

HOLMES IS MISSING

*A HOLMES,
MARGARET
& POE
MYSTERY*



JAMES

PATTERSON

and BRIAN SITTS

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Chapter 74](#)

[Chapter 75](#)

[Chapter 76](#)

[Chapter 77](#)

[Chapter 78](#)

[Chapter 79](#)

[Chapter 80](#)

[Chapter 81](#)

[Chapter 82](#)

[Chapter 83](#)

[Chapter 84](#)

[Chapter 85](#)

[Chapter 86](#)

[Chapter 87](#)

[Chapter 88](#)

[Chapter 89](#)

[Chapter 90](#)

[Chapter 91](#)

[Chapter 92](#)

[Chapter 93](#)

[Chapter 94](#)

[Chapter 95](#)

[Chapter 96](#)

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[A Preview of *The Writer*](#)

[A Preview of *Paranoia*](#)

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS 2 a.m. The posted speed limit on the Williamsburg Bridge into Manhattan was 35 miles per hour. But Auguste Poe was abiding by his personal driving code: Go as fast as possible, whenever possible. For short stretches, the needle on his vintage Shelby Charger was touching 60. The hum of the tires bounced off the concrete side barriers. Margaret Marple sat beside him in the front passenger seat, gritting her teeth—and biting her tongue.

“I know what you’re thinking, so keep it to yourself,” said Poe. “Helene said to get there in a hurry.”

“And hopefully, still among the living,” Marple replied, watching the bridge struts whiz by in a blur.

The call had come in on Poe’s personal cell phone barely half an hour ago—not on the main line at their private detective agency, Holmes, Marple & Poe Investigations. Marple was usually the one with connections, so it irked her just a little that in this case Poe was the one with the inside line to an NYPD homicide detective, but she knew why. And a case was a case.

“Helene said this was a big one. That’s about all she had time to say,” Poe had told Marple after he’d knocked on her apartment door, down the hallway from his own.

Now fully awake, Marple took in the glittering lights of Manhattan, its towers and spires glowing like party ornaments. They crossed the bridge and sped west across the city. Even at two in the morning, there was traffic along Delancey. Poe downshifted through a yellow light and made an illegal screeching left turn onto Ludlow, heading south.

Marple rocked hard to the right. “*Bus!*” she shouted.

Poe swerved just in time to avoid clipping the thirty-ton brute.

“I wish Holmes was here,” she said.

Poe shot her a quizzical look. “Why would you miss him right now?” he asked. “Brendan is a terrible driver.”

“That makes two of you,” said Marple.

Their destination was St. Michael’s Hospital, but the police barricade stopped them a block short. Poe pulled the Charger to the right and double-parked, effectively blocking two NYPD patrol cars. He turned off the ignition and opened the driver-side door, ignoring the “Hey, asshole!” shouts from cops nearby. Marple could barely squeeze out between the passenger door and the police vehicle to her right. Poe met her on the sidewalk. He put both hands on her shoulders.

“Look, Margaret. It goes without saying that I miss Brendan too,” he said. “Don’t worry. He’ll send us a sign when he’s ready.”

They both turned and hurried to the end of the street, where St. Michael’s loomed—a ten-story hunk of granite with small, narrow windows. It had been a fixture in the neighborhood since the late 1800s, when the Sisters of Charity convinced a group of rich Upper East Siders that the Lower East Side needed help. The nuns were long gone, but the hospital had evolved into one of the city’s most prestigious private medical centers.

As Marple and Poe got closer to the hospital entrance, they saw cops running in the same direction, flowing from a nearby precinct house, shoulder radios squawking. The street was lined with small businesses, most closed and shuttered for the night. One glowing exception was Cops & Docs, a worn-looking bar sitting kitty-corner from the hospital.

“There’s Helene!” Poe called out. Marple spotted her at the same time.

Detective Lieutenant Helene Grey was waiting near a stone pillar in front of the hospital. She wore dark trousers and a matching jacket, with a telltale bulge from the gun belt at her hip. Her badge was suspended around her neck, dangling over her crisp white blouse.

As they got closer, Marple noted there was no overt acknowledgment between Grey and Poe that they’d been lovers for months. There were no pleasantries at all, just cursory nods all around. Helene’s face looked drawn

—as grim as Marple had ever seen her. And they had been together in some very tough situations.

“What is it?” asked Poe. “What’s going on?”

“It’s a kidnapping,” said Grey. “But not just that. Honestly, I’ve never seen anything like it. Nobody at NYPD has.” She turned to lead the way past a hospital security booth and into the main lobby. Grey walked quickly, blowing past other detectives and plainclothes teams. Uniformed cops gave her room as she powered toward the first-floor elevator bank.

“Where are we headed?” asked Marple.

Grey jabbed the Up button with her thumb. Her expression turned even darker.

“Maternity,” she said.

CHAPTER 2

POE ALWAYS FELT a tingle in Helene's presence—an enlivened state of being. Even when she was all business. Even when the circumstances were bleak. Like now. Standing a few inches behind her in the elevator, Poe fixated on the clip that held her blond hair in a tight bun above her jacket collar. It was a small circular disk the color of a blood moon. As omens go, it was far from good.

Marple squeezed his arm. "Please behave yourself when we get there," she whispered.

"When have I not?" asked Poe.

A second later, the elevator door opened onto total chaos.

Poe could hear women crying even before he saw them. He followed Grey and Marple toward the nurses' station in the center of the unit. Cops and nurses and detectives were milling around the hallways. Hospital security honchos paced the floor in dark suits while floor guards in short-sleeved shirts gripped their walkies and tried to appear useful.

