

# THE FATAL STAR

I wake up in the middle of the night because of a phone call. It is an old friend of mine. I haven't heard from him for ages.

"It's Mark Smith. Please, Michelle. I need your help! They're dead" he says in a trembling voice.

"Mark! What happened?"

"A tragedy. My girlfriend Sophie and her dad were found dead."

He starts saying confused words. He is terrified and keeps yelling and asking for help.

"Where are you now, Mark?"

"I'm at Sophie's house, in High Street. We're still looking for her mother Lauren; we don't know where she is."

Lauren, I heard about her some years ago, Mark must have told me something about her. She is his girlfriend's mother.

"Mark don't worry; I'll get there soon. Is there anyone with you?"

"Yes, I already called the police before calling you."

I arrive on the crime scene in a few minutes. I saw the inspector Ethan; I have already worked with him in the past. He was trying to help Mark, typical of him. Mark tells me quickly about what was going on in the family before this terrible event. Mrs Abbot was going to divorce in a few days and the couple had been arguing for a while because her daughter had decided to stay with him. Sophie did not like her mother because she used to get drunk very often.

I was really worried about Mark, I have known him for a long time but I have never seen him in that state: his green eyes, always full of hope, are empty now; his beautiful lively smile has disappeared. Now he is going to collapse.

"Can someone find a taxi to bring him to the police station?" I asked.

The two policemen offered to take him with them while I stay here to investigate.

I look at the two corpses. They are cold. They must have been outside for a pretty long time, thinking about how much time passed from the first phone call and the time that took me to arrive here. Sophie's has a really red nose, though. His father's nose is paler. She might have had a cold, her red nose cannot be only due to the fact she was outside.

Everything else is in its place. There is a towel on the grass, two pairs of shoes and a pair of sunglasses between the towel and the swimming pool. The only problem is that the murder probably took place in the middle of the night, according to the coroner's first look.

I can hear him muttering.

"A crime is so unusual in a little city like Bibury." I must agree.

Two more things are not in their right place: two dead bodies, one of a girl, I think it's Sophie's one, and another, I gather it's Rythian Abbot. What a strange name.

Immediately I notice that there aren't any signs of violence on the bodies. If I was walking in the street and I saw these two people in this garden, I could have thought that they were sleeping. I smell the air, and I get the feeling that something strange was going on.

"I can smell blood" I said.

"But there are no wounds on them!" Said the policeman next to me, pointing to the victims. I approach the bodies, and I smell the air again. Now I understand.

"I don't think it's their blood. A test will confirm it, but I suppose it's animal blood, used to cover the smell of almond." I think everybody understands what I am going to say.

"The killer used some cyanide."

Some hours have gone by and I am in the laboratory now. Everything is cold and metallic. It isn't a cosy place. I think about all the uncomfortable and hard situations I have gone through to reach the truth. An inevitable passage to the light.

"What are the results of the test?" I ask the coroner.

"I did them four times and the result is always different. The only thing they have in common is the poison. Two times the STA R Max revealed that there are some stains of the plant of Belladonna, but the rest of the times it showed just the presence of cyanide."

"That is strange ... Sorry, but whose victim's blood is the one containing traces of Belladonna in it?"

"It is in both. Why?"

"Every information can be useful and may be a clue. You should always ask for more information, especially if they are about the victims and the crime weapon. Now I have to investigate" I added, and I headed to the police station

"Hi Mark!" I said. "How are you now?" I hugged him.

"Well, you can figure it out. My girlfriend has just died." I guess he is right. Understandable answer.

"I'm so sorry for your unexpected lost. But I have to ask you some questions. Do you know why Rythian used Belladonna? The coroner found some traces of it in his blood." Mark did not say a word for a few minutes.

"He had articular pains, I've heard that Belladonna is used to reduce those pains. Her ex girlfriend worked in an herbalist's shop and knew all the benefits of the plants" Mark says.

"That explains a lot of things, and why they had a greenhouse with a lot of plants of that type. What about Sophie? Why did she use Belladonna as well?"

