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The Reluctant Detective

Written by Martha Ockley

Published by Lion Hudson

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THE RELUCTANT DETECTIVE

A Faith Morgan Mystery

Martha Ockley

With special thanks to Rebecca Jenkins



LION FICTION

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Published by Lion Fiction
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
www.lionhudson.com/fiction

ISBN 978 1 78264 068 4
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 126 1

First edition published in 2011 by Monarch Books

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

Printed and bound in the UK, March 2014, LH26

For Kate Morgan and Lulu Purda,
two of my favourite Kiwis.

Chapter 1

"You know I don't like to complain." Pat Montesque screwed up her soft cheeks into a fierce smile. "But I'll tell you, Elsie, I was a tad put out. I've always done the altar arrangements – since before Vicar Alistair came. You need a good substantial block of colour and there she was putting up a great waxy lily and a couple of twigs. Striking simplicity! I ask you!"

Elsie Lively tut-tutted sympathetically. She was looking at her dear Arthur's grave: probably thinking it needed a bit of a tidy, thought Pat. But then it was so difficult to get down on your knees at her age and well nigh impossible to get back up.

"Naturally I pointed out it wouldn't do – not in that space. Who's going to notice a single lily? The altar would be as good as bare. *He* said it was a misunderstanding. She'd only meant to help. Men!" She philosophized aloud. "What they don't know about women! And as for men of the cloth…"

"Charitable."

"What did you say, dear? Didn't quite catch that." Pat leaned down to the small, bent woman at her side with all the gracious condescension of a church officer to a valued lay member.

"Charitable – man of the cloth; a good thing."

Dear Elsie. Always stating the obvious.

Pat was distracted. A stranger was getting out of a little blue car by the gate. It was one of those snub-nosed Japanese things they were forever advertising on the commercial channels.

"Now, who's that?"

The newcomer was a young woman in her early thirties with glossy brown shoulder-length hair and a healthy outdoor tan. She was dressed in a crisp fifties-looking cotton shirt dress in dove grey. As she turned, the sun caught a discreet cross pinned to her lapel. The churchwarden's nose twitched. It couldn't be! The bishop wouldn't do that to them – would he?

Faith Morgan looked down the path from the wicket gate. A couple of elderly ladies were standing by an evergreen bush, cataloguing her from head to foot. This was supposed to be a low-key visit – she was only investigating options, she told herself. It might lead to nothing but still, it wouldn't do to get off on the wrong foot with the locals.

The parish church of St James's in Little Worthy rose sturdy and enduring with its sunlit graveyard at its feet. According to the guidebooks, stones in the tower had been part of a church here since Saxon times. Faith felt a wash of pleasure and peace. This place of worship had served its community for nearly a thousand years. There could hardly be a greater contrast to the gritty, uncertain, challenging chaos of the urban parish she was thinking of leaving. A pang of guilt interrupted her moment of euphoria. The face of her mentor, Canon Jonathan, came to mind, fixing her with one of his wry looks. His tart comment echoed in her head: *Little Worthy, Faith? A congregation of eight – if you're lucky – with an average age of seventy; a fund-raising nightmare to crush the heart of a saint!*

Her eyes searched the roof line. Bound to be Grade I listed. Maintaining Saxon masonry couldn't be cheap. It all *seemed* in good shape. Besides, there were always the heritage funds…

The bells began another peal, and the whiff of vanilla from a nearby shrub struck her with a breath of nostalgia. She had been here more than once as a child with Ruth and Dad on his bell-ringing outings. Those convivial summer Sundays with the dads and their kids and the occasional mother. After church they would go to the pub across the green – still called The Hare and Hounds, she noted happily. The dads would take off their ties and swap stories while she and Ruth sat outside with their lime shandies on benches of sun-warmed wood. You can never go back, she mused, so what was she doing back here?

She rallied. There was nothing wrong with peaceful continuity. Decency deserved to be cherished too.

There was a little time yet before the service began. Faith avoided the main approach and followed a gravel path around the back of the church. A creamy cloud of ivory clematis cascaded over a grey stone wall. Beyond, a solitary pony raised its chestnut head to gaze mournfully at her from a field of weeds. Some way off squatted a group of ramshackle farm buildings.

There was a well-worn track leading from the vestry door. Through a clump of limes she glimpsed the corner of what she thought must be the vicarage.

A dark-haired young man in jeans and a rumpled striped shirt strode out of the church. He had an angular face and the coltish appearance of not having quite grown into his bones. Behind him, a distinguished-looking fifty-something clergyman in surplice and cassock filled the doorway. That must be the incumbent, Alistair Ingram, thought Faith,

wondering if she should introduce herself. He called out to the retreating youth, who turned back briefly to make a dismissive pushing gesture with both hands. She was about to step forward when she registered the youth's expression: disdain, fury, and something else. Triumph? Faith turned away, embarrassed. It felt like a private matter; she shouldn't be spying. She retraced her steps and entered the church.