Poe looked toward a small glass-fronted room off the main unit. The crying was coming from there, from where half a dozen women in shapeless hospital gowns were sobbing and wailing and clinging to one another like condemned prisoners. Suddenly, Poe felt a hard shoulder against his chest. An athletic man in a bulky grey suit was blocking the way. Like Helene, he wore a detective badge around his neck.

"What are these assholes doing here?" he asked. The question was directed at Grey, as was the follow-up: "Who the hell invited PIs to an active crime scene?"

"Back off, Vail," said Helene. "I brought them in. My call."

Poe was fully aware of the friction between his firm and the NYPD in

general. The reason for it was simple. Holmes, Marple & Poe Investigations had recently solved some very big cases—right under the noses of the police department. Those noses were still out of joint. But Poe didn't care. He poked Detective Vail in the chest. "Haven't you heard? There's been a kidnapping."

"That's not possible," said Vail. "This place has security up the ass. You couldn't steal a goddamn Band-Aid from this floor."

Before Poe could respond, Marple yanked him aside. "Stop it, Auguste! You won't make any friends with that attitude."

"I'm not here to make friends," Poe replied. "I'm here to get answers."

A nurse in burgundy scrubs walked up and handed Grey a sheet of paper.

"Is this the list?" Grey asked.

The nurse nodded grimly. She had the look of a woman at the end of a very long shift—maybe two.

Grey tapped the page. "Six," she said. "Six missing newborn babies."

Poe looked at Marple. Helene had not exaggerated. This was a huge case. Too bad their firm was not at full strength. He leaned over and whispered in Marple's ear. "Of all the times to be one brain short!"

CHAPTER 3

MARPLE TURNED TOWARD the roomful of sobbing women in hospital gowns. She realized that she was looking at the frantic mothers—the ones whose babies had been stolen from the nursery in the middle of the night. Had they been gathered together in the same room by the cops or had they found one another in their fear?

As she watched through the glass, Marple saw a detective slip into the room with them, her pen and notepad ready. The women lurched forward, almost engulfing her. Their faces were streaked with tears, their expressions haunted.

Marple felt Poe at her elbow. “Best day of their lives,” he said. “Now the worst.”

Suddenly, an elevator door opened and a whole new group burst into the unit.

“Brace yourself,” said Marple. “I think the dads just arrived.”

The partners emerged as a single mass, wild-eyed and panicky. Marple counted five men and one woman. A big guy in expensive slacks and a blue dress shirt was in the lead. *A Master of the Universe type*, thought Marple, *looking to take control*.

“Where’s my wife?” he shouted. “Christine!” He moved like a rugby player, bumping cops and nurses aside. When he spotted the room full of distraught women, he waved frantically. One of the women waved back. A young cop stepped up to ask for ID. The big guy pushed past him like he wasn’t even there.

Marple watched as the other five followed him into the glass-fronted room, finding their partners and embracing them tightly.

The keening inside the room intensified, now accompanied by curses and

angry mutters. The man in the dress shirt turned on the young detective. “What happened here? What are you doing about this? Where are our babies?”

Marple saw the detective try to assert her command, but it was no use. The furious father towered over her. A couple of hospital security guards hustled over, but the angry dads shoved them out of the room. The detective backed out too, clearly flustered.

Helene Grey walked over to Marple and Poe. “What a shit show,” she muttered.

“What else do we know?” asked Poe.

“It was clean. It was quick. It was professional.”

“How many babies were in the nursery at the time?”

“Eight. We’re keeping the remaining two babies there for the moment—under close watch—but we’ve isolated the mothers and moved all other patients off this floor.”

“Inside job?” asked Marple.

“No doubt,” said Helene.

“Everybody listen up, please!” The voice had come from the nurses’ station in the center of the floor. Marple turned to see a tall woman in a knee-length lab coat standing in front of the curved countertop. Her posture was perfect and her greying chestnut hair was pulled into a severe ponytail. Through piercing eyes, she looked out over the turmoil and commanded silence.

“I’m Dr. Revell Schulte,” she said, her voice clear and firm. “I’m head of the maternity unit. I know what’s happened here is terrible. But we need order. And we need calm. This is a birthing center, not a police station. The women down this hallway have just given birth. They’ve all undergone massive physical trauma and are in need of medical care. So if you don’t absolutely need to be here, please leave.”

“You heard the doctor,” a tall, bookish-looking man in a dark suit said to Grey. He’d walked up during Dr. Schulte’s speech. “I don’t understand what a homicide detective is doing at a kidnapping scene in the first place.”

“Good to see you, Captain,” said Grey.

Marple decided this must be Captain Graham Duff, the newly arrived head of the Major Case Squad. She had heard about Duff but hadn't yet met him in person. Her first impression: he was every inch the prick she'd expected.

Marple could tell Grey wasn't a fan of her new boss either. It was clear now that she was unsettled by his intrusion, but she quickly regained her composure. “I figured it was all hands on deck on a call like this, Captain. I know it's not my case to catch. I'm just here to help.”

“So what's with the spectators?” he asked, jerking his head toward Marple and Poe.

Marple cleared her throat. “Captain Duff, I'm Margaret Marple, and this is my partner Auguste Poe. We're private investigators from Brooklyn. You may have heard about—”

“I know who you are,” said Duff, cutting her off. “And like the good doctor said, you don't need to be here.”

“Look! It's *them!*” The shout had come from the roomful of parents. Marple glanced over to see the frantic mothers and fathers looking their way. “It's Poe! And Marple!” one of the women shouted. “Thank *God!*” another mom sobbed. The parents spilled out of the tiny room and headed across the floor.

Marple smiled at Duff, her British accent adding an extra dab of sweetness. “See that, Captain? I believe we might be wanted after all.”