"I think that she was ill. She caught a cold in the previous days" Mark replies.

I was right. The red nose may not be due only to the fact the body had been outdoors for a few hours.

"So she usually planted the Belladonna plant in this house because of his father's health problems. Right?"

"Yes, she loved plants and flowers, she has lots of plants in the garden behind the house." Mark replies.

"And do you know who gave the medicine to Mr Abbot?" I ask.

"Her wife. She was the only one who really knew all those plants so she was the one who prepared the Belladonna to give to her husband and to the rest of the family if they had caught colds or they had cramps."

"Alright. Thank you."

That makes me think. Well, actually I had to do some researches. I had to search some other information about this plant. It is used to treat articulations problems, headache and even common colds.

This means a lot. Rythian's wife may have melted some Belladonna in the water to give it to her husband and may have added some cyanide in it.

They had been arguing for some days so she must have had some reason to kill her husband: to get the custody of her daughter. Moreover, Rythian was involved in a love affair some time ago and that must have been the reason why Lauren freaked out. He was

no saint for sure but this did not prevent him from being caring with her daughter. She did not judge him for that mistake. So, Mr Abbot could have been an easy target for a woman full of anger and out of control. But why would Mrs Abbot kill her daughter if she loved her so that wanted Sophie to leave her father and come to live with her? I have to find more clues.

I will start with the suspects' alibi.

The first person I want to talk with is Mrs Lauren Abbot.

I call the police and wait for them to arrive with the woman. They arrive quickly, we are now in the same room, face to face.

"I will start with a simple question, Mrs Abbot. Where were you last night at around 3 a.m.?"

"I think I was at home; I remember that I went out in the evening at around 10 pm but my girl friend took me home pretty early because I had drunk a few more drinks".

So she was drunk. She could have given the poison to her daughter by mistake.

"Who was with you?" I ask.

"I was with my friend Lilian but she did not come with me. She called a taxi and I got home on my own, I think. I don't remember anything else. I only know that someone has given Belladonna to my husband and daughter and I don't know who, although I was the only one at home except for them." Lauren replies. There were no signs of forced entry, in fact.

"Do you remember what you did when you arrived home?"

"No, I am sorry, I cannot remember anything."

She can't even remember what she did when she was drunk, how is it possible that she gave the poison to the victims? Things do not balance. May I be wrong?

"Okay, thank you. Please go into the other room." I have to interrogate the other suspect.

She gets up and goes away while Mark comes in.

"How is the investigation going?" he asks.

"Well, we're following a good lead, I guess. Where were you last night, Mark?"

"I was at home." He says after a while. He does not look that sure. I look closely at him to earn some other clues. He seems agitated but I guess it is normal when you are in the list of suspects for a case.

His hair is a bit messy, as usual. He is wearing a dark sweater. There is something on it.

I can notice some hairs, probably pet hairs, but he has not got any pets, as far as I know.

"I know this question could sound a bit weird but do you have any pets?" Maybe he will say the truth now.

"No, I don't. I haven't had a pet since I moved to live on my own. You should know that, I have just told you a few weeks ago that I wanted a pet who could stay with me when I am alone. What does this have to do with the case?"

"Tell me then, whose are those hairs on your sweater? They are not yours for sure, you certainly do not have white hair. Your hair is brown and a human does not lose so much hair. They are shorter, thinner and they have less colour than human hairs, typical features of pets' hair." I can see him getting more anxious.

"Okay... I will say the truth. I have a lover and I was at her house yesterday evening and night, before coming here. She has two white cats and these hairs are probably theirs."

So he lied before.

"Were you cheating on Sophie, then?" After this question he raises his voice.

"No no! I still loved Sophie! I did not want to... My lover, she... Her family is rich and respectable and his father is important. I work for his company. If I refused to be her lover

she would have definitely take revenge on me or my family and would lose my job and my position! I had to!"

That seems an excuse, I will have to search some information about that mysterious woman, then.

"What is your mistress's name?"

"Tracy Wilson"

Mr Wilson is her father, then...

