her latest novel and greeted me with a warm embrace when I popped into the shop? A woman with an infectious laugh and a bright crimson scarf tied around her neck? The woman I see peek out from time to time, but only in the secure comfort of mutual friends' dining rooms and parlors? *That* confident woman is the one I need for the endeavor I'll be proposing today.

Even though I know what's happened to her—by Jove, the whole country does—I'm sometimes gobsmacked by the transformation since the early days of our acquaintance. One cannot fully imagine the damage done to her confidence from the blanketing of newspaper articles during her infamous eleven-day disappearance, five years ago, when her automobile was found empty on the edge of a cliff and the largest manhunt in England's history was launched. The search was undertaken by policemen and hundreds of volunteers and bloodhounds and airplanes and even me, to no avail. Thankfully, she emerged in northern England unscathed—except by the indignity of having her now ex-husband's dirty extramarital laundry aired—but shrouded in a mystifying silence with no explanation and a cowed character to boot. Her vanishing remains the greatest unsolved mystery in her canon.

But studying her now, I wonder. Has the vivacious, bold woman really disappeared? Or can she simply not bear the public gaze? We shall see.

How would I have reacted to such a highly publicized broadcasting of my own peccadilloes? I'm not immune to improprieties myself, but I do not believe that anyone would be the wiser upon meeting me. Or even suspect an untoward thing. All my shame is tucked away within my bullish exterior. Done and dusted.

Then I remember a line from one of my guest's short stories, a frippery involving married sleuths Tommy and Tuppence: "Very few of us are what we seem." And I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the woman I met in that bookstore five years ago is still there, hiding beneath the surface and emerging only when unthreatened. Somehow I need to draw her out.

Her gray-blue eyes peer out over the top of the Drawing Room's impossibly tall teatime menu, and I leap upon this first overture. "This menu is chockablock with delicacies. Every single item looks simply scrumptious. What tickles your fancy?" I ask.

"Well," she answers in a soft voice, "the full tea does include orange poppy-seed cake."

"Is that a favorite?" I venture.

"Oh, yes. It might even count as *the* favorite," she answers, with a glimmer in her eye. If we must first chitchat about gastronomical delights, so be it. It certainly will not be a reach for me. I'm so well known for my adoration of the culinary arts that my husband, Mac, dedicated his cookery book to me.

I chortle as my eyes skim the list. "I wish I had only *one* favorite. If I'm being perfectly honest, I haven't encountered a single tea sandwich, scone, pudding, or sponge that I couldn't befriend."

At the thought, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror on the wall opposite. A little rounder than I'd been in my twenties, but still the same sparkling eyes and winsome smile, or so I've been told by a select few. Not to mention that in my thirties, I've learned how to dress so that I accentuate rather than hide my curves. On balance, still attractive, I suppose. Even though I've never been the belle of anyone's ball—except Mac's, perhaps.

She chuckles, which I consider an unequivocal victory from this reticent creature. "Shall we order the full tea? If it was good enough for Queen Victoria, I daresay it's more than good enough for us." I'm referencing our stalwart matriarch from times gone by who—rumor has it—adored teatime at Brown's Hotel.

“Let’s,” she says, leaning forward with a conspiratorial gleam in her eye.

I signal our waitress, and with the order placed, I turn toward my guest. Ice between us now broken, I bestow upon her my most generous smile. No more tiptoeing or holding back for her benefit. The undertaking I’m about to present will require a certain amount of moxie, and the waters must be tested. So I plunge in, bracing myself.

“Mrs. Christie, I want to thank you for agreeing to join me today. I know you are generally disinclined to be out and about,” I say, obliquely referring to her reclusiveness.

“I was delighted to receive your invitation to tea, Miss Sayers. I always enjoy a good chin-wag with you when we have the odd dinner or drinks around town with fellow writers. Although I don’t think we’ve met just the two of us since before the, the—” She pauses, then seems to think better of finishing that sentence. “Well, it was a pleasure hearing from you, and please *do* call me Agatha.”

“Only if you’ll call me Dorothy.”

“You have a deal, Dorothy,” she replies, her face open, the hint of a warm smile on her lips.

“Speaking of invitations, I was tickled when you agreed to accept my other one as well. To join me in becoming a member of the Detection Club, soon to be the preeminent organization of mystery writers.” I get to the matter at hand, and I’m formal about it. I am a founder, after all.

The slight curl of her mouth and receptive expression vanish in a blink, replaced by an inscrutable blankness. Is Agatha backing away from her decision to accept? *Confound it*, I think. Have I startled the skittish cat back into her corner? If only I had mustered a modicum of patience, perhaps I could have made my petition at a more auspicious moment. Maybe after wading through a sea of innocuous small talk. But restraint and polite conversation have never been in my nature.

“I must have had an uncommonly bold moment when I said yes,” Agatha finally replies, one side of her mouth lifting again in, dare I say it, a smile. Hope returns to me; she hasn’t replaced her yes with a no. “I

haven't been in the company of an entire club of people since the—the incident.”

So here we have it, I think. She's actually going to refer to it.

