

SHADOWS IN SUSSEX by Emma Dakin

EXCERPT

“My name is Mark Evans,” he said. “I’m a detective inspector with the Hampshire constabulary and I’m the fiancé of your tour guide, Claire.” He didn’t mention Reece, so he was here socially.

Susan was the first to respond. “My name is Susan and I’m delighted to meet you. I’m a great mystery novel fan and I have met many detective inspectors in the pages of books. It’s a pleasure to meet a real English inspector. Please join us.”

“Bring a chair,” Heather said. “I would love to talk to you about the way English detective inspectors actually deal with a mystery.”

Mark smiled at me again and I could feel my heart expand. I knew he came to the café because I was having trouble with Richard and he wanted to help. I was sure I could handle Richard without any help as Heather was used to dealing with him and the three young women seem quite able to deflect and control him. But my heart warmed at the notion that Mark would come and see if he could be of use to me.

I was so distracted it took me a moment to realize that Andy Forsyth was with him.

“Please join us,” I said, then turned to the guests. “This is Detective Sergeant Andrew Forsythe. He’s Mark’s teammate.”

“Hello, everyone,” Andy said. “We have eaten, but we love to join you for tea.”

Andy was dressed impeccably in pressed jeans and a blue, open-necked sports shirt. He wore a gold earring and the wedding band I’d watched his husband Bruce put on his finger. That had been quite the society wedding. Bruce comes from a wealthy and supportive family and they had hosted an elaborate reception.

Susan brought me back to the present.

“That would be wonderful.” Susan invited him by a gesture to sit beside her. “What’s it like to be a sergeant in the Hampshire police force?”

He laughed. “It’s pretty busy.”

“I was wondering if the police still give those warnings that I read about in novels.”

“Not quite the way you read them in the novels,” Andy said. “I read thrillers myself so I pay attention to police procedure. We do make a statement when we make an arrest, but not the one you commonly see in fiction.”

Mark was at the other end of the table and seemed to be having quite a lively conversation with Heather, Richard, Howard and Poppy.

I ordered some small fairy cakes and some chocolate and nuts to be passed around with coffee and tea. The guests stayed for some time chatting with each other and with Mark and Andy. The group was enjoying themselves but eventually prepared to leave. The older guests were returning to Rother Manor House. The three young ones told me they were going to visit a pub.

“Waterworks Pub is a nice one,” Andy advised. “It's just down the street on this block.”

“Sounds perfect,” Julie said. “We're not big drinkers. We just like the liveliness of the English pubs. At least we think we will.”

“You have my cell number,” I said. “Just call if you need help or for anything at all.”

“We'll be fine,” Julie said. “Thank you for a delicious dinner.” Off they went, leaving Mark, Andy and me at the table.

“How do you like working with DS Flynn?” I asked.

“He's a marvel,” Andy answered me. “Meticulous, conscientious. Digs for information.”

Mark leaned forward. “He's so competent that if the Super gets wind of him, Andy will be recalled.”

That was a possibility. Superintendent Addison wasn't one to waste personnel.

“What about DC Sandhu?”

They both grinned. I expect Jas Sandhu had that effect on most people.

“I can work with him,” Mark said. “He seems a good team player with Flynn.”

I could see that: one was methodical and one imaginative.

“Flynn put Jas onto tracing Reece's movements on his last day. Once Travis has the info, he'll put it on a chart for us.”

“We're looking into a gang motivation. That's my job,” Andy said. “I have an appointment with someone in the know later tonight.”

“Be careful,” I said.

“Shouldn't be a problem.”

I don't know why I urged Andy to be careful. He was always careful. It must be some kind of superstition that makes those of us who have no control over the situation offer a kind of blessing on the one in danger. My mum used to caution me to stay dry if it looked like rain. Of course, I'd try to stay dry. But cautioning me was her way of trying to protect me. It can be annoying.

"Do you still think Reece was murdered?" I asked into the silence created by our mutual concern about a gang contact.

"Looks like it. He would be unlikely to get hold of Nembutal. None of that drug is circulating in this area."

"We aren't positive, though," Andy said. "All we can say is that he died of Nembutal poisoning and it is unlikely he gave it to himself."

"He could have taken it by accident, thinking it was something else."

"He could have, but we are going to treat this case as homicide until we can prove it isn't, or until we run out of leads."

Andy left us at the door of the café to walk back to the Rye Lodge Hotel while Mark escorted me to the Rother Manor House.

I invited him to my room where I plugged in the tea kettle and set out two cups and some biscuits—not that we needed any more to eat. While the room was small, it had a table and two chairs near the window.

For some reason we talked about birds. Mark had recently visited his Uncle Lionel and gone on a birding venture with him along the coastal walk of Cornwall. Mark was only mildly interested in birds, but enjoyed his uncle's enthusiasm. Like Lionel, I was keen on birds, so I listened to Mark's descriptions, enjoying the sound of his voice.

We spent quite a few minutes saying goodbye, but he finally left me for the night. I heard the front door close but couldn't watch him leave from my back garden window.

It was going to be a busy day tomorrow as I had to drive Richard and the older guests to Godinton House and deposit the three young women at the train station in Ashford. I checked that I had fresh supplies for their daily packs: chocolates, biscuits, hand sanitizers and tissues. I wished Mark could have stayed but I understood his need to be with Andy and available to the local constabulary. We were both working. We were used to being apart for weeks. Still, he wasn't far away but I wished he was with me. I conjured up a picture of Gulliver. I expect he was cuddled up with Deirdre's two dogs and was happy enough. I missed him as well.