

The Murder in the Library

by Alison L. Robson

Winner: Best 'Body in the Library' Story

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The year 2030

I always wanted to be a writer and I always wanted to see my books in the library. Ever since I was a teenager, I'd dreamed of seeing my crime books sitting on the shelves, nestled amongst the greats of the crime genre. I even wrote my first book about a murder in a library.

But not once did I think *I'd* be the body in the library.

My demise only happened mere minutes ago and even though I'm no longer breathing, I'm still here in the library. I'm not alive, of course, but I am here in some form. I can see my body lying face down in front of the geography books. Exactly as I'd written in my first book, *The murder in the Library*.

I'd been hit from behind, a single, strong hit. They'd come up behind me and whacked me with a fire extinguisher, disappearing before I could rise up out of my body and see who it was. It was just as horrid as I had imagined it in my novel, as well. Blood splattered in the most unsightly way. I had no doubt it was going to take the cleaners an awfully long time to scrub the carpets clean.

It was late at night, 9:04 if I'm going to be exact, and the library was closed. I preferred to do research for my books the 'old fashion way' and the library was happy for me to do this after hours as long as I gave them regular author talks and book signings. I liked coming to the library when it was closed because I could research my latest novel without anyone recognising me. Selling two million books unfortunately came with some fame. Some good, some not so good.

To be honest, these days the only part of the fame I hated was someone recognising me and stealing my ideas, not someone recognising me because they were a fan. AI had completely taken over the book world in recent years and all the story-thieves needed was an idea, a snippet of a new release and the book could be pirated and released before I'd even finished my first draft.

It had happened with my last book. With AI robots walking amongst us these days, it was getting harder and harder to research and write books without someone stealing ideas. Gone are the days of writing in coffee shops or libraries. Too many data scanning robots.

Not that it mattered now.

No, I must focus. The only thing that mattered now was finding out who'd done this to me. It would be my final mystery.

I could hear the librarian, June, returning from the staff kitchen. Sometimes she stayed back to help me with my research. She'd been making us a coffee and toasted cheese sandwiches while my murder was taking place. I knew she wasn't the one to do this to me. Mainly because she was a terribly loud walker. There was no sneaking around with June. Seriously, for a librarian, she wore the jingliest jewellery. You could hear her moving around from the other side of the room.

June dropped the coffee and the food when she saw me – well my broken body, I mean. She screamed. She cried as one does. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and called triple 0. She kept her distance from me, knowing there was nothing that could be done, seeing that my brains were leaking out into the carpet.

The next couple of hours were a blur of flashing lights, police officers, forensics and the like, all taking evidence, dissecting the crime scene in front of them, talking about me like I wasn't just moments ago a real-life person. It seemed to me that they were as perplexed about my murder as I was. How had the murderer gotten inside? Was it planned? Were they known to me?

None of it made any sense. Who would do this to crime author extraordinaire, Julianne Fox?

A woman, who I'd gathered was the lead detective on the case, approached sweet June, who was still quietly sobbing as she sat on the lounge in the reading area. As June looked up the detective gave her a sympathetic smile.

'I'm sorry for your loss, June' she said, her voice steady and calm. 'I hear you and Ms Fox were good friends.'

June gave a nod as fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. It was true, I thought sadly. We had become good friends over the years. It was a shame we'd never taken our friendship out of the library.

'Julianne is an amazing writer and a wonderful person. I always enjoy staying back and helping her with her research.' She let out a small sob. 'I can't believe this has happened. Who would want to do this?'

'You don't think she had any enemies?'

I couldn't help but scoff. I was a writer, not a mafia boss. I spent the majority of my days holed up in my home office, tapping out my next novel. I didn't have time to make enemies. The detective looked up, a frown creasing her forehead, then she looked back down at June.

'You can't think of anything Ms Fox may have told you that points to her having a problem with someone? A stalker? A fellow author?'

June shook her head. 'Julianne worked all the time. She had to with all those robots stealing her ideas. Damn things they are.

Stealing ideas straight off authors computers and using them for their illegal AI books. Scanning the computer screens with their zoomed in 'eyes'. And to think we used to worry about ChatGPT. Julianne used to sit here in the library and write for hours. Now she has to write at home with the shades drawn. Seriously, what has the world become?'

The detective nodded and pressed her lips together.

'Yes, I've heard many stories about the robots and data-stealing. Do you have one working here?'

June nodded. 'Yes, it helps me with the filing and putting books away. I never wanted it here. I can do my job just fine without it, but the bosses think it's the bees knees I'm afraid.'

'Is it an advanced model?'

'No,' said June with a firm shake of her head. 'A 2025 model. Basic entry level assistant robot.' The detective nodded.

'Is there anything else you think might help us find Ms Fox's killer?'

