

*Murder in the Lakes* extract  
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It's never a good start to the day when the daughter of one of your clients leans across your desk and slaps you in the face.

She had a mean left hook on her too, helped somewhat by the platinum engagement ring that she'd only thought to remove after she'd hit me, before throwing it onto the carpet on her way out.

It helped – a little – that my client managed to hold back her smug look of satisfaction until after her daughter had stormed out of the office, slamming the door in her wake.

'I knew he was trouble, Melody,' she said. 'I told you.'

I stumbled around my desk, bent down to pick up the ring and handed it to Heather McAdams. 'Perhaps hang on to this,' I suggested. 'I'm presuming he'll want it back. Or you can sell it.'

I moved to the mini refrigerator under the window, cracked open the door and pulled out an ice pack.

I guess it shows how often this happens to me that I have one prepared.

I held the door to stop it swinging open. I didn't need my client to see the case of beer that Charlie had left in there on his last visit.

I held the ice pack to my cheek as I made my way back to my chair and somehow managed to sit down and look my client in the eye without losing my composure. My eyes stung, and I was going to have a bruise, that much was for sure.

Mrs McAdams only realised now how hard her daughter had slugged me, and that maybe I wasn't happy about it.

'Are you all right?' she said.

I glared at her. I had a sneaking suspicion her question was brought on by a sudden thought that her daughter might get sued for assault, rather than any concern for my welfare, and whether she should make a speedy phone call to the family solicitor.

'I'm fine,' I replied. 'I'll print out my invoice for you. I accept payment by card only.'

She looked taken aback for a moment, seemed to debate whether to ask if she could pay on account, and then thought better of it.

I ignored her and turned my attention to the computer screen instead. The system allowed me to automatically check off each service provided. I spitefully added an extra thirty pounds miscellaneous line item for the ice pack, hit the "print" button and then slid the still-warm invoice across the desk to Mrs McAdams.

'Oh, my,' she said, as she ran her manicured fingernail down the page. 'This is rather more than I expected.'

'A copy of my expenses is on the second page,' I said, jutting out my chin. 'I'm sure you'll find everything is in order. You'll appreciate that I do provide a rather exclusive service.'

She looked flustered. 'I wasn't implying—'

I raised an eyebrow.

She lowered her gaze in response and flicked over the page instead.

I drummed my fingers on the desk while she read through the numbers. Such a sign of impatience always annoyed the hell out of me when people did that anywhere within a mile radius of me, so I was banking on it getting on her nerves and that she'd hurry up and pay, then leave me in peace.

Sure enough, she flicked the page over with an exasperated sigh, then handed over her credit card.

It was from one of the larger banks, the word “platinum” embossed across the front of it with a sparkly finish that glinted in the sunlight streaming through the window.

A car horn honked somewhere beyond the double-glazed panes, followed in quick succession by a higher pitched *beep* and a stream of colourful swearing.

I swiped Heather McAdams’s credit card across the handheld reader and handed it back to her, then used a large rubber stamp to punch the word “Paid” across the top of the invoice.

And yes, I pretended I was stamping her daughter’s face with it before I released the spring mechanism.

‘Thank you,’ I said, and stood to show her the way out, dumping the ice pack on the desk. ‘If you know of anyone else that would be in need of my services, please give them this.’

I handed over a business card.

Heather McAdams took it between her forefinger and thumb as if it was infected with weaponised smallpox and wrinkled her nose. ‘I’d best go and find out where Charlotte is,’ she sniffed.