

NEIL RICHARDS
MATTHEW COSTELLO



MYDWORTH MYSTERIES

A Shot in the Dark



It made the Dower House look like a hut.

“Wow, wow, wow,” she said – this time in a hushed voice – as she stopped and took in the unexpected sight and sounds.

Looking stocky and square, the house squatted behind perfect lawns dotted with classical statues, surrounded by woodland.

She could also see easily a dozen bedroom windows, framed by thick ivy across the upper floors; a grand entrance with glowing lanterns; and a sweeping gravel drive that came out of the woods and curved round a fountain, with a cherub armed with bow and arrow, set back from the house.

And even from up here, the source of the music was clear: a large downstairs living room, or whatever they called it here, running along the side of the building, with French windows thrown wide open, and a dozen or so people standing inside, all in evening dress, chatting, laughing.

Drinking cocktails!

A pause in the music – and then the gramophone launched into a new disc – a song that she and Harry absolutely loved back in Cairo: *Let’s Do It, Let’s Fall in Love*.

Which of course is exactly what we did, she thought.

Albeit, less a decision than, in her opinion – inevitable.

Hell, yes! This is more like it, she thought, a thrill of excitement making up for the crazy hike through muddy fields. *First night in England, and we’re going to a party, Kat!*

She brushed a stray piece of straw from her hair and wiped her muddy hands on her jacket.

Hmm, guess I’ll have to borrow some clothes. And definitely some shoes.

With a skip in her step, she headed barefoot down the gentle slope towards the house.

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Kat walked across the dark shadowed lawn of Mydworth Manor watching the smartly-dressed guests being gently ushered out of the reception room and into a formal dining room: tall windows revealed a long table set with candelabra, glass and silver sparkling, maids and footmen ready to serve dinner.

Well – isn’t this something, she thought.

She suddenly realised that in this muddy state – she might *not* quite get the welcome she was hoping for.

Maybe better to head for the servants’ entrance and enlist some help getting an outfit?

Don’t want to frighten Aunt Lavinia – or the elegant guests!

She walked a bit closer to the house, trying to figure the layout. To one side stood what she guessed were outbuildings and stables – in the darkness, she could just see the outline of cars parked in a line.

As she rounded the side of the house, searching for a servants’ entrance, she glanced up at the bedroom windows.

In one of them, she saw something – a shape and shadows moving.

Must be somebody late for dinner, she thought. Better hurry up – smells good – don't want to miss it!

But then, before she looked away, a man appeared at the window, silhouetted against the bedroom light. She watched him grab hold of the window frame – then climb up onto it!

And now, through the open window, she heard loud voices coming from the room.

What the...?

She saw the man pivot, as if to climb out of the window, his foot reaching down into the ivy and trellis for a footing, his body now fully twisted round so his back was to her, one hand gripping the window frame, one reaching down to get a hold in the ivy.

A shrill scream from inside the room.

A piercing, terrifying, woman's scream.

And, right at that window, a muzzle flash and a gunshot – crisp and loud out here in the gardens.

And the clinging man fell backwards, as if punched, falling, head rocking back, arms spiralling, legs now in the air, kicking, taking forever to land. Kat knew he must land so hard from that height.

With a horrible thud, he hit the ground.

Kat stood still, not moving, mouth open in shock, not able to say or do anything for a second. Another man appeared at the window, arm raised, revolver in hand and...

Bang!

A second gunshot, this one somehow seeming louder – as if the first shot had silenced the world. The muzzle flash brighter too -

Bang!

And now a third.

And Kat felt, rather than heard, the bullet thread through the air near her, and realised *she* was in the firing line. For the second time that day, instincts kicked in and she crouched and ran towards the nearest cover: a milky-white stone pedestal plinth, with a helmeted figure atop it holding a sword in one hand, and a head in another.

And as she reached it, stumbling, falling – she hit somebody hard with her shoulder who fell back with the impact against the pedestal with a loud...

“What the bloody hell—?”

“Harry?” she said, grabbing a familiar-feeling arm, as yet another two shots rang out.

Bang! Bang!

And a fragment of marble shattered above their heads.

“Kat? Can I not leave you for an afternoon without a war starting?”

“I didn't start *this* one.”

“Good to hear. Um, any idea what's going on?”

“None at all. But there's a man down, over in the bushes there. Fell from the window.”

“Uninvited guest perhaps? Got your note by the way.”

“Yes, gathered that.”

Bang! Kat saw a chunk of muddy grass spiral away into the darkness by her feet. She tucked in her legs a little more.

“Okay, so I’m a bit late to this party,” said Harry. “Out of interest – how many shots is that?”

Kat thought for a second.

“Six – I think.”

“*Think?*”

“No – I’m sure.”

“Good,” said Harry. “Sounds like a standard-issue Webley. He’ll have to stop to reload.”

Kat watched her husband stand and brush down his suit, then shout up to the window: “I say! Do you mind awfully cutting that out, somebody could get hurt.”

Bang!

“Ah,” said Kat, confused. “Sorry. *That* must be six. Though, Harry – I *really* do think it was seven.”

