

## A SAINTLY KILLING

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A FAITH MORGAN MYSTERY

MARTHA OCKLEY



LION FICTION

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MARTHA OCKLEY'S  
FAITH MORGAN MYSTERIES:

THE RELUCTANT DETECTIVE  
THE ADVENT OF MURDER  
A SAINTLY KILLING

## CHAPTER

# 1

Tuesday morning, 10:30 a.m. The calm before the storm.

Faith Morgan swept a scatter of confetti across the stone floor of the church porch and chivvied it towards the pile of dust and other detritus she was collecting by the door. Outside in the churchyard, the heat of the July sun was already intense. If only this glorious weather could hold out until the weekend! St James's Church, Little Worthy, was celebrating its 800th year on the Sunday coming. Faith's time as custodian, just twelve months so far, seemed an almost insignificant chapter in such a long history.

Despite the tranquillity of the old church's cool interior, she could feel her brain slipping into overdrive. *Commemorative services throughout the day. Lunchtime picnic for local families. Evening concert at the church by Christian rock group.*

And these were just the highlights of Sunday's very full agenda. Faith's usual A4 'to-do' sheet had swelled into a clipboard, bulging with lists and peppered with Post-it notes shouting "URGENT!"

She shook the last of the brightly coloured paper fragments from the broom. This morning, she'd promised herself a few moments of quiet time in the building that had become such an integral part of her life. The clipboard could wait. She'd tackle it with much more clarity and gusto after some calm meditation. She stood by the open door and closed her eyes, murmuring some words from the 26th Psalm. *O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells.* The stone flags of the porch were firm and smooth beneath her feet. Birds twittered in the churchyard trees and from the village green came the distant hum of a car. The only slightly jarring note was the buzz of a chainsaw, across the fields at Shoemith's Farm, where its new owner, none other than Jeremy Taylor, treasurer of the parish council, was carrying out extensive refurbishments to the farmhouse. But even that irritation was fading away, as the ancient peace of St James's possessed her...

"Morning, vicar!"

Faith started. A portly man with his sleeves rolled up was trundling a wheelbarrow past the door. Fred Partridge, one of the churchwardens. His red waistcoat was unbuttoned today – possibly a first.

Fred lowered the barrow and pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"Sweeping up again?" He smiled at Faith. "Beyond the call of duty, I'd say."

"I enjoy it!" Faith replied.

It was always good to chat to Fred. His unassuming approach to life was very relaxing to be around, and from her earliest days as the first female incumbent of St James's, Faith had sensed that Fred was on her side, despite the fact that he

was old enough to be her father, and might well have been expected to be a stickler for tradition. A couple of weeks ago, he'd shared with her the news that he'd been diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. Faith had experienced some anxious moments over this, but Fred accepted the condition with equanimity. He assured her he was taking care with his diet, and following all the advice he'd been given. Apart from that, he intended to carry on as normal.

"Seen young Daniel about?" Fred asked. "He said he'd come by today, and give me a hand with the digging."

Faith shook her head. "I haven't. Not this morning."

Daniel Wythenshaw was a big-boned young man who lived with his parents on the other side of Little Worthy, about a mile and a half from St James's. His severe learning difficulties made it practically impossible for him to hold down a regular job, but he was devoted to Fred, and would work by his side for hours at a time.

"I'll keep an eye out for him," said Faith. "He's probably on his way."

Daniel was a friendly soul, and easily distracted. He might have encountered a walker with a dog, and stopped to chat.

"Right you are." Fred grasped the handles of the barrow and set off, heading for the new commemorative garden he was creating beside the vicarage. The highlight of the garden was to be a quiet, shady arbour where villagers could go to sit and reflect. Fred was a slow but thorough worker, and he was still at the hard-landscaping stage. The young trees to form the arbour hadn't arrived yet. It would be quite a task to get them all in the ground by Sunday.

Faith leaned on her broom handle. What she had said to Fred was true. She did enjoy cleaning the church. There was a

rota for this, which none of the churchgoers would've expected their vicar to sign up to. But sweeping and dusting the ancient stones of St James's gave her a feeling of connection with past generations who had loved the place. Not just the previous incumbents – all men, of course – but the many women of Little Worthy, whose labours in caring for their church had gone unsung through the ages.

Faith shook herself out of her daydream. A grey-haired woman in a navy-blue dress and a white cardigan was bustling through the wicket gate. Pat Montesque, Fred's fellow-churchwarden. She looked as if she was on a mission.

*What have I forgotten?* Faith thought. *Oh, the bell ropes!* A key item on one of her lists was to contact Alfie Tarrent, a local builder, and ask him to hang a new set of bell ropes at St James's. The new ropes had been delivered, but fixing them at the top of the belfry was a specialist operation. She should really have rung Alfie yesterday.