'Well, there is one thing,' said June. 'This crime scene bears an uncanny resemblance to Julianne's very first novel, The murder in the library. Maybe it's a copycat thing? A crazed fan wanting to live out one of her books? I know we have a copy. I'll grab it for you.'

June jumped up and jingled her way over to the crime section. She searched through the books for a few minutes and walked back over to the detective empty-handed.

‘It’s the strangest thing - the book is gone. I know it was returned a few days ago and I haven’t booked it out since.’

The detective looked up from the notes she was making in her little notebook.

‘Gone?’

June shrugged. ‘It’s not on the shelf. I guess it’s possible the 2025 put it back on the wrong shelf. It has made mistakes before. It’s also possible someone took it without checking it out. Maybe a fan who didn’t want to buy their own copy?’

The detective made some more notes.

‘I’ll have a look around before I leave.’ She folded the notebook and smiled softly.

‘I’m sorry that I have to say this, but seeing you were the only one here with Ms Fox, you are a suspect.’

I watched as a look of horror washed over poor June’s face. June wouldn’t do this to me, I just know it.

The detective sighed. ‘Fifteen years as a cop and my gut instinct tells me you aren’t the murderer, June, but we must cover all bases. Fifteen years has also told me that anything is possible. You are free to go home. However we will have more questions for you.’

June nodded as she got to her feet. She wiped a tear off her cheek and made her way to the front door where she disappeared into the night. If June was my killer, she sure was a good actress.

Another hour later and the only people left in the library were the detective and me.

Not me physically. My body had been zipped up and carted out of here about half an hour ago. But I was still here, in some form.

The detective was standing over what was left of the crime scene, hands in the pockets of her basic black work pants, and she let out a small sigh.

‘What happened to you, Ms Fox?’ she muttered to herself. ‘Who would want to do this to you? Is it just a copycat case? Did you offend dear, sweet June in some way?’

My sigh was longer and louder than hers. ‘I’d like to know the answer as well.’

The detective stilled and I watched as her hand went to her gun.

‘Who’s there? Who said that?’

Well, this was interesting. She could hear me?

‘You can hear me?’ I said, louder this time. How could the detective possibly hear me? I didn’t even know I had a voice. The detective pulled the gun out of its holster.

‘Of course I can hear you. My name is Detective Sonja Harding and I want you to come out where I can see you. Right now.’

I couldn’t help but laugh.

‘I’m afraid seeing me is out of the question, Detective. I was carted out of here half an hour ago.’

‘What? Who are you?’

'I'm the victim.'

The Detective lowered her gun and some of the colour left her face.

'The victim?'

'I'm Julianne Fox and for some reason, I'm still here. I'm not exactly sure what happens after you're murdered but I'm pretty sure I'm still here so I can help you find out who did it.'

The detective sat down on a lounge chair and I could see she was doing some deep breathing.

'This isn't happening,' she muttered to herself.

'I'm not hearing ghosts. I've been working too hard. My husband told me I've been working too hard and it's finally happened. I've burnt myself out. I've lost my mind.'

I sighed again.

'I assure you, Detective, that I am here. Well, in a spiritual way at least. I've been here the whole time and I've watched this whole thing unfold and, trust me, I don't want to be here talking to you either. Surely heaven is better than watching your own crime scene. But the fact of the matter is, I am here and I have a feeling that the quicker we solve this, the quicker I can move on. To the next world, I mean.'

The detective's eyebrows shot up. 'You know who did it?'

'Unfortunately no. They hit me from behind. But I think June was right when she said this had something to do with my book,

The murder in the library. It's all very familiar. Plus, I can't think of a single reason for anyone to want to kill me. It must be a copycat crime. My book was very popular. Maybe someone wanted to live it themselves?'

'I guess that's possible. Plus, the book is missing.'

'Exactly.'

Detective Sonja stood up and put her hands on her hips.

'Well, I'm going to have a look around and see if I can find that book. It may hold some clues or give me a place to start. Maybe it's just been put back on the wrong shelf.'

She walked over to the romance section and began looking at the spines.

'You're sure that you don't have any enemies that may have wanted to do this to you? A cranky neighbour? A fan you've ignored?'

'Absolutely not, detective. I don't have time for enemies, I'm too busy. I write crime novels, for goodness' sake. Who in their right mind would want to harm an author? We're a delightful bunch of people.'

'I have read some of your novels. They're quite good.'

'Thank you. Unfortunately I won't be writing anymore.'

The detective sighed.

'Are you sure there have been no stalkers or odd people following you around recently?'

'I'm hardly interesting enough to be stalked, or followed for that matter.'

‘And it definitely wasn’t June?’

‘June’s never hurt a fly. I’m sure an author isn’t high on her kill-list, either. You really must think outside the box on this one, Detective.’