“Wasn't it Emily Dickinson who said that fortune befriends the bold? Anyway, who among us has not had an 'incident,' Agatha?” I say, my cheeks growing hot thinking of my own. “And the so-called faultless lives of others are actually at fault for much. But I'm only planning on having about twenty other writers in the club, most of whom you know fairly well and who respect you too much to refer to said 'incident.’”

“That gives one some relief,” she says with a slow broadening of her half smile until it becomes full.

“Hold tight to that boldness, because I will have greater need of you as I prepare to launch the Detection Club.”

Chapter Two

FEBRUARY 1, 1931
LONDON, ENGLAND

Just then, two silver tea stands arrive at our table. Heaping piles of finger sandwiches—smoked salmon and butter, prawns with paprika, sliced cucumber and cream cheese, Parma ham, and egg mayonnaise with watercress—are arranged on one of the three-tiered stands, while another proffers glistening Bakewell tarts, Victoria sponge with lemon curd, miniature Battenberg cakes, shortbread, and, of course, scones with pots of strawberry jam and clotted cream. I am grateful for the timely diversion as I wait to see what Agatha will say next. She seems game for the Detection Club, but will my extra appeal make her waver?

I force myself to stay silent as we make our way through the savory and sweet delights. I want to say nothing that will overwhelm. Aside from the odd remark about the wonder of this mouthwatering sponge or that delectable sandwich, we do not speak. The unnatural quiet makes me physically uncomfortable, and I squirm until finally Agatha says, “Your Detection Club *is* a noble and worthy endeavor, make no mistake. We writers of mystery and detective novels have great need of the unity it would provide if we are to elevate our craft.”

As she reaches for a slice of the pastel-colored Battenberg cake from the tray, I echo her sentiments. “No matter how beautifully written a mystery book is or how important and profound its themes, mainstream reviewers lump us in the ‘genre’ category and refuse to consider our work

as literature. They think of our books as pulp fiction, and as one who reviews detective novels for the *Sunday Times*, I am keenly aware of the difference in treatment. But if we support one another and insist on a certain level of quality, then we stand a chance.”

“I am committed to your new club,” she says. “But what is this ‘greater need’ you have of me? On that, the jury remains out.”

“Well,” I venture, delighted that she’s chosen this moment to take a bite of her favorite orange poppy-seed cake—a delectable confection always softens *my* mood—“you know I’ve installed Gilbert as the first president.”

Nibbling away, she nods at my mention of G. K. Chesterton, known as Gilbert to his friends and colleagues. He’s well loved by the public for his Father Brown mysteries and a little less loved by his fellow writers for his verbosity. Still, I chose him to give the club a certain level of gravitas that I wouldn’t be able to confer if I’d named myself president.

“He’s shared with me some grumblings by other prospective Detection Club members about adding more female writers to the roster. Other than you and me, of course.” I will my voice to remain steady. Steadier than it was when Gilbert had delivered this sour news and I’d shrieked like an alley cat.

Agatha places her fork down upon her plate and sits up even straighter. “Grumblings?”

“Apparently, Gilbert and several proposed members were dining together, and a certain hesitancy was expressed around having an ‘abundance of women’ in the ranks. Apparently they worry that it might be perceived negatively by those very literary institutions we are trying to impress.”

Her eyes narrow and her cadence slows as she asks, “I take it that an ‘abundance’ is more than two?”

“That seems to be how they’re defining the word. Although I doubt that the *Oxford English Dictionary* would agree.”

“Was Anthony part of this conversation?” A single eyebrow raised, Agatha asks about our mutual friend, author Anthony Berkeley Cox. Discussions at the writerly dinners he hosts planted the seed for the

Detection Club, one that I coaxed into existence with my usual energy and brashness. The male writers may have let the idea languish.

“Gilbert would not share the names of the men.”

“Typical cowardice,” she says with a disappointed shake of her head. “Hiding behind the cloak of anonymity.”

On this point, I could digress for days. But I have an agenda, and a time-sensitive one at that. “I do have a plan.”

Her eyebrow lowers, and she leans toward me. “If I know anything about you, Dorothy, it’s that you are never without one.” As she speaks, her eyes flash intensely, and I do believe the Agatha of old has returned for a moment. I’ve got to take advantage of this opportunity.

“How would you feel if we hand-selected the cleverest female mystery writers to become members of the Detection Club—contrary to the men’s wishes—and form a club within a club? We would share the objectives of the Detection Club, but we will have a purpose all our own: to ensure that we have a place among the pantheon of preeminent mystery writers. Together, we would become a society of mutual admiration and support—for one another and for women everywhere. And...”

I pause to gauge her reaction. While on the one hand, I doubt that Agatha would thrill to the suggestion that she is a feminist, as I might should I be called the word outright, on the other hand, her books depict bright, inventive women, even those in their later years. As do mine, increasingly. Does this mean she might be open to assembling this unusual circle of women? Then take the necessary next step? It would be hard to go this path alone.

As I hold tight for an interminable moment, I watch as Agatha slowly nods. My stomach flutters excitedly as she then asks, “And?”

“And once assembled, we would appear en masse at the Detection Club initiation ceremony, ready to be sworn in by Gilbert. In such a setting, the men wouldn’t have the moxie to object. An ‘abundance’ of female mystery writers in the Detection Club would be a *fait accompli*.”