“Counting. Always tricky at times like this.”

She stood up too, grabbed her surviving shoe, and looked across at the house. More lights were now on, and people were crowding at the downstairs windows. She heard shouting and crying from up in the bedrooms.

“Harry. The man who fell...” she said, knowing that seconds could mean the difference between life and death. “Come on.”

With Harry just behind her, she ran towards the house.

There, in the shrubs and flowers below the window from where the shots had been fired, she could see a dark shape.

The body of a man, lying on his back, not moving. Limbs splayed. The angles – unnatural.

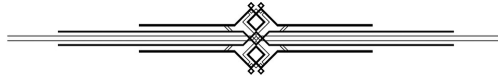
She crouched down next to him, her fingers quickly reaching to the neck, looking for a pulse. His skin was still warm, the eyes blankly open. A young man. A lock of dark hair falling across his forehead.

Harry was at her side. “Anything?”

She hated it when there was nothing she could do.

“No,” she said. “He’s dead.”

5. The Constable Calls



Kat stepped back, as Harry crouched and leaned in to inspect the body.

“Quite a drop,” he said, nodding towards the bedroom window. But then he tilted the man’s head gently, and the lock of hair fell away: “But – I don’t think it was the fall that killed him.”

In the darkness, Kat could now make out a bullet wound to the man’s temple, blood glistening.

As a young volunteer nurse in France, back in 1918, she’d seen enough casualties to know that such a wound was almost certainly fatal.

She felt Harry’s hand – warm on her arm, felt his body next to hers, knowing that he understood what she was feeling now.

Both of them had that shared history of war. In moments like this it could return without warning, raw and vivid.

She stood up – Harry’s arm still on her shoulder – then turned as a woman’s voice cut loudly through the silence.

“Good *God!* Harry? Is that *you?*”

From out of the darkness, a flashlight was suddenly pointed at her and Harry, as a group of figures rushed towards them. “Hell-lo Aunt Lavinia,” said Harry, shielding his eyes from the dazzle.

As the flashlight was lowered and the group approached, Kat saw a tall, elegant woman leading them, the brightly coloured Japanese silk shawl over her shoulders catching the moonlight perfectly.

So... this is the famous Lavinia, thought Kat, taking in her every feature.

Harry had told her so much about his aunt – but not how striking she was.

Tall, like Harry, with a kind of languor about her movements.

Her hair was dark and fashionably short – with the type of kiss curls you’d normally see on a younger woman. Her clothes elegant, her face sharply defined, with high cheek bones and barely any make-up.

She looks like... like a... leopard, thought Kat.

Lavinia stopped suddenly – clearly shocked to see Harry – and then even more shocked to see the body at their feet.

“Oh my,” said Lavinia, focusing the torchlight on the body, then taking Harry’s hand as if to steady herself. “Poor boy. Is he... *dead?*”

“Afraid so,” said Harry. “You know him?”

Kat watched Lavinia lean closer, then pull back quickly.

“Oh God – it’s Coates. My driver.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry. “Any idea what happened?”

“Heard a gunshot. From the look of things, I think Cousin Reggie shot him,” said Lavinia, looking up at the still-lit bedroom window above. “As to why? I have absolutely no idea.”

“I think perhaps I do,” said Harry. Kat watched as he took out a handkerchief, crouched down by the body, reached into the man’s jacket pocket... and gently pulled out an ornate diamond necklace.

As he stood – the jewellery sparkled and shimmered in the light from the house. Kat heard a gasp from the small crowd of onlookers behind her.

“Extraordinary,” said Lavinia.

“That’s not all,” said Harry, nodding towards the flowerbed. And now, Kat could see the light catching other pieces, scattered on the ground: single jewels, bracelets, rings...

The man must have held them clutched in his hand as he fell.

Kat watched Harry fold the handkerchief with the necklace and place it in his trouser pocket. Then he took off his jacket and gently placed it over the body.

After a few seconds, he rose and faced the small group of onlookers, in their evening dress, who now pressed closer.

“There’s nothing we can do for him now,” he said, gently ushering Lavinia’s guests away from the crime scene. “I suggest we all move back to the house and telephone for the police.”

Kat watched Lavinia and the group turn and walk towards the brightly lit portico of the great house. Then Harry put his arm back around her shoulder and they followed.

“Harry. I really *did* hear six shots,” said Kat, quietly.

“Oh, I believe you did,” said Harry. “Numbers are a strong suit with you.”

“Odd, don’t you think?”

“Very. We’ll get you a hot bath and a whisky later and talk about that, eh? But in the meantime...” Harry looked at the crowd walking in. “Let’s, um, keep that to ourselves for now, hmm?”

Kat nodded.

Having that same instinct.

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“Darling Harry,” Lavinia said once the other guests had gone back into the house, leaving just the three of them waiting for the police on the elegant stone steps. “It’s a joy to have you home again. But what on *earth* were you doing in the garden?”

“Oh dear. Did you not receive my telegram? Got rather bored in Marseilles, so we loaded up the old Alvis and set a course for England so I could...” he paused, still blinking