‘Well, who committed the crime in your novel?’

I cleared my non-existent throat. ‘The librarian. But I’m positive it wasn’t June.’

The detective looked up and stared around the room.

‘Why can’t I see you? You’d think you’d have some sort of ‘ghostly’ body.’

‘I have no idea. This is my first time as a spirit.’

‘You don’t sound particularly sad at being murdered.’

‘t’s odd, Detective. I don’t really feel anything. I know that I’m here, I know I was murdered, and I just know that I must help solve this in order to move on.’

The detective went back to looking at the books. ‘Well, let’s solve this case.’

As the detective moved on to the next row of shelves, the door to the cleaning room opened and the 2025 assistant robot walked out with a book under its arm. It placed the book on a shelf, grabbed another one and walked back to the cleaning room, all without looking in the Detective’s direction.

‘Well, that was odd,’ I said.

Detective Sonja shrugged. ‘The 2025 robot is odd. It should never have been the first robot sold to the public. The learning chip

they used in the central processing unit was a prototype. Originally, the robots couldn’t be upgraded. Once directions were uploaded to it, they couldn’t be changed. So they have a basic set of jobs their whole lifespan. It’s not unusual for the 2025 to want to perform their tasks even in night mode because it’s all they know.’

‘A bit different to the robots of today,’ I said bitterly.

‘The 2025 model was discontinued in 2026 when they developed the Super Learning chip, allowing robots to be constantly upgraded and able to learn new things. The unsold 2025s were given to nursing homes, libraries, or to elderly people to help them around the house. They’re fantastic at basic tasks like making beds, vacuuming, folding laundry and putting items away. They aren’t real useful for much else.’

The detective shook her head.

‘However, there have been some reports in recent years of 2025 robots ‘learning’ new things. I’m not sure if I believe it, but it’s interesting. And damn scary.’

‘Is that even possible?’ I asked.

‘It’s not supposed to be, but I heard of a 2025 in Melbourne that learnt how to use a slow cooker. It belonged to an elderly gentleman who loved to have slow cooker chips every night with his dinner. One night he went to the kitchen to make them and the 2025 had already done it for him. It taught itself by watching him every night. There was also a case in Perth of a woman who had

a 2025. The woman used to play four songs on her piano every night after dinner from Elton John's greatest hits album. One night she came into the lounge room and her robot sat down at the piano and played the entire album from start to finish.'

If I still had a body I would have shuddered.

'I hate the robots. How do you know so much about them?'

The detective shrugged.

'I could see the rise of AI happening so quickly, and the government was so slow to act, so slow to make the rules. AI was already out of control by the time they acted. I wanted to know everything I could about the robots and AI so I knew what we'd be up against. Although, nothing could have prepared me for the world we're living in today.'

'I wish more was done sooner. I know so many great authors who had to give up writing and get jobs in other industries just to survive.'

'Yeah, it's been a worry.'

Two hours later, the detective only had the fantasy section and the crime section to look through. June had already looked through the crime section but the detective wanted to give it one last look. As she finished looking through the fantasy section, the door to the cleaning room opened and the 2025 robot walked out with a book under its arm and a broom in its hand. It started using the broom as a sword, moving it in a choreographed fight scene as it spoke in its low robotic voice.

'What on earth?' mumbled the detective as she watched the robot's intricate movements. 'What is it saying?'

'I believe it's reciting a scene from the book 'Zorro'. I read the book in high school but I remember it well. It's even acting out one of the fight scenes.'

The detective shook her head. 'Are you trying to tell me that the 2025 actually read that book and is now able to act it out? Impossible.'

'I don't believe what I'm seeing either, but you did say that there have been cases of them learning new things. It sees people reading books all day. Maybe it learnt to read the books and then progressed to acting out whatever book it read? Stranger things have happened.'

'Not that strange. That means these robots could learn anything. There's thousands of them out in the world with no one keeping track of them, with no restrictions, no one controlling what they learn.'

I watched as some of the colour drained from the detective's face. 'Oh no,' she whispered.

'What? What's wrong?'

Detective Sonja walked over to the bookshelf and pulled out the book that the 2025 had put back on the shelf earlier. She turned it over in her hands and I could see that it had dark, dried blood splattered all over it, making the front cover unreadable.

The detective opened the book and looked at the title page.

Horror washed across her face.

If I still had blood pumping through my veins, I know that the look on her face would have made my blood run ice cold.

‘What book is it?’ I asked, my voice thick with hesitation.

The detective looked over at the robot. ‘The murder in the library.’

Alison L. Robson

Alison L Robson is the Australian author of *The Sweet Series*, a fun series based on the Gold Coast. She has only recently delved into the world of short-story writing and this was her first Scarlet Stiletto entry.