

THE CASE OF BILLY'S MISSING GUN
(SHERLOCK AND ME SERIES) by SJ SLAGLE, 2019

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 6

I'd forgotten a pair of shoes at my office that I would need later, so I made a quick stop for them when I noticed a man in the pawnshop next door. It was too early for the store to be open, so I assumed the man was Bert. No time like the present to make his acquaintance.

The door made all kinds of noise when I knocked on it. Hope he was planning to replace it because the door shimmied and shook like a belly dancer hitting her stride. A big man who looked like he could take care of himself in a knife fight filled the partially open doorway.

"I'm not open yet, miss. Come back in an hour."

I stuck my foot in the door hoping he wouldn't crush it with a door slam.

"I'm Lucy James and I work next door. I just need five minutes of your time."

A set of curious dark eyes squinted at me before the door opened fully. "You the private eye?"

Handing him my business card, his squint narrowed as he read it. He handed the card back but didn't shut the door. My foot was relieved.

"Come on in, but I don't have much time."

"I'll be in and out so fast, you'll wonder if I was even here." I smiled what I hoped was my most winning smile. His curious look had morphed into one of distaste. I better get what I wanted fast before he tossed me out on the street.

I followed his retreating back as he made his way through the shop. I hadn't been in here before—indeed my pawnshop experiences were few—so I openly gawked at the bounty before me.

Glass cases arranged in the center of the large room contained trays of rings, necklaces, bracelets and watches. Mirrored walls made the room look

bigger than it actually was and deer heads, landscape art and mountain paraphernalia hung enticingly. Stereo equipment occupied one corner with posters and furniture placed here and there. It was a mini department store with every retail category known to man in one packed area. The jewelry sparkled as I walked under lights well placed to show them at their best angle. It was an impressive array of merchandise. My respect for his operation raised a few notches.

Bert's massive shoulders ducked behind a counter and turned to me. With a prominent scar down one cheek, maybe he *had* been in a knife fight. I was willing to bet next month's rent he had won.

"What can I do for you, Miss James?"

"Lucy."

"All right." Corners of his mouth curved the teensiest bit. "Lucy. I'm Bert Peckham."

I shook his extended hand. "Nice to meet you, Bert. I've been meaning to come over to say hello since I moved in."

"You moved in eight months ago."

"So I'm not very timely."

When he just stared, I continued. Cross humor off the list.

"A man hired me to look for his missing gun. He pawned it here with you and it was apparently one of the items stolen in the burglary a few nights ago."

"Patrick Walker." Bert folded beefy arms across his chest. Why was he getting so defensive?

"That's right."

"Why would he hire a PI?"

"You'd have to ask him."

"It's an active police case."

"Sure," I nodded, "But the percentage of finding the stolen items is relatively low for this kind of crime. You know as well as I do that without identifying details of some kind, many items are rarely found."

"So why are you here if you know that?"

“I wanted to get your take on the heist. Was it unexpected?”

“Why would it be expected?”

“Bert. You’d just taken a possibly valuable gun in pawn that day. Maybe word got out. Maybe you mentioned it to someone in passing.”

“I don’t discuss my inventory with just anyone.”

“You might have discussed it with other store employees who passed the information on.”

He glanced around the store, spread his arms wide. “I’ve got a store full of valuable merchandise, Lucy. Why would I zero in on one gun?”

My focus on him hardened. “Because the gun could have belonged to a famous outlaw. That kind of information circulates fast and brings out the worst in many.”

He scoffed. “I didn’t believe that nonsense Walker was spouting.”

“It didn’t give you pause? Make you wonder? Did you recalculate the amount of insurance you have on your store?”

By the look on his face, I scored a major hit.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe you should have locked the gun in your safe for safekeeping.”

“Maybe.”

Hearing noise from a back room, probably a storeroom, I looked at Bert. He had the expression of a man caught between a rock and a bigger rock.

“Did you talk to one of your employees about the gun? And by gun, I mean the Colt single action revolver, just to be clear.”

Slowly he nodded. I could tell the amount of information I was going to get from this character was drying up fast and hard.

“Could I speak to your employees?”

“Only got one and Davey ain’t here right now.”

“Davey...”

“Foster.”

“Your employee is named Davey Foster. He’s the one you discussed the gun with?”

“Briefly.”

I withheld my smirk. “Briefly is good enough for me, Bert.” I nodded, stepped back. “Will he be in today?”

“This afternoon.”

Most people don’t lie well and Bert, the pawnshop owner, was no exception. Shifting eyes spoiled his neutral expression—eyes that blinked he’d rather I left. Now.

So I did.

“Thanks for your time. I’ll catch Mr. Foster later today or tomorrow.”