We take a break; I need a good cinnamon tea to concentrate. Cinnamon can heal everything. I sip my infusion and take my time. Reality needs to time to reveal and people need time to understand it properly. I have a consultation with my colleague Ethan. He is a good man, sometimes touchy but enjoyable. He has done some research.

"Lauren's friend Lilian confirmed her version of the events" he says "and Mr Wilson die 3 years ago in a car accident, Michelle. Why would he lie or omit this information?" Interesting question.

I still do not have enough evidences to find and catch the criminal, though.

"Well, thanks for taking part in this interrogatory – I tell Mark, omitting the information acquired before – but remember to tell the truth in front of the police and in the middle of a case."

I take a walk in the street and get to the crime scene. I still can smell blood. The house is in a private area and there are not wild animals in this village. And what's more, the tests confirmed my suppositions. The murder must have used blood on purpose. The crime weapon was poison, cyanide to be more precise. It is well known that cyanide leaves a strong smell of bitter almond, so blood was to cover that clue, I guess.

Now I have to understand the reason of the presence of the sunglasses next to the corpses, when the murder took place in the middle of the night.

May they be diversions? Sophie had a cold and Mr Abbot had articular problems. They would never have a picnic outside.

The murderer wanted to make us believe that they died in the afternoon or before, but why? Greenhorn, the autopsy would have revealed the exact death time. Anyway, Mark was out in the afternoon but Lauren was not.

So it was Mark the one trying to give a diversion? But which motive would have led him to kill his girlfriend and her father? None, absolutely none. You cannot kill a person you love, especially if you are Mark. I know him.

It is still too early to accuse someone, though. I have to investigate in the green house now.

While I walk towards the green house Ethan stops me to tell me that some policemen went to Tracy's house and asked her a few questions. She confirmed that Mark was with her that night but left at around 10 p.m. because he had something to do.

I thank him and continue my inspection.

There are a lot of plants here. There are also a lot of flowers. I have to find the area where Mrs Abbot planted Belladonna.

While I walk across the green house and look for the Belladonna plants I see an area with Christmas star flowers. Suddenly I remember something I read on the newspaper some time ago. A murder caused by cyanide poisoning obtained from the stem of this flower.

I look closely and I see a cut stem well hidden between other flowers. I notice that it is still a bit humid and that there is something stick on it. Other hairs, they look the same hair

that were on Mark's sweater. But it is still not enough to confirm that Mark was here last night. He is almost everyday in this house.

I have already controlled Mark's clothes but I still have to verify Mrs Abbot's.

I go back to the police station and enter the room where the suspects are.

"Mrs Abbot, please come to the other room with me." She follows me.

"I have to check your clothes and bags." She takes off her coat and gives it to me.

I can notice the same type of hairs on one side of the coat. Then I check the other clothes as well, there is nothing on them. She gives me her bag. Some more hairs are caught in the chain.

If they were the same found on Mark's clothes, how could they possibly be on her? Mark and Lauren did not have have physical contacts, he did not like her and would have never hugged her. The only moment might have been when she was drunk.

"Do you often wear this coat? There are some hairs on this side, do you know where they may come from?" I ask her.

"What? No, I only used it yesterday and neither me or my friend have pets..."

This proves that Mark was definitely not at home that night. He must have been here and helped Mrs Abbot enter the house while she was drunk.

So was he the one who gave the Belladonna to his girlfriend and to her father?

That cannot be true...

Mrs Abbot moves in the other room and suddenly Ethan comes in. "How is it going? Did you find new clues?"

"Yes I did... I think I have the evidences as well but... I may be wrong; he cannot be the murder for real... Mark would have never done something like this!"

"Only because he is your friend?" I guess Ethan is right. I have all the evidences now. Wait... I still do not know why he would have killed his girlfriend and her father.

"You may be right; I have all the evidences but why would he do something like this?"

Ethan thinks for a while and then he replies: "Maybe because Sophie found out that he was cheating on her?"

