

A
BLOODY
HOT
Summer

Trevor D'Silva



Black Rose Writing | Texas

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First printing

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-68433-371-4

PUBLISHED BY BLACK ROSE WRITING

www.blackrosewriting.com

Printed in the United States of America

Suggested Retail Price (SRP) \$18.95

A Bloody Hot Summer is printed in Chaparral Pro

I take the opportunity to thank Reagan Rothe and the staff at Black Rose Writing for publishing this book.

I thank my editor, Dr. Angela Stokes, for editing this novel to make it suitable for publication and for also giving the characters their authentic British accents, which gives this book the aura of a proper British mystery.

I would also like to thank Prepare to Publish Ltd for proofreading the book. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Dame Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose books gave me countless hours of pleasure, an understanding of British crime fiction, and the inspiration to write my own detective story.

I dedicate this book to my late grandmother, Maisie Saldanha, who was the first to recognise my love for writing and gifted me with a dictionary to encourage me to pursue my writing endeavours. She also gave me the confidence to start reading books at a very young age, and being with her was like being in the time period the book is set in.

To the Reader:

There is nothing more British than a good murder mystery set in the beautiful English countryside during the 1920s and 30s. That is why I decided to set my first murder mystery in England during the 1920s. Since this book is set primarily in Britain, I thought it appropriate to write it in British English. The editing of this novel was also done by a British editor to give the characters their authentic upper class, Cockney, and Scottish accents. Some of the dialogue may seem grammatically incorrect, but it reflects the authentic way the working class spoke in England.

For the convenience of American readers and/or those not familiar with British English slang or phrases, a glossary has been added after the Epilogue. It is my intention that the glossary will help the reader with any unfamiliar terms and, at the same time, enable the reader to learn a little more about British English and the history of the British Empire and its colonies.

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Revenge is an act of passion; vengeance of justice.

Injuries are revenged; crimes are avenged.

— Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

Prologue

Argyle Castle Grounds, Scottish Highlands – January, 1903

It was a cold foggy night and the only sound was of the snow crunching under the feet of the couple walking up the path towards a small and isolated cottage. Wearing a long woollen coat and a flat cap, and tightly clutching a basket, the man towered over the woman walking beside him who, despite also being dressed in heavy clothing, visibly shook with the cold. The man knocked on the cottage door and it was quickly opened by a smiling middle-aged woman who pulled nervously at her bedraggled clothes when she recognised her visitors.

“Here y’are, finally...” she said. She looked at the shivering woman. “Ye poor wee hen, you’re shivering, aren’t ye? Come in an’ get yourself warm.”

The warmth from the roaring fire enveloped them as the couple entered the cottage and they felt their bodies finally relax. The shaking woman stood by the large fireplace, palms to the flames. A large cooking pot was bubbling and hissing over the fire and the comforting smell of stew wafted through the air, causing the couple’s empty stomachs to grumble in anticipation. The man walked towards the large wooden table that filled the room and placed the basket down on the floor next to one of the chairs. The blanket in the basket seemed to move and the middle-aged woman bent down and slowly removed it.

“Ach! She’s a bonnie wee bairn. How old is she?”

“A few months old, Mrs. Blair,” said the man. “You have always been faithful to Lady Argyle’s family and she trusts you with this. As agreed, we need to keep this a secret; not a word to anyone. We will send the money for the child. All you have to do is raise her as your own and make sure that she knows nothing until we say so. Is that understood?” he said, staring at her intensely.

Mrs. Blair’s smile slowly vanished. “I understand, sir. Her Ladyship has already spoken tae me... Tae avoid any questions, I’ve already told folk here that she’s my nephew’s daughter an’ her parents were killed in a carriage accident in London. My husband, Ewan, an’ I will bring her up as our own.”

“That’s good. I am placing the money on the table. We’ll send you more and our address in case you need to get in touch with us.”

“Very good, sir. Thank ye for the money; I will wait for yer letter. When will ye be back tae see her?”

“Not sure, but if we do she must never know who we are... We have to leave now. We’ll say goodbye to the child.”

The man and the woman kissed the baby, took one last look, and went out of the door into the foggy night.

“I hope we’re doing the right thing,” said the woman with tears in her eyes.

