

HOW TO
SOLVE
MURDERS
LIKE A
LADY

ALSO BY HANNAH DOLBY

No Life for a Lady

HOW TO SOLVE MURDERS LIKE A LADY

Hannah Dolby



An Aria Book

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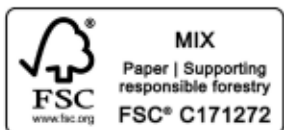
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To my friends, for making me laugh

Resolve

Build on resolve, and not upon regret,
The structure of thy future. Do not grope
Among the shadows of old sins, but let
Thine own soul's light shine on the path of hope
And dissipate the darkness. Moist no tears
Upon the blotted record of lost years
But turn the leaf and smile, oh smile, to see
The fair white pages that remain for thee.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850–1919)

Chapter One

Life was good, full of recent achievements and adventures to come. I had an exemplary fiancé and a fledgling career as a Lady Detective. It was only a tiny setback to be trapped in an oast house full of hens.

A bird with black feathers and an evil expression clucked ominously near me and I shifted in case it pecked my ankle. Oast houses were built to store hops for beer and in the middle of the room, three storeys high, rose the giant furnace that was lit day and night in August and September to dry the hops, before they were taken away for brewing. It was spring now, and even though the slatted floor above had long been swept clean of the hop flowers, the hints of juniper berry and pine still mingled with the scents of hay and hens.

Ten or so were meandering around the floor and more clucking from nesting boxes lined around the circular wall. They were not my only company. Three baby goats sat at my feet, staring at me.

I was lucky. Not many women could expect a career at all in the year of our Lord, 1897. My luck had come about only last spring, when I had plucked up courage and hired a detective to find my mother, who had been missing from Hastings and St Leonards for ten years. I had persuaded Benjamin Blackthorn, a very tall detective, to let me work for him, initially as a typist. It had led to several adventures, including finding my mother and becoming engaged to him, and now, to handling cases like this one.

A brush-bearded, fustian-trousered farmer called Mr Wicken had shut me in the oast house. I had asked him if he had seen any

of the little goats who pulled children along in the goat-chaises on the Hastings and St Leonards promenade, as three had gone missing, and a shrimp-seller on the seafront had told me she had spotted him walking homewards early this morning, a wildly wriggling sack over his shoulder. When I arrived, Mr Wicken had grunted a little and gestured towards the oast house, and the second I stepped inside he locked me in with a bar over the door. And here were the three little kids, one chewing my bootlaces; too little to have started pulling the chaises, white and brown with whirling tails, amber eyes and soft snouts.

Three hens were circling the smallest goat, clucking in agitation. I couldn't blame them. The kids overflowed with hapless, haphazard energy, sometimes leaping and twisting into the air as if some invisible force propelled them, pausing only to play-butt each other and my knees and trying to eat everything in sight. They had only tired themselves out enough to sit down in the last few minutes. The smallest bleated forlornly, so I took it onto my lap and stroked its soft ears. Too soft. There was a reason they were made into gloves.

Six months or so ago, I had found my mother. I had hired a shady detective to find her, a Mr Frank Knight, and attempted to replace him with the morally superior Mr Blackthorn, and then in the end I had found her myself, living quietly in Buxton in affectionate, if surprising, proximity with a lady friend.

Mr Fake-Detective Knight had died. I could not bear to call it murder, but he had chased me all the way to Buxton, revealing a long, bitter obsession with my mother and threatening both of us, and my mother's lady friend had precipitated his early departure from the world into the depths of a cave. It was a shocking moment that still woke me at night, but it had cemented the feeling I must become a detective, must face all of the horror and sadness of life. I had learnt so much in the past year, I never wanted to return to the naive, ignorant female I had been.

There were rough edges. I was still coming to terms with the fact that for ten years, my mother had not made a very great

effort to let me know she was alive. It hurt with a sharpness I had not expected, but the only vital point, surely, was that she was living and in good health. I must ignore the hurt. I had more splendid things to think about.

There was my agreement with my new fiancé, Benjamin Blackthorn, for example. It was a very modern one, in that he had agreed we could mutually get to know each other for as long as I needed and if it didn't work out, we could reconsider with no blame on either side, and I would be a free woman again. We had been engaged nearly six months now, and I was very content. Maybe in ten years we would get married and settle down to raise a family.

Overall, it was not so bad to be locked in an oast house. I did not think the farmer meant injury. I was getting cleverer at discerning when people meant me harm. He had looked panicked rather than angry. Besides, being locked up was giving me a rare moment to reflect on the miracle of my life finally falling into place.

But I had had enough ruminating. It was time to escape.

