

Patrick Gooch

Patrick Gooch enjoyed a varied career prior to becoming a writer. His first thriller *The Dark Side of the Balcony* met with considerable success in 2007.

He has worked as a marketing professional for international companies, was the chief executive of a British government-inspired trade council and has lectured at the Central School of Art and Design. He was awarded the 'Commander of Civil Merit' by King Juan Carlos of Spain for his work promoting Spanish food and wine.

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**MOSAIC
DECEPTIONS**

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MOSAIC DECEPTIONS

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Chapter 1

Dorset

I changed my mind.

In an instant, I decided to forgo lunch and take the road to Wimborne Minster and Compton Place. It was less than a month since my last visit, when I'd left abruptly with his words ringing in my ears. Now was the moment to make amends.

I give no prior warning of my visit. I never do. Usually, I just drop in and ask to see him. When he appears there's a welcoming grin and arthritic fingers smooth the remaining wispy strands of white hair. He grips my hand as though I've been away for years – not just the past three or four weeks.

I share two passions with Reverend Julian Makepeace: a fascination with ancient texts and religious jousting. We have quite opposite views on religion, we've been arguing since I was an undergraduate at Oxford and he was my tutor.

Julian has a probing intelligence and, despite his name, delights in provocation. It's never long before voices are raised. Sometimes my visits end with ruffled feathers, other times we almost come to blows. I'm usually the one to lose it. Even in the thick of a verbal brawl Julian retains an urbane manner, which infuriates me even more.

My last visit had ended suddenly when I was advised by the manager to moderate my tone as there had been a complaint. We were sitting enjoying the gardens, when Julian turned once more to his topic of the moment – the advent of a new prophet.

“Of course, it all started with Abraham,” he began.

“Not again...” I rolled my eyes.

Undeterred he carried on. “Do you know, every 500 years or so we witness the coming of a prophet: Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed... look at the timeline.’ He pushed back a loose strand of hair that fell across his forehead.

“Now we’ve reached the second millennium... who might be next I wonder?”

‘I think I can guess...’ I said impatiently.

Julian turned towards me, a fire in his eyes that contrasted with the clerical black and Roman collar. He was up to something.

“I have the strongest premonition there will soon be another coming! One that will lead to a marked shift in the world’s religions... Someone will offer another path to Nirvana. I’m certain of it.”

“Complete nonsense! Look at the recent so-called visionaries! Charles Russell with his Jehovah’s Witnesses, Ron Hubbard and the Scientologists, Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church... mere cults that have got no further than acquiring a handful of followers!”

He smiled that infuriating smile.

“Matthew, you know of my interest in this new prophet... Well, I believe he is soon to make his presence known.”

I nodded, barely paying attention.

“I have a name – Bal’Ashtu – even a location – Kurdistan.”

“Another so-called holy man walking the sands of the Middle East? What makes you think that this one will be any different?”

“A contact tells me this prophet is a true radical. He foresees the coming of a new age of enlightenment.”

“You wait until religious leaders get wind of what he’s up to. There’ll be an almighty closing of the ranks.”

“Perhaps... But before that happens I want you to do something for me.”

Julian hesitated, then it spilled out. “I want you to take me to Kurdistan to meet him. I’ll pay, of course, but I want to hear his teachings. To see for myself the effect he has on people, the strength of his following. I want to be there.”

It was then I realised that Julian Makepeace had been leading up to this for months.

“You old devil!” I barked, loudly, but he just sat there benignly, unapologetic.

That was when the manager of the home, Daniel Horne, came bustling over and asked me to quieten my tone or leave.

“I’m going anyway...” I retorted and strode off across the lawn to the car park.

*

I decided to stop on the way and buy a peace offering – a half-bottle of Bushmills whiskey, his favourite tippie. With the memory of our last conversation playing over in my mind, I turned into the gates of Compton Place and swept up the long drive.

The question refused to go away: why not go with him to Kurdistan? Why not?

As I parked the car, I became aware of a knot of people milling in front of the large entrance doors. In the wing mirror I glimpsed Daniel Horne running towards me.

“Doctor Clements! That was quick,” said Horne breathlessly. “I only asked someone to phone you a few minutes ago.”

“Why? Is something wrong?”

“Didn’t they tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

He paused and lowered his voice

“I’m afraid Julian Makepeace is dead.”



Chapter 2

Wimborne, Dorset

I was surprised by the number of church and university dignitaries in attendance. There were many more friends and acquaintances than I had expected. In contrast, the number of family members was modest. They occupied half the first row in the chapel and clustered thinly around the grave when Julian Makepeace was interred.