“Yes, we are. We must do it for her. She’s the only thing that matters now. Tomorrow we go to England and, no matter how long it takes, we’ll accomplish what we came to do.”

The woman smiled sadly as they walked down the snowy garden path towards a horse-drawn carriage that was waiting for them.

Chapter 1: A Delightful Gathering

Meadowford Village – June, 1927

“We will be arriving at Meadowford shortly, ladies and gentleman,” the guard called as he passed through the carriage, pulling Arthur reluctantly out of his thoughts. Fond memories had come flooding back as the familiar views of the town nestled in cattle-filled meadows had come into view; it felt like a lifetime ago. Arthur gulped down the remaining liquor in his hipflask and made his way to the end of the carriage to alight from the train.

Despite the bustle of people on the platform, Arthur stood still for a moment. He lifted his fedora and wiped at his brow with a handkerchief. “Thought I’d left the heat behind in India,” he muttered under his breath. He glanced around to get his bearings. The heady scent of the meadows surrounding the town mixed with the heavy coal smoke of the train as it left the station behind, slowly revealing the settlement behind it.

“Welcome to Meadowford Village, sir. Can I help you with your cases?” a porter asked, walking towards him.

“Thank you. I’ll be needing a taxi too.”

“Yes, sir,” the porter replied as he picked up Arthur’s suitcases. “Right this way.”

As the two men exited the station, Arthur was taken aback by how much the village had changed since he was last here. “I reckon you’ve not been ’ere in a while,” the porter said as he hailed a taxi.

“You are right. I was last here before the war, when I brought my bride to meet my family.”

“Blimey, well a lot has changed in Meadowford since then, sir. We lost a lot of men, made it hard for a while. Things lookin’ up now though; Meadowford’s more of a town than village. Even got two inns now, you know. Of course, the Fitzhughs still own all the land abouts and plenty of farmers rent from them. That Lady Fitzhugh is celebrating her eightieth this week...”

“Which one?” the taxi driver asked as he pulled up in front of them. “The Meadowford Inn or the Carlton Inn?”

“Fitzhugh Manor... please,” Arthur replied, smiling wryly as the porter and the driver looked at each other in surprise.

The taxi bounced as the car crossed the route of the long-gone ford for which the village was named. Arthur stopped paying attention to the scenery, closed his eyes and let his head fall back. He was glad that this long journey was coming to an end.

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The residents of Fitzhugh Manor, a stately pile built during the reign of King Henry VII, were also feeling the effects of the heat. Inside the manor, preparations were hurriedly being finished for the eightieth birthday party of Lady Doris Fitzhugh. She was a spinster who had inherited the manor and its surrounding farmland when her father, Lord William Fitzhugh, had died of septicaemia some years before. A no-nonsense woman, Lady Fitzhugh didn't tolerate any unruly behaviour and she single-handedly oversaw the workings of the entire estate. She was held in high esteem by her family, the villagers, and the manor staff alike.

The kitchen downstairs was a bustle of activity. Slattery, the elderly butler, entered the servants' dining room where the food for the birthday dinner was laid out on the dining table, a wine bottle in each of his hands. He saw Alice – a slim, blonde, and attractive maid – sitting on the table next to the food, smoking a cigarette.

“Get off the table. Not near the food, for heaven's sake, child,” he yelled at her.

She got up slowly and looked at him. “I'm on me break. You asked me t'look after the food and keep the flies away. I'm doin' just that!”

“But no smoking near the food. We wouldn't want cigarette ash or smoke on her Ladyship's celebration dinner, would we?”

Alice rolled her eyes. “I'm goin' outside t'finish me smoke.”

“The guests will be arriving soon. Don't stay out too long.” He placed the two wine bottles on a side table and smiled. “Her Ladyship has given us these because it's her birthday. We can have our own celebration here tonight.”

Alice sighed. “Not likely with Miss Carter around. She'll pour the wine herself – you know how she hates us having a drink. I miss when your wife was housekeeper. She always let us 'ave some fun.”

“Come now. Miss Carter only means well. She takes her duties seriously. Now, hurry up and finish that cigarette before Miss Carter sees you.”

