

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-78359-0 - But Was it Murder?
Jania Barrell
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *Missing The Queen's Head*

Detective Inspector Rod Eliot was watching the rain running down his office window. He looked at his watch. 6.30. Time to leave the mountain of papers on his desk and go to The Queen's Head pub across the road.

'But only one beer,' he told himself. 'I don't want to be stopped by some junior policeman for drunk driving. Then I'll have to go home to an empty house.'

Just as he was leaving the office, the phone rang. He turned back automatically and picked it up. He half hoped it might be his wife.

'Sorry to disturb you, sir,' said Detective Constable Jamie Bowen. 'But we've got a bit of a problem.'

'So have I,' said Eliot. 'I shouldn't be here. Ask Inspector Merryon.'

'Sorry, sir,' said Bowen, 'but Inspector Merryon hasn't arrived yet. He phoned to say his car is stuck in a traffic jam in Hackney. He probably won't be here for at least an hour.'

Eliot hit the top of his desk angrily. The lights from The Queen's Head looked so inviting. But in the street below people were crowded into shop doorways, trying to escape from the rain. The water poured onto the street and was thrown up again by the lines of cars moving slowly away from the centre of London.

'All right, Bowen,' he said. 'You'd better tell me about it then. What is it?'

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‘We’ve just had a report of a death, sir. And there’s a gun.’

This was the last thing Eliot wanted to hear. He had been in a bad mood all day. He usually liked Friday because of the weekend ahead, when he could spend time with his wife Sally and eight-year-old son Micky. Micky was crazy about football, and Eliot always took him to watch West Ham on Saturdays when they played at home. This weekend would be different, though. Eliot had to work, and Sally had taken Micky to her parents’ house in Brighton for two nights. He had argued with her that morning.

‘Stop shouting,’ she had said. ‘You’re just angry because you don’t want us to go away. Why can’t you admit it?’

She was right, but knowing this only made him more angry. He had left the house without saying goodbye to her.

He had tried to ring several times to say sorry, but there was no answer. Now she would be at her parents’ house. And she could not speak to him openly there because they would be listening.

‘I knew this would be a bad day from the moment I woke up,’ he told Bowen. ‘All right. We’ll have to go. Where is it?’

‘Blackheath, I’m afraid, sir.’

Eliot sighed. Blackheath was only six kilometres from New Cross police station. But at this time on a Friday night there was so much traffic that the journey could take over an hour.

Eliot could not think of a worse way of spending Friday evening, especially as he had to be in his office early next

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morning. Why did everyone try to leave London at the same time? One day the whole city would be stuck in one big traffic jam. Already the traffic moved more slowly than it had a hundred years ago. It was madness.

‘Meet me downstairs in ten minutes, Bowen,’ he said. ‘Oh, and there’ll have to be medical reports. Check that someone’s told a doctor and the pathologist.’

Eliot turned away from the window. Well, at least Sally and Micky weren’t waiting for him at home. He had better phone them now. It might be his last chance this evening.

Sally’s father picked up the phone. ‘Hello Rod. Pity you can’t be here. The weather’s beautiful. How’s the job?’

Eliot made himself chat politely for a few minutes and then asked to speak to Sally.

‘I’m afraid she’s not here,’ her father said. ‘She’s taken Micky for a walk. He couldn’t wait to see the sea. Any message for her?’ Eliot couldn’t believe his bad luck.

‘Just say I’m pleased they’ve arrived safely,’ he said. ‘And give her my love. I’ll ring again tomorrow.’

He put down the phone and took one last look at The Queen’s Head. The traffic seemed hardly to have moved. Well, at least he could get Bowen to drive.