I saw three or four tutors from my university days and several erstwhile fellow students. No one glancing in my direction showed any sign of recognition – hardly surprising, as I used to have a beard.

Daniel Horne was there, standing next to a tall, young woman whose white outfit was in stark contrast to the more formal black worn by most mourners. On his other side, a smattering of residents from the Home for Retired Clergy and Their Dependents were gathered. Prominent among them was Mrs Linden, a tiresome individual, forever set on making her presence felt. She had invariably been the first to complain about my heated exchanges with Julian.

In the churchyard I stood to one side, observing the scene. The local vicar was precise and quick in his delivery of the service as Julian was lowered into his final resting place. Mrs Linden ensured she had a good view by indecorously elbowing her way to the front. The obligatory grains of sod were tossed into the grave – and it was over.

I was turning away when Horne materialised by my side.

“Doctor Clements, I wonder if I might have a word?”

“Can’t it wait, Mr Horne? I was about to slip away.”

“That’s why I came over. Look – I would very much like you to join us at Compton Place. It’s really quite important.”

We strolled through the graveyard. The prospect of sipping warm sherry and exchanging words of sympathy was decidedly unappealing. The annoyance I’d felt at my last meeting with Julian was now outweighed by a gnawing sense of guilt at having rejected his last request. I was about to decline, when Daniel Horne added:

“The police inspector saw me shortly after the incident, you know. He said they were still awaiting the final results, but all the signs indicated that it was suicide. Apparently, it’s not unusual for alcoholics to end it this way.”

I stopped abruptly. “Julian Makepeace was *not* an alcoholic! He liked a drink; he liked to drink whiskey... but never to excess.”

Horne shrugged. “I’m just repeating what the police told me, Doctor Clements. Personally,” he hesitated, “I have my own thoughts on the matter... which is why I wanted to speak to you. But not here...” He touched my arm. “Doctor Clements, please do me the favour of coming back to Compton Place.”

Unlocking my car, parked in the lane by the church, I thought about the troubled expression on Daniel Horne’s face. Although there was little reason to return to Compton Place, it seemed churlish to ignore his request.

The gravel parking area was full. Fortunately, there was a space near the kitchens at the rear of the building. In the crowded drawing room, I was handed a glass of white wine and two of the staff made their way over to me, expressing their sorrow at Julian’s death.

Mrs Linden drifted by, sniffing in disapproval. I moved onto the terrace, and standing apart from the others, leaned on the balustrade overlooking the grounds. The gentle hubbub of polite conversation washed over me. It was a few minutes later that a softly-spoken voice murmured.

“I was sorry to learn of Reverend Makepeace’s death... he meant a great deal to you, didn’t he?”

The woman in white was at my shoulder.

I half-turned in her direction, but hastily resumed my unseeing stare at the gardens as the words choked in my throat. The silence lasted a few moments while I pulled my emotions into line.

“When did you first meet?” the woman asked.

“At Oxford... he was my tutor.”

“You were close?”

“Yes, he was something... someone special... we loved to talk, loved to argue.”

“I’ve heard you... once or twice.”

“Sorry, I – I tend to get carried away.”

Now I was able to look in her direction and consider the woman beside me more closely. Her blonde hair was short and framed an attractive face. I couldn’t help but notice her bright blue eyes – although six foot two – she was tall enough to look at me directly.

“Tell me, when everyone else is wearing black, what prompts someone to wear something the opposite side of the spectrum?”

“Wearing a uniform is not something I subscribe to. Anyway,” she smiled, “black doesn’t suit me.”

I couldn’t help but smile back. “Tell me, how did you know Julian?”

“My mother is a resident here... you’ve probably come across her. I’m Leah Linden.”

She must have seen the uncertainty on my face. How could this tall, attractive young woman possibly be the daughter of the short, dark creature that was Mrs Linden. She read the questioning in the involuntary tilt of my eyebrows.

“I take after my father, so I’m told...” She smiled. “By the way, have they discovered what might have caused his death?” So, she was here at her mother’s bidding, to gather a morsel of gossip.

“Haven’t you heard? All the signs were he committed suicide. He took a knife from the kitchen and, in a frenzy, slashed both his wrists. When they found him, he was bleeding all over the carpet!” I snapped.

She simply nodded. “How upsetting. It must be very difficult – ”

Instantly, I was ashamed of blurting out the stark, uncaring truth. But then suddenly, Daniel Horne was bearing down on us.