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As the clock in the main hall struck six, the first of the evening's guests began to arrive. Slattery opened the door and greeted Reverend Joseph Howard of nearby St. Andrew's Church and his wife, Henrietta.

"Reverend, Mrs. Howard, how lovely you could come," said Pippa Fitzhugh enthusiastically as she rushed towards them. "Please come in and join the family in the drawing room while we wait for the birthday girl!" Pippa ushered them away from the front door and into the drawing room where she handed them both a glass of champagne from the table.

Pippa heard Slattery greeting the next guest and, recognising Richard Seymour's voice, she excused herself and almost ran out of the drawing room, smoothing her short bob-styled hair as she went. Her face lit up when she saw him and she held out her hands.

"Darling, how nice to see you; I am so glad that you came."

Richard, his dazzling smile returning her own, took hold of her hands as he stepped towards her. "Actually, I am quite surprised that I was invited a few hours before, considering that your aunts don't like me."

"My aunts seem to be warming to you, especially Aunt Flora. She's the nice one. Even Aunt Doris is beginning to like you. It was she who said that you could come," Pippa explained. "Please give Aunt Lilian some time."

"I will, my dear," he said as they walked into the drawing room together.

The next guests to arrive were Major Percival Havelock and his wife, Gerda. Slattery showed them into the drawing room and they were greeted by members of the family. Major Havelock walked with a limp; an old war wound in his right leg. He had served with Lord William Fitzhugh in South Africa during the Boer War, and Lady Doris Fitzhugh regarded him as a close friend and a member of the family.

The final guest to arrive at the manor was the family solicitor, Mr. Bertram Kerr. Lady Fitzhugh trusted him just as much as her father had. Tonight though, he looked less than his usual dapper self.

"Sorry for my dishevelment," he muttered to Slattery as he passed over his coat and hat. "It has been a very trying day." Mr. Kerr turned to the mirror to the left of the door, ran a hand over his balding head and adjusted his collar. "Don't just stand there, man," he snapped at Slattery. "Tell her Ladyship I have arrived... And bring me a brandy immediately."

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Lady Doris Fitzhugh looked in the mirror and was pleased with her reflection. Her mother's emerald necklace complemented the emerald earrings she wore. She placed the diamond earrings which she had initially intended to wear back into the box and reached for the perfume bottle. As she dabbed the fragrance behind her ears, she heard a knock on the door.

“Enter,” she answered, and the door opened. She saw the reflection of the person in the mirror. “Ahh! I’ve been waiting for you. Please come in. You will like what I’ve got to tell you.”

After the person left, Lady Fitzhugh looked one last time in the mirror. Satisfied with her appearance, she got up and went out of her bedroom. She walked slowly down the staircase, holding on to the banister. She liked being independent. It was what her father had liked most about her, besides her sharp intelligence and resourcefulness.

Lady Fitzhugh’s family and guests greeted her as she entered the drawing room. She was glad that everyone whom she cared about had come for her party. The last time she had celebrated her birthday was when she had turned seventy-five.

“Delightful gathering for your birthday, Aunt Doris,” said Pippa.

“Yes, Pippa. After all, it is not very often that one turns eighty. Although I do wish your father were here to celebrate with us.”

She saw Bertram Kerr, whom she fondly called Bertie, and he smiled at her. He came over and wished her a happy birthday and then bent forward a little and quickly whispered to her. She nodded. He went and sat down as Alice came towards him with a tray of champagne glasses.

Lady Fitzhugh spied her two sisters, Flora and Lilian, sitting together and walked towards them. Flora Ainsworth was three years younger than Doris and was the most amiable of the sisters. Her face exuded kindness, but at the same time commanded respect from anyone who met her. At seventy-five, Lilian Endecott was the youngest of the three sisters; however, she appeared to be older due to her morose and feisty nature and her habit of brazenly complaining all of the time. She was sometimes referred to as ‘the battleaxe’ by people who were unfortunate enough to be at the receiving end of her wrath.

“Delightful gathering but would be a lot better if we did not have this heatwave,” said Flora. “I hope it ends soon; a few days is plenty.”

“Hope it doesn’t portend that something bad is about to happen. Reminds me of the heat back in India,” said Lady Fitzhugh.