I could feel his eyes track me from the counter to the door. He all but willed me to get the heck out of there but it was puzzling. I hadn’t accused him of outright theft, nor had I accused anyone of anything. I was merely asking questions.

I pondered my next step driving to the movie theater. Cindy had mentioned that Skip was working a burglary. Could he be working this one? My hand grabbed the small notebook I carried around with me everywhere. At the next stoplight, I made a quick note to ask Skip what he could tell me. With an active police case, it wouldn’t be much but maybe he would take pity on his fiancé’s best friend and drop a pearl or two. Something to hope for.

Things were already hopping when I walked in the front door of the theater. If I had one wish, it would be that this would be the day of the week with no looming crisis on the horizon. As assistant manager, the doom and gloom generally belonged to me. One glance around told me I would be wasting the wish. Megan and Butch were arguing at the candy counter, Bobby tore in right behind me with disheveled hair and paint streaks down his cheeks, and Kevin looked like a wild man pacing in and out of the manager’s office like it had suddenly developed a revolving door. What now?

I yelled at Bobby while heading towards Megan.

“Bobby! Get that paint scrubbed off.”

“Sure thing, Lucy. I was heading that way first.”

I sighed. Bobby was an artist who seemed to have more paint on his body and clothes than on any canvas of his I'd ever seen.

"Megan. Butch. What's going on? We open in," I checked the big clock on the wall behind her, "fifteen minutes."

She looked at me with moistening eyes. Oh, no. I'd have to deal with crying today. Another sigh escaped.

"He told me I'd have to put Napoleon down." While she pointed accusingly at the man across the glass case whose hair was shaped in a mohawk the shade of blue sky instead of the usual purple, I noticed her sleek bob had several stripes of pale blue, probably to match her boyfriend's.

My surprised eyes darted to Butch. He spread his hands defensively.

"Lucy, it's—"

"What? Is Napoleon sick?" I'd been given a white parrot a few cases back that was older than dirt and I passed him on to Megan since Baskerville had taken an immediate dislike to him. The bird had once belonged to a French dentist who had been in the Resistance in World War II. To put it mildly, Napoleon was a little long in the tooth.

"Well...he's been acting strangely." When I cracked a smile, Butch bit his lip. "I mean, even more than usual."

"Is he acting like he's sick?"

"I told Megan she should take him to a vet to see what's wrong."

"And I told him that there's nothing wrong with Napoleon," Megan countered. "He just doesn't want to believe me."

"Why wouldn't he want to believe you?"

Her blue eyes flashed. "Napoleon loves my poetry group."

"Yeah, you told me he recites French words sometimes." The bird was nothing if not entertaining.

"...And sometimes he...ah..."

"...Sometimes he what?"

She straightened a few boxes of candy and mumbled something under her breath. Butch blushed a pretty shade of pink that contrasted nicely with the blue hair. The interesting part of this story was next up.

“What?”

“He, um...well, he likes to watch us when we...ah, that is...” Her words trailed off into the candy counter.

“Megan,” warned Butch in a stop-now tone.

I almost laughed. “I get the picture. Is Napoleon playing Cupid or has he become a voyeur?” A chuckle leaked out anyway. “We’re opening in ten, so wrap up this conversation for now. Pick it up later at home—when the bird’s asleep.”

I left Butch soothing a still ruffled Megan, saw that Bobby had a streak-free face and strode over to the pacing theater manager. Kevin’s few strands of hair had burst loose from the scented gel he used and were in the process of curling around his shiny scalp. Why he didn’t just shave them off, I don’t know.

Kevin and I have known each other since middle school when we were the class oddballs. He was a Star Wars geek and I was the cool outsider whose clothing choices didn’t always match those of my contemporaries. I still prefer my jeans and tee shirts to any piece of haute couture out there. Kevin and his wife had married right out of high school and had more ups and downs than a roller coaster. I was dizzy just watching him traverse the slippery slopes.

“Kevin.” He stopped mid-pace to glare at me. “You all right?”

“Don’t I look all right?” Touchy. His frizzy hair was frizzier than usual, beads of sweat were dripping off his plump face and his white shirt looked like he’d slept in it.

“Not particularly. What’s going on?”

“Have I told you my wife’s pregnant?”

“Every day for the last three months. Is she okay?”

“It’s our first, you know.”

“Kevin.” With effort, I refrained from rolling my eyes. “We’ve known each other since we were twelve. I’ve been around for every milestone in your life. Yes, I know it’s your first child.”

He looked sheepish. "Okay then. You must know I'm nervous."

"I got it. So?"

"She just called about feeling the baby move. Maybe I should go home and make sure she's all right."

"The baby moved?"

"Yes." At least he had quit pacing, although one eye began twitching.