That makes sense. I have to check if this is the truth. That afternoon I go to the crime scene again. I go upstairs in Sophie's room. After looking around I find a diary under the pillow. Flipping through the pages I see what I unconsciously was looking for. A page where Sophie left all her emotions out when she discovered that Mark was cheating on her. She wanted to leave him. But was that such a tragedy to avoid at all costs?

Now I remember, Mark's father is a politician. If people found out that his son had cheated on someone his career would be ruined.

But why would he kill Sophie's father? I think about the clues and realize that he tried to make us believe the murder happened in the afternoon so he could have killed the father to accuse Sophie's mother who surely had a motive to take revenge on him. He was a collateral death. Lauren lacked a motive to kill her daughter, though.

"I think that my affection to him made me fall in a trap... I believed him. I do not want him to go to the jail!" Luckily there is Ethan to lead me on the right way.

"I know that he is your friend but he disappointed you. Do you remember why you became a detective? You wanted to fight for truth and justice, right?"

Right... I have to capture him... Even if he is my friend.

"You have to bring him to justice, even if it is difficult and painful."

Ethan is right. It is painful. I could not believe it.

We go together into the room where Mark, Lauren and the other policemen are.

"So, I solved the case. I am sorry to say this but Mark, you are the culprit."

Immediately he yells against me: "What? You must be kidding me!"

"I obviously have the evidences. First of all, I will start with Mrs Lauren's coat. On one side there are some hairs, the same pet hairs that are on your sweater and on her bag chain as well."

"I could have hugged her; she is my girlfriend's mother after all." He interrupts me trying to defend himself.

"You never liked her, Mark. And the hairs are only on one side of the coat, that is because you carry people on one side to help them when they are drunk. That night Mrs Abbot came home earlier because she got drunk and you were at home and helped her to come in."

"What? No! I told you that I was at my lover's house, she can confirm my alibi. That is why I have these hairs on my sweater!"

"You were there till a certain time. She clearly said that you left at 10 because you had 'something to do'."

"But that does not mean that I am a murder!"

"Well, that might be not enough to accuse you but I have more. Please come with me at the greenhouse."

We go together towards the greenhouse and I lead the others to the area where I found the cut stem of the Christmas Star.

"Do you see that stem?" I ask.

"I do. And so?"

"You can obtain cyanide from this plant engraving the stem and making the fluid come out. Then you just need to leave it in contact with oxygen."

"Well I don't know anything about that." He tries to defend himself again.

"I think you do. There is a hair on the humid stem. The same that were on your sweater, Mrs Abbot's coat and her bag. You didn't have the time to come here after the murder so you must have left the hair previously, when you came to get the cyanide."

"And how could I give the cyanide to the two victims? Mrs Abbot was the one who used to give them the Belladonna plant melted in water!"

"I have never said that you melted the cyanide with the Belladonna. How did you know it?"

"I... I tried to guess... I knew that the Belladonna has to be melted in water and I deduced..."

"Mrs Abbot was too drunk to give them the medicine. She could not even enter the house on her own and she does not remember anything so she was not in the state to poison them."

Mark stays in silence for a few minutes.

"And why should I have done something like this?"

"Because Sophie found out that you were cheating on her. There is an entire page on her diary where she gets all her emotions out."

"I would never kill her only because she found out that I cheated on her!"

"But you wanted to cover your reputation and your father's. You hoped that nobody would discovered the truth but, unfortunately for you, you made a mistake."

"That is the truth, my friend. I should have known you were an amazing detective before calling you. This was my mistake." Lauren burst into tears while listening to his words.

“No, Mark. You chose evil, the worst part of you. But I know you are more than this. I have seen it. At least say you’re sorry”

“I will not say anything else.” That is the last sentence I hear from him. It reminded me of Iago’s last words in the *Othello*. That was pure evil. Could Mark be the same? I can’t believe it. Maybe I cannot accept that he is free till this point. Evil has not explanation. But it is real and concrete. We can choose it or not, we can suffer it. I will never get used to it. The policemen take Mark away. Ethan looks at me. His gaze is full of understanding. He takes me by the arm and we walk under the dull sky.