“Doctor Clements! There you are! I need to talk to you. Will you excuse us, Leah?”

We made our way around a crowd on the terrace, crossed the expanse of tiled flooring in the entrance hall, and opened tall, mahogany double-doors to enter the administration suite. Horne offered me a chair, then

slumped into his own behind the desk. For a brief moment he steeped his hands and leaned forward. Then, he rose to stand in front of the window, sinking his hands deep into his pockets.

He began hesitantly. “I’m not certain how I should tackle it.”

“I’m not sure I follow you... tackle what?”

Horne retraced his steps to stand by the desk. The manager of the home had always reminded me of the White Rabbit. Forever peering at his wristwatch, eyes never still, always rushing to this or that corner of Compton Place.

“The police think that Reverend Makepeace committed suicide. They may well be right in their assumption... but – ”

“But – ?” The question hung in the air.

“But somehow... it just doesn’t add up.”

I leaned forward in my seat.

“You see, there was no suicide note. Being the meticulous man he was, I would have thought he would want people to know why he was taking his life.”

“Is that it? You’re questioning the verdict because he didn’t leave us a message?” It was the flimsiest of reasons to doubt the official findings. I started to rise from the chair.

“Well... that and the fact that some of his papers had been moved.”

“Sorry, Mr Horne, you’ve lost me. Julian was forever consulting his books and papers. They were never in one place for long. They moved from bookcase to boxes, or lay on his desk.”

“I’m well aware of that, Doctor. Most often they were scattered all around the room,” said the manager. “But that night, just before he retired, Reverend Makepeace asked me to countersign a letter. I sat at his desk to sign it and couldn’t help noticing several books and maps of the Middle East laid out. His parting words were to inform me that he would put the letter on the hall table for the postman in the morning.”

Daniel Horne sat in his chair, elbows resting stiffly on the arms, hands clasped in front of him. He stared at some distant point on the carpet before continuing. “I thought nothing more about it until yesterday, when the caretaker and I were packing up his things. I found all the items that had been on his desk that night stuffed in a cardboard

box, including the document he urgently wanted to post.”

I sat there, digesting what the manager had said, unsure what to make of his comments.

“Have you told the police?” I said, at last.

“No... not yet. My... interpretation might be thought unhelpful. After all, he was becoming slightly forgetful. He might well have swept everything into a box for safe-keeping and decided against posting the letter.”

I nodded, trying to think it through. Daniel Horne was suggesting, albeit obliquely, that someone could have been in Julian’s room, moved his things, even been instrumental in his death.

“And this letter, who was it addressed to?”

“Why, to you, Doctor Clements. The letter gives permission to remove his library, documents and papers into your keeping, in the event of his death. His personal effects go to his family.”

I stared at the manager, unblinking.

“Incidentally, I almost forgot. There’s a solicitor, a Mr Stokes who wants you to call him. If you wait a moment, I’ll find the number.”

*

Stokes, the solicitor, was about my age, in his mid-thirties. He had the sort of features that suggest he rarely had to shave and would always appear to enjoy eternal youth. Only his eyes, magnified by rimless glasses, displayed more clearly the passage of time. He took them off in a well-practised gesture, wiping them on a handkerchief tucked in his sleeve.

“It would seem, Doctor Clements, that other than a few family bequests, the bulk of Reverend Makepeace’s estate comes to you. Not that it comprises much. His investments and other funds total no more than £200,000.”

I was stunned. I had no idea he had amassed such a sizeable sum, nor why he should have left it to me.

Stokes went on. “And, of course, you now know you are to be the recipient of his books and papers at Compton Place. I’ve had a word with

Daniel Horne and they can be removed as soon as you wish. I’m afraid there will be some delay in making available the residue of his estate. It will take time for the monies to be released in your favour.” He coughed that dry cough solicitors seem to acquire along with their diplomas.

“Then there is the question of the will being contested. Are you aware that one of the Reverend’s nephews is bringing a complaint against you for opportunism and unseemly coercion? I don’t think it will hold much water. Reverend Makepeace was in full command of his faculties. But it will have to be answered.”

I left the offices of Lord, Wylie and Stokes in partial shock. At that point, I had no idea why Julian would leave me any money but part of me rejoiced in the good fortune of acquiring his library, papers and memorabilia. Typical of the old man though – to bring me round to his way of thinking by passing on the many sources he had quoted in our disagreements.