Pat was hurrying up the path now, her face red. Faith's mobile jumped in her pocket. A text message. She sneaked at quick look at it in case it was something urgent: *still on for tonight? pls tell me u haven't forgotten.*

The message glowed accusingly. Faith's sister, Ruth, had organized a family meeting this evening to talk about their mother, and it wasn't a conversation Faith looked forward to. The memory lapses had been getting worse for months and, according to Ruth, the subject could not be avoided any longer.

Faith keyed in a quick reply to Ruth – *I'll be there!*

"Phew!" Pat hurried into the shade of the porch with a sigh of relief. "This heat is too much. Gracious me, what's all this?"

Pat hadn't noticed Faith's pile of sweepings, and she'd just kicked them all over the flagstones of the porch. She shook confetti from her white court shoe. "So sorry, dear. I didn't realize you were cleaning up."

"Don't worry about it," said Faith. She'd soon sweep up again. "Did you want to see me for something?"

"The anniversary booklet. We must get it to the printers!" Pat said. Little Worthy's longest-serving churchwarden was born and raised in Morningside. When she was particularly wound up about something, the strong Scottish "r" would often surface in her speech. "Our contributors are proving very tardy. I'm missing half the material!"

Faith winced, inwardly. The booklet was a collection of photographs and memoirs, and she was supposed to be writing the foreword for it. One more Post-it note that didn't shout loud enough...

"Pat, I'm so sorry. My piece is coming along. I'd just like to add a few final touches..."

In fact, she'd committed only a first draft to paper, and felt it hopelessly ill-fitted to the importance of the occasion.

"Of course I'm not referring to *you*, vicar. I've every confidence in *you*. It's the photographs of historic Little Worthy I'm concerned about. And as for that Hinkley woman.... well!"

Pat pulled her spectacles off and rubbed the lenses vigorously with her handkerchief, a gesture that somehow managed to convey her deep distaste for the person she had just mentioned.

Faith sighed. She'd hoped they wouldn't return to this particular topic. Sal Hinkley had been commissioned to paint an image of St James's Church for the back cover of the

booklet. The artist had trained at Winchester Art School more than thirty years ago, and had recently returned to the area after a long sojourn in the country of her birth, Australia. She was well known in the art world for her striking and sometimes controversial works, which sold for high prices.

“Pat,” Faith said, “Sal was chosen to do the back cover by a democratic vote of our parishioners.”

Pat made a noise that might have been a snort, and suggested that she thought democracy in church matters something of a novelty. “Artists are notoriously unreliable,” she said. “I suspected from the outset that she’d miss the deadline.”

“Sal will deliver on time,” Faith said, with a tone that belied her lack of certainty. “I’m sure she just wants the painting to be perfect.”

Pat sighed. “It’s a *trrr*avesty that our own dear Gwen was passed over for this commission.”

Faith struggled not to roll her eyes. Hinkley-gate, as her mother had mischievously called it, would not rest. Local artist Gwen Summerly, who just happened to be a close friend of Pat, was renting a house just off the village green, having been born and bred in Little Worthy and its environs. The only thing she and Sal Hinkley had in common was that they had attended the art school at the same time. Gwen now taught art classes on an informal basis and her speciality was watercolour paintings of local scenes, most notably the glorious cottage gardens that abounded in the village.

“Gwen’s one of us,” Pat continued, as if that crucial argument should settle the dispute once and for all.

Faith took a deep breath. She really must say something. Pat was a good-hearted woman. It was a shame that she occasionally lapsed into intolerance.

“Sometimes an outsider may see with a clearer vision,” Faith said.

“I’m *rr*really not at all sure what you mean by *that...*”

Faith was spared from having to explain herself by the sight of two people walking up the path. A broad-shouldered man with a slight stoop and a matting of gingery stubble on his cheeks, and beside him, holding his arm, a trim woman with her hair styled in a sleek bob. Percy Cartwright, the last of Little Worthy’s dynasty of blacksmiths, and his wife, Andrea. As they stepped into the porch, Percy pulled off his tweed cap, revealing a shock of white hair.

“Good morning! Warm one, isn’t it?” Andrea said. She held out an envelope. “Here’s our photograph, at last. Sorry for the delay, Pat.”

Pat thanked her. She opened the envelope and pulled out the contents.

“Ah, look at this, Faith. Those were the days. Not a car to be seen.” She held out an old black-and-white photograph.

Despite the lack of motor vehicles, Little Worthy was clearly recognizable in the photo. A young boy was leading two Shire horses across the Green towards the forge, where a man in a leather apron stood with his arms folded.

“Is that your grandfather, Percy?” Faith asked. “He looks like you.”

Percy twisted his cap in his large, knotted fingers. “My great-grandfather,” he said.

“So sad that you are selling up,” Pat said. “The village won’t be the same without the forge.”