It was not hopeful. I went up the circular staircase leading to the floor above, where hops were dried by the shovelful, but could see no way out. The door which led to the cooling house next door was firmly locked, and it was impossible to escape through the hole in the roof as it was conical, a giant chimney to funnel the hot air from the furnace up and out.

It was impossible to fail. I had not spent six months training to be a Lady Detective to fall at the first hurdle. But after I had perambulated the entire roundhouse thrice, each time followed by small curious goats, I had to admit the possibilities were slim.

Finally, I sat down on the upper floor, frustrated, resting my head back against the wall, looking up at the distinctive white-painted cowl at the very top of the coned roof. Shaped like the hood of a nun's robe, it spun around in the wind, propelled by

a weathervane. Dimly, I thought it might be to protect the hops from the rain, but all I knew was that it looked very showy from the outside. Scores of similar oast houses dotted the countryside, each with its white peak, a distinctive mark on the landscape.

I looked at the cowl again and sighed as an idea formed. Was it the only way? Would I have to risk my dignity and my reputation for my freedom? Would it be better just to wait, in hope the farmer saw the error of his ways?

I was not the waiting kind. I went down the stairs again, picked up a long-handled rake lying against the wall, and then climbed back up. It was not long enough, so I took the ribbon off my hat and tied two rakes together, prongs to prongs.

Would I ever be allowed out in society again, even if my actions saved me? But my hat would not fit through the hole, and I could hardly take off my skirt. Instead, mumbling to myself, I removed my serviceable white cotton petticoat, which was woven with a thick cording of fabric that made it stand out stiffly to support my skirt. It had a cotton tie around the waist that I fastened as firmly as I could around the thin end of one of the rakes, allowing an opening for it to billow in the wind. Then I hoisted it up and out of the hole at the top of the roof. I had made a flag. A flag which would save me or shame me forever.

For a few seconds my petticoat inflated splendidly, silhouetted against the sky, a signal no one could miss. Then the wind picked up and the cowl spun again, knocking my petticoat clear off the end of the rake, so it flew away and out of sight, a white cotton bird against the clouds. I sat down again on the slatted floor, defeated.

Chapter Two

The farmer's face was extraordinarily red above his scrubbing brush beard.

'Miss, you've lost...' he said. 'Is it yerrs? It can't be anyone else's. You might want...' He stood at a distance, his arm stiffened out at full stretch, and handed me a folded parcel of brown hessian. I guessed it contained my lost undergarment.

'Thank you,' I said. 'Perhaps you might let me out.'

'Me wife says I should,' he said. 'But ah'm doin' it on behalf of the goats. 'Tis a protest. Goats are not horses. They shouldn't be on the seafront, pullin' along carriages for the tourists. That's not what they're for. That's usin' 'em. It's agin nature. They should be allowed to grow up, and graze in a field; become good milkers. That's a proper life.'

'You have stolen them,' I said. 'Theft is a serious matter. You took them away in a sack. And you imprisoned me among hens. I am covered in feathers. Several important people will be wondering where I am. Besides, is not keeping goats for their milk using them, in a way? They do not make their milk for us.'

He wrinkled his nose. 'Tis unnatural, pullin' spoilt brats along the seafront. Better for their lazy legs if they walk. Me wife says I've maybe gone too far this time, though. Yer... it hit me in the face, yer... yer... as I was feedin' the cows. I reckon it's a sign. I didn't mean to scare you into doing summat so... so... *unladylike*.'

'Why don't you let us all go, and we'll say no more about it,' I said.

He shrugged and stroked his beard. 'Tell Mrs Pearson she

needs to look after her livestock better. Make sure they aren't pulling children twice their size. 'Tis no life for a goat. But me wife is the one with the sense. Tek 'em away, then.'

He took a ball of string from his pocket, cut three pieces with a penknife he produced from another pocket, tied each piece of string round the necks of the goats tight enough they couldn't wriggle out and then tried to hand me the end of the strings.

'Good luck wi' it,' he said. 'Sorry for the trouble. Bit unusual for a lady to be harin' about the countryside sorting out troubles, ent it? Aren't you too... gentle for that sort of business?'

'I am a Lady Detective,' I said. 'Tough, decisive and when necessary, brutish.'

He turned towards the doorway as if to look at the clouds, but did he have a smile on his face? I would ignore it if so. He had touched a nerve, but he was a man who stole goats and therefore lacking good sense. 'If you will take the animals outside temporarily and leave the door ajar, I will... attend to matters.'

He shot out the door, rosy-faced again, and I put my petticoat back on before meeting him in the farmyard.

'Sorry, miss,' he said, handing me the kids on the string.

'Thank you for having me, goodbye,' I said, and stalked out of the yard. It was not quite the dignified exit I had hoped, because the three kids had different opinions about which way they wanted to go, but eventually we made it out and I set off down the hill to return them to Mrs Mavis Pearson, seaside proprietor of goat-chaises.