The transition from sunlight to cool interior blinded her briefly. In a pool of clarity, Faith saw a service sheet held out in a meaty hand. It belonged to a cheery-looking man in a red waistcoat and a moss-green tweed jacket. He was smiling at her as if they knew one another.

"Fred Partridge," he pronounced in a carrying voice. "Churchwarden. Pleased to have you with us." He winked conspiratorially as he turned to greet a couple coming in behind her.

Faith slid into an unoccupied pew. There were twenty or so worshippers scattered about. Not a bad turnout for a small country church on the fifth Sunday in Lent. Her eyes settled on the little bent woman who had been outside as she arrived. She was arranging her hymnal and prayer book on the shelf before her with delicate, twisted hands. Her fine silver hair was folded into a thin bun secured by a network of old-fashioned two-pronged pins.

A presence blocked the light from the door. The formidable-looking lady who had been sizing her up as she arrived was standing in the aisle looking at her with speculating grey eyes. She was solid, with a healthy complexion, probably in her late sixties or early seventies, dressed in what Faith's mother would refer to as "good clothes".

"You've met my fellow churchwarden, I see," she said. She had a round face and a hint of Morningside gentility in

her voice. "I'm Patricia Montesque, the other one," she stated brusquely.

Faith gave her best smile and held out her hand to have it clasped briefly in paper-dry fingers.

"I'm pleased to meet you. Faith Morgan. I'm visiting for the weekend – my sister lives locally. I have fond memories of Little Worthy. We used to come here when I was a child."

"So you like our little church?"

"Isn't it beautiful?" Faith responded warmly. "So well proportioned, and a lovely, comfortable feel about it."

They contemplated the nave together.

"That's a striking arrangement," Faith remarked, indicating the display of lilacs and ivory viburnum by the altar. It was a deliberate ploy. Pat Montesque seemed the kind who was almost certain to do the flower arrangements. She was right. The churchwarden's face relaxed into a narrow smile.

"Not one of my best, I'm afraid. I was rather rushed. But lilacs do give a lovely block of colour." She inclined her perfectly coiffed head in a faintly regal manner. "So you've family in the area, then?"

"I was born in Winchester…"

"Winchester! Barely twenty minutes away. You're almost a native."

"Almost."

"I'm just a newcomer, of course – hardly been here twenty years!" Pat Montesque gave a hard little laugh. "Not like dear Elsie Lively there." She nodded in the direction of the silver-haired lady with the bun. "She's Little Worthy born and bred. Ran the post office for half a century. A close-knit lot, the old families – but we have a very friendly parish here," she ended firmly.

Faith remembered the post office. They had sold old-

fashioned sweets: shell-shaped sherbets and Parma violets. She could almost smell the sugar. Ruth always chose liquorice; not because she particularly liked the taste, but for the way it stained her tongue black.

"So you haven't met our vicar, Alistair?"

Faith was surprised by the challenge. Pat flicked a significant look at the cross pinned to her dress. So I've been rumbled, Faith thought.

"I haven't had the pleasure," she said.

"He's a good pastor. A bit of a liberal, some thought when he first came, but he's sound enough in the essentials. And very good with the finances." Pat paused. "He's leaving us, you know."

"I had heard something of the kind," murmured Faith. To think she had meant to slip in and out with being noticed. She should have known better. Rural parishes always had a Pat Montesque.

"Mmm. A bit of a dicky heart. He looks wonderfully well, but…" Her tone implied something more.

A petite woman with smooth, long fair hair, wearing a simple cotton dress came out of the vestry.

"…decided to take early retirement," continued Pat.

The blonde had striking long-lashed blue eyes and a neat-featured prettiness that retained an element of youthful innocence, although she might have turned forty – it was hard to tell. She saw the churchwarden looking at her, and gave a little girl lost smile before leaning over a pew to exchange greetings with a young mother trying to hold a squirming toddler in her lap.

Pat turned back to Faith apparently as an afterthought. "You'll be staying for coffee after the service?" Without waiting for a response, she was gone.

Could this place feel like home? Could these people ever be her people?

Faith studied the faces around her – silver-haired Elsie; the doting mother shadowing her small determined son as he ventured out down the aisle; the ruddy-faced man with the jacket too short in the sleeve, who couldn't be anything else but an English farmer; a single black family with mother and father and a boy and a girl dressed in smart Sunday clothes. Faith's eyes drifted up into the barrelled roof. There was such comfortable familiarity about the space. Why should that make her feel guilty?