The Cartwrights had sold the old forge building to Free Foods, a chain of organic outlets that owned a farm shop in a village a few miles from Little Worthy. They were looking

to expand, and planned to knock down the forge and build a spanking new health food emporium on the site. For many years Percy had made wrought-iron garden ornaments at the forge, but he was retiring now. He and Andrea were moving to France to run a hostel off the pilgrim's trail, near to Lourdes.

"When do you leave?" Faith asked.

Percy was silent, looking down at his boots. Faith didn't know the man well – he wasn't a churchgoer – but he always struck her as something of a lost soul. It was hard to read the expression in his face now, but it must be an emotional time for him. Several generations of Cartwrights had worked at the forge. Yet even if Percy stayed on in Little Worthy, he would be the last of the line. Faith knew that Andrea was his second wife. The first had passed away not long after their only son died in a car accident.

Andrea slipped a hand through her husband's arm. "Next weekend. We can't wait."

Andrea was a Catholic, and had been a teacher at the local Catholic school. It was generally acknowledged by the inhabitants of Little Worthy that without the love and the warm, supportive energy of Andrea, Percy might have fallen into serious depression.

"I'm sure it will be very rewarding," Faith said. "And you, Percy – are you looking forward to the change?"

"It will be good." The old man's eyes, faded from so many years of working with fire and hot metal, had a distant look. Faith wished that she'd got to know him better. He had given up attending services at St James's after the loss of Rory, so he had never been part of her congregation, even though his wife and son were buried in the churchyard.

The couple said their goodbyes and walked off, arm in arm.

"Thanks for the wonderful photo," Faith called after them. She turned to Pat. "What good people. They'll be greatly missed in the village."

Pat leaned close and whispered: "My friend Barbara – you know? From the WI? *She'll* be very glad to see the back of them."

"Why?" Faith couldn't picture the Cartwrights as anything other than exemplary members of the community.

"The smoke from the forge!" Pat continued, her lips pursed. "Barbara lives right next door and she said it smelled dreadful. Just this morning her washing was *rrruined!*"

Faith suppressed a smile. The speed that gossip could spread through Little Worthy was quite fascinating.

Pat clearly had plenty more to say about Barbara's spoiled sheets, but she was interrupted by heavy footsteps, thudding along the side of the church. Fred came staggering into the porch, his face horribly pale. "C-call – an ambulance," he gasped. His soil-smearred hands were shaking. Faith thought for a horrible moment that he was having a heart attack.

"Fred?" She ran to his side. "Fred, what is it?"

"Sal Hinkley!" said Fred. "She's in the hut. I... I saw her on the floor!"

"Is she ill? What's wrong?"

Fred struggled for breath. "I think she's... dead."

Faith heard Pat suck in a breath. Her own senses sharpened as adrenaline kicked in.

"Steady, Fred. Take some slow, deep breaths. Well done for coming so quickly. Pat – can you dial 999? Ask them to send an ambulance, right away? Tell them a woman's been taken ill. No details yet, but it's a possible fatality."

"Of course." Pat hurried away to the telephone in the vestry.



“Let’s go,” Faith said, laying a hand on Fred’s arm. It seemed to calm him a little. His breath slowed and his colour began to return. “Show me, Fred.”

The quickest way to the dilapidated hut that Sal Hinkley was using as a studio was through the side gate of the churchyard and over a rickety fence onto the rough pastureland that bordered the church. Fred headed that way, stumbling as he hurried between the gravestones.

Faith followed, her heart banging against her ribs. She could just catch the words that Fred was muttering to himself: “I took my thermos... I wanted to ask if she’d like a cuppa. I never thought... Oh dear. Oh dear, dear me...”

She caught up as he clambered over the fence. “Fred. The hut. Did you go inside?”

Fred’s eyes widened at her sharp tone. She could have bitten back the words, seeing the awkward, embarrassed expression on his gentle face. It wasn’t the way to speak to a parishioner and friend. More than three years now since she had left to follow her vocation, yet the old behaviour still kicked in as soon as she was confronted with an emergency.

“Y... yes,” Fred said.

Faith couldn’t stop herself asking, but she spoke softly this time. “Did you touch anything?”

Fred nodded. “Only Sal,” he said, “I wanted to see if she was... all right.”

They were at the hut now.

“Wait here.” Faith pushed open the peeling wooden door, using her elbow so that she would leave no fingerprints.

It was very hot inside the hut, and there was a strong smell of turpentine. Sal Hinkley lay on the floor beside her easel. She was wearing a long dress of green linen and her slight body

looked almost graceful, with arms uplifted and her head turned to one side. Faith was struck by the dramatic mane of grey-streaked red hair that flared around the painter’s heart-shaped face.

There were several dark, bluish-red marks on Sal’s slim neck. Faith stared at them, and for an odd moment she thought they might be paint. But the painting on the easel, the view of St James’s Church, was a different palate entirely.

As Faith knelt to feel for a pulse she knew would not be there, she realized that the marks were bruises.

Sal Hinkley had been strangled.