"Is it the first time?"

"Um, no, but she seemed upset when she called. Maybe she needs something."

My incredulous stare took in the sweating, anxious man. "You took three days off last week because she was either crying for apparently no reason, couldn't figure out where to put the bassinet in the nursery or was wondering what to eat."

"Right, ah..."

"Kevin, you have a job here, remember? You're the manager of this movie theater."

"Well, sure, but you're here, Lucy. I can always count on you."

I finally let my eyes do a thorough roll around their sockets. This was ridiculous.

"Yes, you can, but you're needed here too."

He dashed into the office, grabbed his jacket and was shoving his arms into sleeves when I caught up with him.

"You're leaving?"

"You can handle it for an hour, Lucy. I'll be back soon. Just let me check on my wife and I'll be back for the afternoon shift."

"Wait, Kevin, I..."

But I was too late. He'd booked it out the door like a man who had just learned he'd won the lottery. The tracks he made were smoking. Great. I was alone with the circus. Again.

After movie patrons began to arrive, Megan was happily manning the candy counter and Butch was getting the projectors in the first two screens ready

to go. Apparently, they'd come to a compromise about Napoleon and I didn't want to hear what it was. Bobby was taking tickets and the new employee Kevin had hired two days ago was coming out of the bathroom where he'd been mopping. Usually I was the one stuck with the mop and bucket. I was thrilled to hand over the job to someone else.

Bubba Rawlins seemed to be a nice enough guy. He kept to himself, didn't bark at the customers and seemed to get along with the regular crew. I was hoping he'd be a keeper since we were always one short around here.

"Hey Bubba. If you're finished, I'd like to send you in with Butch to learn how to run the projectors."

"Sure, Miss Lucy. No problem."

I smiled. Yay! An employee with no problems and could take direction well. "You seem to be settling in."

"I am, thanks." Tall with a scruffy jaw, he looked like a basketball player getting set to lob the ball across the room, but I had a sneaky suspicion he was straight from some rodeo circuit. The hat he wore in every day was a big, fat clue, but so was his thick accent.

"Anything else you need from me?" I shook my head as I turned to head back to the office.

"Miss Lucy?" His soft voice made me turn back.

"Yeah?"

"I probably should tell you this."

Oh, no. "What is it?" Please let him not have a troublesome pet, paint abstract art or have a pregnant wife.

"My daddy's in town for the gun show. I may need to leave early if he calls. He ain't too good with waitin' around for me to show."

"In town from where?"

"Round Rock, Texas. We've had a good-sized cattle ranch there since my great granddaddy moved over from Oklahoma and staked a claim."

"Okay. Good to know. What are you doing out here, Bubba? And by the way, that can't be your real name."

He rubbed his chin with a thoughtful look on his tanned face. “Been goin’ by Bubba since my mama pushed me out. My birth certificate says Travis but no one ever called me that.”

“Did you decide to come out west for adventure?”

“Never been off the ranch and I was tired of eatin’ dirt as a lousy bull rider, so I come to Reno to have me some fun.”

“Having any?” I smiled. He was easy to like.

A big grin spread from ear to ear. “You bet. With them flashy casinos on Virginia Street, it’s hard not to have fun. Why, the bells, the clanging slots, the ladies singin’ and dancin’ on stage, I’m in hog heaven.”

I laughed and believed him. He’d come to Reno for the same reason lots of people did—to have a good time.

“I thought you were going to tell me something horrible like you had an exploding brain tumor and needed to get to a hospital right this minute.”

Bubba slapped his leg. “Why that’s funny, Miss Lucy! You could be a comedian like a guy I saw last week at Harrah’s. He wasn’t no funnier than you!”

“Take off when you need to, Bubba. Trust me when I say we cover for one another like crazy around here. You’ll be pressed into service soon, so look out.”

He took off to find Butch when a man munching on a bag of popcorn caught my eye. I don’t know. Something about him didn’t look right. Basic jeans and plaid shirt, he could be a college student or accountant slipping out of his office for a break. And cowboy boots didn’t register “suspicious guy” either, but my gut doesn’t lie. The name Davey Foster flashed through my mind just as he looked over at me. Even across a room crowded with moviegoers, he still didn’t ring true. I watched him walk over to hand Bobby his ticket stub just as the popcorn popper started spewing butter at Megan.

Good grief. That’s all I’ve had with that new popcorn popper. Three grand for the thing and it still gave me fits. Walking over to calm Megan and deal with it, I glanced over at the preppie-looking guy but he was gone. Might just be my overactive imagination. Of course, as soon as I unplugged the popper and paged Butch to come fix it, Eric called.

Of course. Like my father, Eric had impeccable timing.