Guilt. Purpose. Being of use. From the very first, Faith had always known that she wanted to be part of some greater purpose. That desire had led her into the police force. And, for a while, she thought she had found her place: to serve and protect; to bring the guilty to account; to protect the weak. That was what had first brought her and Ben together.

Running away, Faith?

I am not.

Ben always seemed to engage life so directly; he was unflinching, so sure of himself.

She was daydreaming. She could see Ben staring her down. *Taking refuge, Faith? Never thought you were a coward.*

You know I'm not, she protested the thought.

The rhythm of the old argument circled in her mind; the argument they had recycled so many times. It had moved them further and further apart, until she had left him – Ben, her lover, her mentor, her inspiration, once.

I can't hold on to your certainties any more.

He had been so hurt. She couldn't make him understand that it wasn't about him. It had been something so personal; each step on her path to the ministry had seemed undeniable.

Her eyes came to rest on a stained-glass window panel leaning against the wall in the shadows beyond the pews. She guessed it must have been taken down on its way for repair. A glass section was cracked through and the leading twisted. The echo of the panel's shape above was boarded up. A haloed lamb stood on a stretch of gaudy emerald grass. The Victorian artist had given the lamb a smiling, enigmatic expression. The Lamb of God.

Running away from reality.

That's what he'd called it. To Ben, it had been a betrayal. And was he right? Was she seeking refuge from the world?

She looked around the congregation. These were people, individual persons, with their complicated lives, their struggles, their fears, their sins, their souls.

An intelligent, capable woman past thirty – with a degree, no less – buying into this delusion… for what? Ben always challenged her. They'd been a good team, once.

What am I doing?

Finding out.

That voice was somehow neither her own nor Ben's. God and she often spoke like that. He would enter the conversation in her brain – not exactly unexpectedly. She had a sense he'd always been there. But since she had taken this turn – embraced this risk and embarked on the ministry – the sense of a presence, of an enduring and constant friend, had grown.

Finding out. The sense of opening horizons warmed and excited her. But then, what about Ben? He had moved back to Winchester more than a year ago.

And why should that matter one way or the other? He had his world now and she had hers.

The organist finished up with a self-important chord.

The vicar was standing before them. Faith pulled her thoughts back to concentrate on the service.

Alistair Ingram took a step towards the altar draped in its Lenten purple, and the choir embarked on the Agnus Dei. Faith suppressed a smile as Pat Montesque's forceful soprano rose above the rest.

"Lamb of God,

You take away the sin of the world."

The vicar's voice was clear and impressive. Faith wondered briefly if her own lighter tones could ever carry the words so well. Then she was caught up in the familiar comfort of their meaning.

"Jesus is the Lamb of God,

Who takes away the sin of the world.

Blessed are those who are called to his supper."

Alistair Ingram spread out his arms to encompass his congregation. Sunlight, tinted by the stained glass in the window behind him, painted pastel blue and red on the white linen runner laid on top of the purple cloth.

"Amen."

He picked up the communion cup and drank.

The toddler escaped from his mother and made a break for freedom past the communion rail, his feet pattering in quick uneven steps. What perfect timing. There had to be a life metaphor in that. Faith was pondering how children brought life into a church when her ears registered the choking rasp from the direction of the altar.

Alistair Ingram was staring out at nothing, his eyes wide, his chest heaving. Faith saw in slow motion. The chalice dropped from his hands. It hit the edge of the table. Wine flowed out red over the white cloth and stained the purple black. The empty cup rolled off the altar and struck the stone flags.

Alistair Ingram was no longer standing before them. Clutching at his chest and tearing at his vestments, he sat heavily on the steps.

The mother caught her son up in her arms. She turned his head into her shoulder, covering his face. Alistair slumped sideways. Faith realized that she was standing in the aisle, then she began to run towards the chancel steps.

Chapter 2

It struck Faith how death is always startling, facing us with the greatest mystery: how the particular and the individual can vanish from this world so completely in a moment.

The body behind the altar was almost definitely dead. Faith knew that instinctively. The servers were standing around him as if frozen.

"Perhaps I can help," she said. "I have some first aid training."

The blonde woman with the long hair was in the way. She was sitting on the floor beside the crumpled heap of robes, holding the fallen man's hand and rocking slightly. Her hair covered her face. "It's his heart. It must be his heart!" she repeated in a small, breathy voice. "Someone call an ambulance."

"Tim's doing it," mumbled Fred Partridge. His kindly face wore the fragmented look of shock as he stared helplessly to the rear of the nave, where the black father was using his mobile to phone for an ambulance, his small daughter clinging to his coat. He was stroking her glossy hair with his free hand.