It was heading towards lunchtime, so once I had left the country lanes and entered the edges of town, I took the narrow twittens and back streets to avoid meeting anyone. It was all downhill, as Hastings and St Leonards was a motley marriage of hills and valleys, dropping sharply towards the sea. I zig-zagged my way until I reached the promenade, and then I picked up one kid

under my right arm, pulling the other two, and walked with the nonchalant saunter of someone doing something entirely natural.

It was the first of March, and the seafront was coming to life again. It had been a harsh winter. Storms had ruined several piers further along the coast and Beach Terrace had been flooded three times, although it was generally agreed it had been built too close to the sea anyway.

Now the day-trippers and convalescents were starting to trickle back. The hawkers were out, selling whelks and periwinkles; toffee apples and sticks of rock; flowers, postcards, driftwood carvings and seashells. A fisherman was mending his trawl net in the doorway of a black-tarred net shop and another was making wicker baskets. I passed a row of bath chairs on the promenade, ready for hire, and on the beach were several rows of the new striped deck chairs that had become so fashionable last summer. Beyond them at the edge of the sea, surrounded by ready crowds, were the giant pleasure yachts, their sails billowing. The air was full of shouts, laughter and loud conversation. I had heard talk the council was bringing in by-laws to curtail the worst of the seafront's excesses and control who could sell what where, and I hoped the rules would not destroy this dramatic maelstrom of life.

Hastings Pier, stretching majestically out to sea with its onion-topped Moorish pavilion at the seaward end, had been shut for most of the winter months. The gales had destroyed the landing stage on the new St Leonards Pier, some of its timber beams driven further along the coast to smash into several of the two hundred iron columns holding up Hastings Pier, but the damage could not have been too serious, because today it was open again. People were pouring through the two octagonal tollgates to visit the numerous stalls and sundry entertainments, from fortune-telling and strength-testing machines to this week's new attraction, a hall of mirrors.

Imps of fate being what they were, as I passed the end of it, I

saw the Spencer sisters coming towards me, in apricot dresses. They were a strange pair, fond of cutting me in the street. They noticed me and veered slightly as if considering crossing the road, but they were with a burly man with an unusual red-brown beard, dense enough for sparrows to get lost in, who must be their father. Not knowing me, he did not change course, so they did not have time to avoid me. They contented themselves with identical looks of horror and disdain, giving my animal charges a wide berth.

A little further along, because the angels disliked me today, I met Mrs Withers from my local church. Criticising me was already her favourite pastime, without her needing extra ammunition. She was fond of extravagant hats and today's was covered in red and purple silk poppies, a whole field flowering on her head with a startled blackbird at its epicentre.

'What in heaven!' she cried. 'Miss Hamilton, what on earth are you doing?'

'Just returning some goats,' I said, and tried to circumnavigate her, but one of the kids, fascinated by the foliage on her hat, reared up with its little hooves on her knee to have a closer look and the others became happily entangled in her skirts.

'For goodness' sake!' she said, brushing them away and stepping behind a bench to protect herself. 'Have you no sense, no decorum? Parading around town with dirty farm animals! What would your mother think?'

'My mother disappeared eleven years ago,' I said, 'Her thoughts would be... antiquated. I must be going. Good day,' and I managed to circle around her and continue on my way, not looking back, knowing her face would be unpleasantly scrunched up with disapproval. I should not have been so flippant about my mother because it was only Benjamin and I who knew she was alive and well and had not drowned at sea, been abducted by highwaymen, seduced by pirates or any of the other lurid theories eddying around town for years. But Mrs Withers deserved short shrift.

Eventually, I reached Mrs Pearson's goat pen on the seafront and handed them back. She was a small woman of some asperity, perfect for training stubborn goats.

'I shall go and give Farmer Wicken a piece of my mind,' she said, but I deterred her.

'He is old-fashioned and thinks goats should be kept for milk,' I said. 'He was attempting some grand point about liberation, and the ethics of goat-chaises. He has realised he was wrong and will not do it again. Treat them kindly, I beg of you.'

I had developed an affection for them over the morning, with their lively exuberance. But they looked happy to be home, so I patted their heads and left.

I planned to go and meet Benjamin Blackthorn, my fiancé, in our office. First, I would go home and wash off the scent of my adventure. I only wished to meet him looking my best.

The morning had been successful, if I ignored the small irritations. I was perhaps less patient than I had once been with people's foibles and failings, because I had a profession now, a calling. Surely it gave me the right to avoid the slings and arrows of those who did not suit me, and gravitate towards those who did? The last year had brought good friends into my life and I needed to find a way to excise the likes of Mrs Withers and the Misses Spencer from it.

I did not know, then, how soon one of them would be gone.