“I think Pippa going out with that Richard is an outrage,” said Lilian, adjusting the pearls around her neck as she nodded towards the couple at the far end of the room. “Fancy a young girl like her, not long turned twenty-two, going out with some man twenty-five years her senior.”

“Come now, Lilian, you and Edward were fifteen years apart. That didn’t stop you from marrying him,” said Flora.

“That was different. Edward knew Father and Father approved of him. God knows where Pippa met that man. We know nothing about him.”

"Pippa said that she met him in London, at an art gallery. He's a painter – landscapes and portraits," said Lady Fitzhugh as she sat down next to Flora.

"He's even painted a portrait of Pippa, which hangs on her bedroom wall. She showed it to me, and I must say that he does have talent... and he is very handsome," added Flora.

"Good looks don't make up for poor breeding... It would've been good if she'd told us why she wanted to live in London. Cora should've put a stop to it. I wish Father or Allan were alive," said Lilian wistfully. "They would not have allowed it."

At that moment, a sickly boy – aged about thirteen – came into the room. He was chatting animatedly to a woman who was around fifty years old but looked older than that. She came towards her three elderly sisters-in-law, while the boy went towards the table.

"Ah, Cora, how's Hector doing?" asked Lady Fitzhugh.

"His fever has gone, but otherwise he is still the same." She frowned lovingly at the boy. "He refuses to take his tonic. He claims that he feels better when he doesn't take it."

"Dr. Fielding should probably take a look at him again."

"He did. He said that Hector needs to take his tonic and I'm trying to make sure that he does."

Lilian looked up as her son, an ashen-faced man in his late forties, came last into the room, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his expensively tailored suit. Without speaking to the others, he grabbed a glass of champagne and drank it, the colour returning to his cheeks. Lilian shook her head with disapproval. She and Arthur didn't get along because of his bad habits, but she still loved him. Arthur Endecott had recently returned from India, where he lived with his wife and three children. He claimed that he had come back for his aunt's birthday celebration, but everyone knew that wasn't true.

Lilian glanced back at Doris. "What was he talking to you about two days ago? He didn't look happy when he came out of your bedroom."

"It's between Arthur and me, Lilian. Once this party is over and when I've done what needs to be done, I will let you know in good time."

Lilian was annoyed. Even though they were adults, Doris still treated her sisters like children. They knew that she loved them, but they resented her air of superiority. Doris didn't notice Lilian's annoyance though because she waved her hand to get the attention of Mr. Kerr. When he looked at her, she beckoned him to come to her. She lowered her voice and asked him to wait in the library. A few minutes after he left, Doris got up and followed him.

Half an hour later, Bertram Kerr left the library and told Miss Carter and Slattery that Lady Fitzhugh wanted to speak to them. They both went into the

library and she asked them to close the door. Ten minutes later, Lady Fitzhugh entered the drawing room. Her family and guests noticed that she looked happier than before. They wondered what had transpired between Bertram Kerr and her, but knew better than to ask.

Shortly after, Slattery came in and announced that dinner was served. Arthur insisted on leading his aunt, Lady Fitzhugh, to the dining table and the guests followed them. Lady Fitzhugh sat at the head of the table with her sisters on either side.

Arthur, who sat at the foot of the table, stood up and toasted his aunt. He wished her good health and happiness for many more years to come and made it a point to say that she was his favourite aunt. Some of the family and guests rolled their eyes as he said this. After the toast, they all clinked their glasses together and drank their wine.

After dinner, the family and guests retired to the drawing room where Slattery, followed by the staff, brought out the birthday cake. They all sang 'Happy Birthday' to Lady Fitzhugh and she blew out the candles. She thanked everyone for coming and stated that she was the first in the family to live to that ripe old age, and she looked forward to many more years and possibly a hundredth birthday.

When the last guest had left, Doris wished her family a good night and went upstairs to her bedroom.



The next morning, Alice went to Lady Fitzhugh's room, taking with her a tray of tea and a slice of toast. When she entered the bedroom, she noticed something was amiss. She went closer to the bed and looked. The next moment, her screams reverberated throughout the mansion as the tray fell, scattering its contents on the bedroom floor.